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Visions, Inner Voices, Apparitions, and Defiance in Nineteenth-Century Black Women's Narratives

Delores S. Williams

African-American Christian women are inheritors of a rich female visionary or mystical tradition that led, in the nineteenth century, to decisive acts of resistance on the part of some black women. Many of us realize this tradition is still alive when we hear black women in seminary describe the visions that introduced them to the kind of ministry for which they were to prepare.

The nineteenth century has sometimes been referred to as the age when American women's public voices came to life. Maria Stewart, a black woman, became the first woman to make a public address before a large audience in Massachusetts. The first feminist movement began and many of its advocates, including Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, spared neither voice nor pen as they championed women's rights from one end of the country to the other.

For some women, religious experience provided the self-esteem and courage they needed to begin and continue their public work. Several African-American women—as the result of inner voices, visionary experiences, and seeing apparitions—became preachers, though there was no practice of ordaining women in the mainstream institutional churches. They were known as "exhorters" and traveled through the United States preaching in houses, schools, and most any place that would open its doors to them. The urge to speak publicly about God and to defy those who interfered came from the empowering visions they had, the voices they heard, and the apparitions they saw. Though these visions, voices, and apparitions are important for understanding the life, work, and religion of some nineteenth-century black women, very little scholarly attention has been focused upon them. Hence, the purpose of this article is to give attention to selected visions, inner voices, and apparitions seen by three African-American women: Jarena Lee, whose autobiographical state-

ment first appeared in 1836; Zilpha Elaw, whose memoir was published in 1846; and Old Elizabeth, whose memoir appeared in 1863. I examine certain visions, inner voices, and apparitions on the basis of their contribution to specific acts of defiance on the part of Lee, Elaw, and Old Elizabeth. The task here is not dream analysis but rather an exploration into the source of these nineteenth-century black women's courage to venture into public life and public speech and remain there.

Jarena Lee

The route Lee's life took toward visionary experience passed through what she called "struggles in the soul." Hired out as a servant at age seven, Lee suffered depression and inclinations toward suicide that convinced her that she "could never bee [*sic*] happy in this life." While information about her childhood is scant, she tells of the suicidal inclinations that plagued her early adult years. Relief came slowly and at intervals beginning with her conversion to Methodist Christianity in 1804 and extending with her call to preach in about 1811. During the course of that time Lee had visions and heard voices that transformed her consciousness, deepened her spiritual life, and led her to defy customs oppressive to women.

Her progression to religious conversion—amid thoughts of suicide—involved visionary images she describes at length:

> . . . not withstanding the terror which seized upon me, when about to end my life, I had no view of the precipice on the edge of which I was tottering, until it was over, and my eyes were opened. Then the awful gulf of hell seemed to be open beneath me, covered only . . . by a spider's web on which I stood. I seemed to hear the howling of the damned, to see the smoke of the bottomless pit, to hear the rattling of those chains, which hold the impenitent under clouds of darkness to the judgment of the great day . . . (Andrews 1986, 30)

She personified the terror she felt and named it Satan:

> That night I formed a resolution to pray; which when resolved upon, there appeared, sitting in one corner of the room Satan, in the form of a monstrous dog, and in a rage, as if in pursuit, his tongue protruding from his mouth to a great length, and his eyes looked like two balls of fire; it soon . . . vanished from my sight. From this state of terror and dismay, I was happily delivered under the preaching of the Gospel . . . This I found to be true, to the joy of my disconsolate and despairing heart, in the hour of my conversion to God. (31)

Lee progressed beyond conversion to sanctification prompted by inner voices. She describes this experience as a time of retiring "to a secret place for prayer. When I rose from my knees, there seemed a voice speaking to me, as I stood in a leaning posture—'Ask for santification [*sic*].'" She did as the voice advised and instantly realized that she received that for which she had asked.

