Lifting as She Climbed:

Sarah Mapps Douglass's Intersectional Empowerment of Free Black Women

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Historical Paper

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Process Paper

The inspiration for this paper stemmed from my love of literature and English. As a poet myself, I have always wondered about an author's responsibility to their readers since I've always felt that words can be used for more than simply "beautiful" literature. Naturally, this led me to the field of activist and abolitionist literature. I was engrossed in the work of magazines such as *The Liberator*, and as I sifted through their archives, I found multiple essays written by Zillah. Intrigued, I attempted to research Zillah's work and found that it was the pseudonym of Sarah Mapp Douglass. I curiously attempted to research why she would use a pen name and fell down the rabbit hole of her intersectional work, combining literature and education with both the abolitionist and feminist movement. After reading about Douglass's philosophy on the right to education—particularly in literature and the humanities—I was captivated by her responsibility to use her opportunities and resources to lift others as she climbed, and I was confident that I wanted to write about Douglass for my NHD paper.

I began my research with the mother of first-wave feminism—Mary Wollstonecraft. After reading *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and learning of Wollstonecraft's outlook on the power of education, I gathered more context on the racial divide that emerged within the feminist movement through works by Sojourner Truth and Susan B. Anthony. I placed Douglass within this context of fragmentation, and then I began extensively exploring her work using E-Books and academic articles as well as English studies papers on Douglass's writings and primary source documents of her letters, speeches, essays, and paintings. I split my research into two sections: Douglass's individual action in art and literature and her institutional action with her girl's school and the FLA. Operating under the framework of lifting as we climb, I developed the argument that Douglass felt a responsibility from her own education to fight for the equal right to

education for all Black women, empowering them with resources to follow in her footsteps of creating space in society for Black women.

As a poet and writer, I felt that a historical paper was the perfect format to honor the legacy and penmanship of Sarah Mapps Douglass. Drawing from English studies papers, I was able to seamlessly incorporate analysis of Douglass's word choice and paint color into my historical paper.

Sarah Mapps Douglass is significant in history not just because she created institutions or engaged in abolitionist and feminist discourse, but she stands as a symbol of the power within the right to education to fight against injustice. Douglass's impact through direct education and education through exemplary literature has even reached modern activist groups. Sarah Mapps Douglass embodies the essence of lifting as we climb, overcoming racial and gender barriers while planting the seeds for future generations to secure their right to education.

Historical Paper

Etched onto the front cover of the Tenth Biennial Convention of the National Association of Colored Women in 1916, "Lifting as we climb" represented how Black women helped each other overcome oppression in the United States.[1] The 1800s saw the birth of first-wave feminism, coinciding with the climax of the abolitionist movement. At the intersection of these two activist movements, Sarah Mapps Douglass found her role as a writer, artist, and educator. Born in Philadelphia on September 9, 1806, Douglass entered into a family of free Black abolitionists. Her mother Grace Bustill Douglass was a founding member of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society (PFASS), and her father Robert Douglass was a part of the Philadelphia Vigilant Committee, an organization committed to creating a relief fund for Black individuals. Benefiting from a formal education, Douglass wrote, painted, and motivated other free Black women to follow in her footsteps. Douglass encouraged Black female artists and laid the foundation for future literary institutions to help free Black women climb over the racial barrier of social mobility. She herself was inspired by her mother Grace, who was one of the only Black women in the PFASS. Sarah ultimately expanded on Grace Douglass's legacy of creating a space in society for Black women. Because of her transformative education, Sarah Mapps Douglass took on the responsibility of empowering free Black women by demanding their right to education and exposing them to upper class perspectives, lifting others as she climbed.

Before Douglass and the first-wave feminists came to prominence, other women had postulated that education was crucial for achieving equality. In 1792, Englishwoman Mary Wollstonecraft published *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, which asserted that the "very system of education" taught women to be dependent on men, forcing them into a subordinate

[1] *Tenth Biennial Convention of the National Association of Colored Women* (1916), 1, University of North Florida Digital Commons.

position in society.[2] Wollstonecraft believed that, through the equal right to education, women could end the "blind obedience."[3] As feminism gained traction, in 1848, men and women gathered for the First Women's Rights Convention at Seneca Falls, New York. However, this summit distinctly omitted Black women though it did advocate for educational opportunity to women.[4] The lack of diverse voices within 1800s feminist discourse prompted Black activists such as Sojourner Truth to question the racial inequalities naturalized in female society.[5] Truth gave her speech "Ain't I a woman?" in response to men's chivalry toward white women yet lack thereof for Black women.[6] With racial tensions brewing, the feminist movement ultimately divided over education, as white female suffragists such as Susan B. Anthony argued that white women deserved the right to vote over free Black men or women because white women were more educated.[7]

Contrary to the assumptions of Susan B. Anthony and many other white suffragists, Sarah Mapps Douglass was an educated woman. In her hometown of Philadelphia, Douglass had the privilege of attending a school specifically tailored to Black children starting in 1819 and received private tutoring alongside her formal education.[8] Through academia, Douglass developed her literary ability, and with her talent, she made it her responsibility to lead the Black writers' entrance into white-dominated literature. She utilized her connections to publish her writing in William Lloyd Garrison's *The Liberator* under the pseudonym Zillah. Aware of the