When her call came to preach, she both heard voices and had visions. Lee writes of a certain time when silence fell upon her. Then, to her utter surprise, "there seemed to sound a voice which I thought I distinctly heard, and most certainly understood, which said to me, 'Go preach the Gospel.'" She responded aloud, saying no one would believe her. She heard the voice say, "Preach the Gospel; I will put words in your mouth." Confused about whether the voice was from God or Satan, Lee says she "immediately went into a secret place and called upon the Lord." There she had a vision of a pulpit with a Bible lying on it. During the night she had a vision of herself expounding a text before a great crowd of people. As the result of these voices and visions, two days later, she "went to see the preacher in charge of the African Society [now the African American Episcopal Church], who was the Rev. Richard Allen . . . to tell him that I felt it my duty to preach the gospel."

This was a daring declaration on Lee's part because the African Society did not ordain female preachers. In fact, Allen's response to Lee was that the Methodist discipline did not call for women preachers.

Lee's visionary experience and inner voices, however, inspired her courageous act of presenting an argument, a response to Allen's denial, that challenged the right of men to deny women ordination. This was the first such argument by a black woman to appear in print for public consumption. Cogent and to the point, Lee's argument reminded males in power of the following realities characteristic of the Christian faith:

1. Nothing is impossible with God. So why should it be impossible for women to preach?

2. Jesus died for women as well as men; therefore there is equality between men and women in the Christian notion of salvation. Why should there not be equality between men and women in ministerial roles and ordination?

3. A woman, Mary, was the first to witness and have knowledge of Jesus's resurrection. She made this knowledge public and thereby became the first preacher of the risen one.

4. "If . . . to preach the gospel . . . comes by inspiration . . . is God straitened; must he [*sic*] take the man exclusively? May he not, did he not and can he not inspire a female to preach the simple story of the birth, life, death and resurrection of our Lord . . . I am fully persuaded that the Lord called me." (37)

One of Lee's most graphic visions delivered her from the momentary doubts and fear that often plagued her faith. She withdrew into her bedchamber and carried her case of doubt to the Lord. In the midst of prayer, she claims to have seen "a form of fire about the size of a man's hand." At the same moment, there appeared "a man robed in a white garment . . . From him a voice proceeded saying: 'Thou shalt never return from the cross.' " Lee claims never to have doubted the call later after experiencing this vision.

Her beatific vision occurred while she was praying by the bedside of a dying young black man. She saw the "Saviour in full statue . . . a ray of light, more abundant, broke forth among us." She said:

> There appeared to my view, though my eyes were closed, the Saviour . . . nailed to the cross, just over the head of the young man, against the ceiling of the room. I cried out, brother look up, the Saviour is come . . . We rose up from our knees, when lo his [the sick man's] eyes were gazing with ecstasy upward; over his face was an expression of joy . . . as I held him by the hand his happy and purified soul soared away . . . to its eternal rest. (44)

Lee herself suggests the impact of her visions and voices upon her public work, for she writes, "My tongue was cut loose, the stammerer spoke freely."

Lee (who claimed to have spent no more than three or four months in school during her lifetime) was one of several uneducated nineteenth-century black women who were empowered by their experiences of visions, inner voices, and apparitions to take the risk of trying to shape Christian belief in their time. They all publicly championed women's right to preach. The extent of Lee's dedication to women's right to public speech and action is evidenced by her choice of biblical text to begin her autobiographical statement. The text is from Joel 2:28, which declares that "It shall come to pass . . . that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy."

Zilpha Elaw was Lee's colleague in the "exhorting ministry," one who defied many status quo regulations regarding women's place. Though she held conservative views about the relation of wives to

their husbands (views she herself did not abide by), she forged an independent career that took her to other parts of the world. She preached over a thousand sermons in England.