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[2] Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (London: Joseph Johnson, 1792), 68, PDF e-book.
[3] Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication*, 24.
[4] "More To the Movement," Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/exhibitions/women-fight-for-the-vote/about-this-exhibition/more-to-the-movement/.
[5] Sojourner Truth, "Sojourner Truth: Ain't I a Woman?," speech presented at Women's Rights Convention, Akron, OH, May 29, 1851, NPS, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, last modified November 17, 2017, https://www.nps.gov/articles/sojourner-truth.htm.
[6] Truth, "Sojourner Truth," speech, NPS.
[7] Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage, eds., *History of Woman Suffrage* (Project Gutenberg, 2009), 2:383, digital file.
[8] Erica Armstrong Dunbar, *A Fragile Freedom: African American Women and Emancipation in the Antebellum City*, Society and the Sexes in the Modern World Series (Yale University Press, 2008), 84, ProQuest Ebook Central.

racial divide within the feminist movement, Douglass wrote “A Mother’s Love” in 1832 and attempted to unite Black and white women. The essay recalled an interview with a recently-freed Black woman, where she described being beaten by her mistress for breastfeeding her child in the middle of the workday. Douglass drew similarities between enslaved women and free Black and white women, emphasizing to readers that enslaved mothers felt “as tenderly for her offspring as you do for yours.”[9] She harnessed the universal maternal feeling to motivate American women to empathize with each other regardless of race.

Douglass’s “A Mother’s Love” not only educated readers of *The Liberator* on commonalities among women, the essay also illuminated the marginalized perspective of enslaved Black women. During this time period, many southern states passed anti-literacy laws, which fined, imprisoned, and even whipped anyone who taught enslaved individuals to read or write.[10] Further north, in addition to enrolling in segregated schools with limited educational opportunities, free Black people grappled with the constant fear of being kidnapped and sold back into slavery.[11] Because of the systems in place, enslaved and free Black women throughout America most commonly did not have the education, the privilege, or even the freedom to enter abolitionist and feminist discourse, so Sarah Mapps Douglass took it upon herself to leverage her education through her writing and uplift the voices of Black women next to those of middle and high-class white Americans. In doing so, she became a beacon for future generations of Black female writers to join her in tearing down the exclusivity of white-dominated literature.

With such an expansive education, Douglass believed that her work in literature was not enough, so she expanded into the artistic traditions typically reserved for elite white women,

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[9] Sarah Mapps Douglass, "A Mother's Love," *The Liberator* (Boston, MA), July 28, 1832, Ladies' Department, https://fair-use.org/the-liberator/1832/07/28/the-liberator-02-30.pdf.
[10] Christopher M. Span, "Learning in Spite of Opposition: African Americans and their History of Educational Exclusion in Antebellum America," *Counterpoints* 131 (2005): 27, https://www.jstor.org/stable/42977282.
[11] Dunbar, *A Fragile*, 50.

mainly watercolor. She painted roses to accompany her correspondence, and with works such as "I love a flower!" painted in 1833, she proudly engraved "S. M. Douglass" below each floral (see Figure 1). As the first known Black woman to sign her artwork, Douglass challenged the