Zilpha Elaw

Born in 1790, just seven years after Jarena Lee, Elaw had visions, heard voices, and saw apparitions in unorthodox places such as barns while she was engaged in mundane activities such as milking cows. She tells of her "soul's conversion to God" as the result of seeing Jesus in a cow stall while she was milking:

> One evening, whilst singing one of the songs of Zion, I distinctly saw the Lord Jesus approach me with open arms, and a most divine and heavenly smile upon his countenance. As He advanced towards me, I felt that his very looks spoke, and said, "Thy prayer is accepted, I own thy name." (Andrews 1986, 56)

Jesus "had long hair, which parted in the front and came down on his shoulders; he wore a long white robe . . . and he stood with open arms and smiled upon me, he disappeared." Elaw might have believed she imagined all this had not the cow "turned her head and looked around as I did; and when she saw, she bowed her knees and cowered down upon the ground." Following this, Elaw joined the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1808.

Later, during her process of sanctification, Elaw heard a voice and "discerned bodies of resplendent light" affirming her new holy state of spiritual "cleanliness" telling her "I will show thee what thou must do." She named this experience a "trance of ecstasy." This happened at one of the Methodist camp meetings that were prevalent in the nineteenth century. Elaw says in regard to this experience:

> I had not at this time offered up public prayer on the camp ground, but when the prayer meeting afterwards commenced, the Lord opened my mouth in public prayer; and while I was thus engaged, it seemed as if I heard my God rustling in the tops of the mulberry-trees. (67)

After this, Elaw had no problem speaking in public in the camp meetings, and she was often called upon to do so.

The incredible visionary event affecting Elaw's life was a vision experienced by her dying sister who claimed to have seen Jesus and to have "been in the society of angels." These angels told the sister to tell Elaw "that she must preach the gospel . . . and must go to a

lady named Fisher, a Quakeress" who would tell Elaw what she must do. Elaw, however, continued, unmindful of the allurements as well as the precepts of God, for several years beyond her sister's death. The movement of Elaw from public prayer to public preaching involved events similar to those that inspired her conversion and her public prayer voice. But these events came during a serious illness when Elaw was close to death. One midnight during her illness,

> when all was hushed to silence, a human figure in appearance, came and stood by my bedside and addressed these words to me, "Be of good cheer, for thou shalt yet see another camp-meeting; and at that meeting thou shalt know the will of God concerning thee." (77)

She was not "in the least alarmed, for the room was filled with the glory of God, who had permitted the veil to be removed from my mortal vision, that I might have a glimpse of one of our heavenly attendants . . . who had a message to deliver to me from God."

Elaw interpreted her illness as having occurred because she had been "so sturdy" in her unbelief that she "could not respond to God's direction for her to preach." Therefore God had made her ill, so she could hear and abide by God's command for her life. Thus she waited patiently after her illness, often "in the meantime saying 'Lord, what wilt thou have me do? Whatever seemeth good unto thee give me the ability, and I will do it.' "

Another camp meeting was announced. Elaw attended. There she gave her first exhortation, which was enthusiastically received. Her public ministry began, though it was often beset with trials and tribulations: the death of her husband, the loss of financial resources, the waning of her own courage and spirit at intervals, and doubt at important times in her ministry.

Nevertheless, the visions, voices, and apparitions provided the stamina Elaw needed to execute some of her most defiant acts, seriously challenging the social and political status quo in the United States. Her most defiant act was venturing to preach in "the Southern territories of the United States where slavery . . . [was] established and enforced by law." Elaw was herself a free woman, having been born and reared in the North. William Andrews, the editor of Elaw's narrative, indicates the danger she faced when she went South:

> In the antebellum South it was customary to jail and auction off any free Negro who could not prove his or her free status through certificates registered and issued by the courts of the State . . . Since 1832, Virginia prohibited any slave or free Negro from conduct-

> ing religious meetings in the day or night-time. Elaw's punishment for breaking this law would have been a public whipping of up to thirty-nine lashes. (241)

In Virginia Elaw preached to both blacks and whites. She tells of the fear she felt as she began her tour south, but her faith in the effaciousness of her past religious experiences empowered her to continue on her journey preaching in many southern territories. Andrews's assessment of Elaw's message in some southern states indicates the subtlety with which Elaw pointed an accusing finger at the South. He declares that

> Elaw implicitly compares herself among the Virginians to Jesus in Samaria when he told a woman at a well of the secrets of her heart . . . By linking the Virginians with the Samaritans, Elaw endows the slave state with qualities of alienation and apostasy that helped make the Samaritans a despised people to the Jews of the Bible. At the same time she identifies herself with Christ on his saving mission among the Samaritans. (241)

The autobiographical statements of Lee and Elaw reveal that there were no easy routes uneducated black women could take to public voice and public defiance. Courage was needed. Inspiration was needed. Empowerment was needed to persevere. According to these women, faith, courage, inspiration, and empowerment came through visions, voices, and apparitions sent to them by God. Elaw knew full well that many people would not grant the validity of her visionary experiences. "There are," she writes, "sceptical persons who conceitedly . . . scoff at the idea of apparitions and angelic appearances . . . they do it in the face of the most extensive experience, instinct, belief and credible testimony . . . as well as inspired . . . scriptures." No doubt many people would label these visions, voices, and apparitions as superstition, so characteristic of "ignorant" black people's religion.

Old Elizabeth

A contemporary of the free women Lee and Elaw, Old Elizabeth, the slave woman, was born in 1766 to slave parents. When she was about twelve years old, Old Elizabeth began having visions and hearing voices. She was separated from her parents by slave owners and grieved a long time over this. Like Lee, she experienced feelings that her life was about to end. She threw herself on a bench "expecting

to die . . . my spirit cried within me, must I die in this state?" Like Elaw, she heard a voice that spoke to her, alleviating her burdened spirit, telling her to "rise up and pray." She describes an extensive vision containing "a director, clothed in white raiment . . . an awful fiery gulf, a hand holding a silver hair, a voice and . . . the Saviour standing with his hand stretched out to receive me." There was much struggle in the vision between Elizabeth and the others. But when it was over, she experienced a personal transformation of the spirit and is therefore "filled with light and love."

Following this experience, Elizabeth was sold several times. She received her mandate to preach much like Lee and Elaw received theirs. Visions and voices assured Elizabeth that God had ordained her for public ministry: "The spirit directed [me] to go to a poor widow in Baltimore and ask her if I might have a meeting at her house." The widow readily agreed. Old Elizabeth was so empowered by the visions and voices that she dared to defy a "watchman" (tantamount to our police officers) who attempted to break up the women's meeting. Most of the other women became frightened and fled. But Elizabeth walked up to the watchman, put her hands upon him, "addressed him with gospel truth," and convinced him not to interfere with their meetings henceforth. In her career as "ordained-by-God-through-visions" preacher, she defied "elders of our meeting [black men] . . . who believed a woman should not preach." She writes, "I was rejected by elders and rulers . . . while others were excused in crimes of the darkest dye, I was hunted down in every place where I appointed a meeting." She exhibited uncanny defiance in Virginia where she risked beatings and other punishments for her public speech. She spoke out against slavery and against those "church disciplines" that barred women from public preaching and ordination. Like Lee and Elaw, Old Elizabeth had a faith steadied by vision and inner voices and anchored in a deep spirituality she believed God endowed her with through mystical experiences.

This mystical experience of visions, voices, and apparitions is so important because it cannot be disassociated from the social change these women tried to effect. A reading of their autobiographical narratives and their memoirs reveals that they could not have persisted in their public work had not their spirits been empowered and energized by spiritual forces working *in* their lives. Lee, Elaw, and Old Elizabeth are, however, careful to show readers that even though they experienced great spiritual transformation that invigorated them, the struggle for change is uphill all the way and their faith had its highs and lows. All three had occasional doubts that they could

achieve what they set out to do. But vision, voice, and apparition were important ingredients in the struggle. Struggle is a word to emphasize in these women's bouts with sexual and racial oppression.

Lee, Elaw, and Old Elizabeth are foremothers and pioneers in black Christian women's long history of resistance in the United States. Their lives suggest a truth African-American women cannot forget—the spirit feeds the struggle for social change. Black women have a heritage as rich as the biblical tradition that shows them *how* the spirit is nurtured for the work of resistance.

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