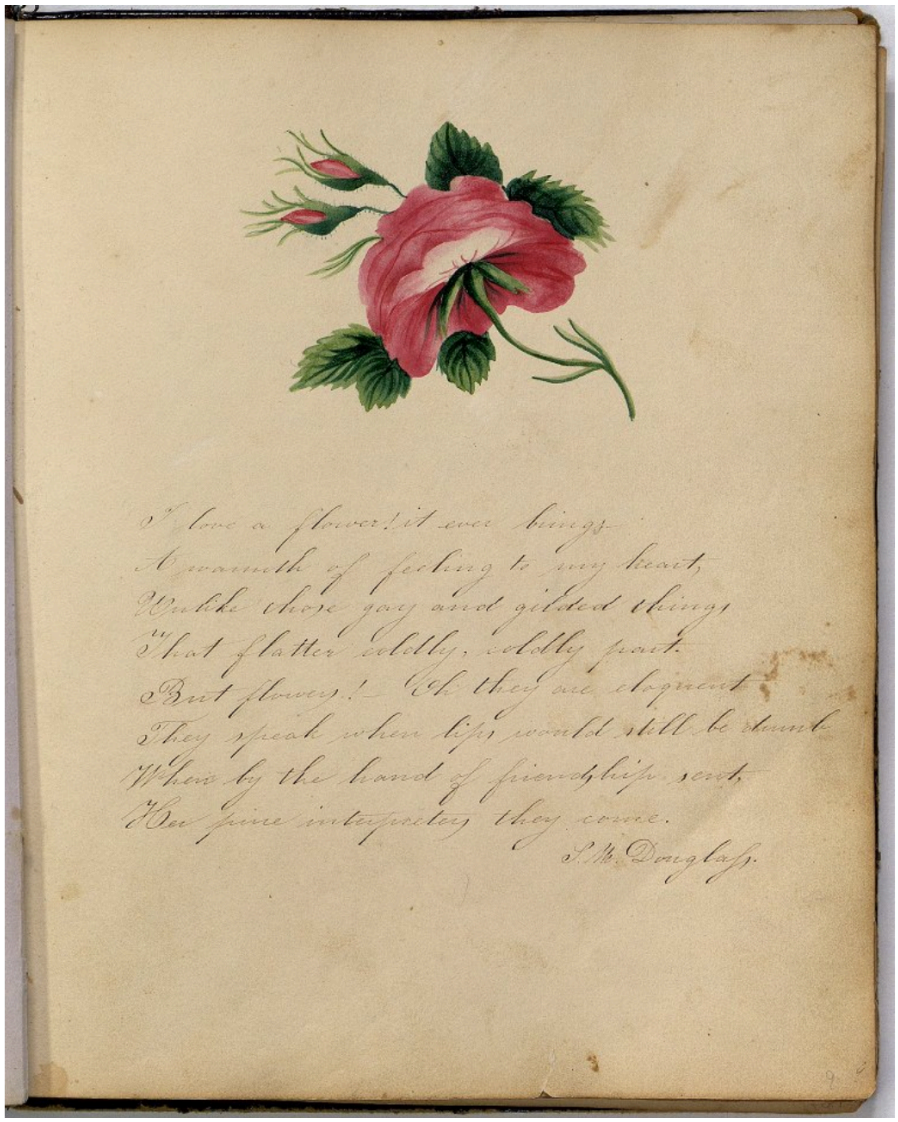

Figure 1. A flower and a poem, titled *I Love a Flower*, written by Sarah Mapps Douglass in correspondence with Amy Matilda Cassey. Douglass's signature is located at the bottom right-hand corner of the poem.

definition of high art and the traditional norms of those who could wield the brush.[12] Her use of vibrant colors in her flowers allowed her to express her own femininity. Before Douglass, the traditionally feminine act of painting flowers was the right of privileged white women.[13] In making it her responsibility to culturally appropriate the Victorian pastime of painting flowers, she dismantled the racial barriers within elitist feminine art, serving as a role model for future generations of Black feminine self-expression.

Although Douglass felt an obligation to perform individual actions in breaking down white elitism and creating space for a new group of upper-class Black Americans, she also recognized the division it created. There was a growing socio-economic gap between Douglass's upper-class free Black women and those who were newly freed or still enslaved. Emulating Mary Wollstonecraft, Sarah Mapps Douglass saw the equal right to education as a way to close the gap and unify Black women.

The segregated public school system in Philadelphia was overpopulated and ill-equipped to teach Black female students. Believing that each Black girl had the right to the education she herself received, in 1833 Douglass felt a duty to establish the first school in the United States to offer a "high school education to young Black women."[14] By offering a holistic education consisting of English grammar, various histories, Latin, mathematics, and science,[15] Douglass created a physical space that fostered the intellectual growth of Black women and helped them overcome the systemic barriers of American society. Furthermore, many of her students went on to teach in schools in the South after the Civil War, paying forward their education to

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[12] Tabitha A. Morgan, "Revolution and Roses: The Voice and Aesthetic of Sarah Mapps Douglass," *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 87, no. 4 (2020), https://doi.org/10.5325/pennhistory.87.4.0657.
[13] Morgan, "Revolution and Roses,"
[14] Dunbar, *A Fragile*, 84.
[15] Milton M. James, "The Institute for Colored Youth," *Negro History Bulletin* 21, no. 4 (1958): 84, https://www.jstor.org/stable/44213172.

newly-freed young Black men and women.[16] Douglass's belief in the right to education lived on in her students and lifted up generations of future Black women.

Douglass's vision for Black women's education was not limited to formal education. She founded and led the Female Literary Association (FLA) in 1831 to serve as a space for elite Black women to engage with abolitionist literature and empathize with enslaved Black women. The group's meetings, dubbed "mental feasts," consisted of writing essays and placing them into a box, where they would later be selected, read to the group, and discussed.[17] During the first mental feast, Douglass gave a speech, reciting that "we must feel deeply before we can act rightly."[18] She recognized free Black womens' responsibility to use their privilege and resources to educate themselves, break down internal prejudices, and empathize with enslaved Black women.[19] Only after gaining a holistic understanding of abolitionism through education, Douglass and her followers began action, leading petitions, fairs, and fundraisers for the abolitionist cause.[20] Furthermore, Douglass convinced *The Liberator* to form a Ladies' Department specifically for the FLA and other free Black women to occupy a space within abolitionist discourse. William Lloyd Garrison, the editor-in-chief of *The Liberator*, agreed to create the FLA's request because he recognized that the inclusion of elite Black women was necessary for the success of the abolitionist movement.[21] As the FLA members learned from

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[16] Margaret Hope Bacon, "The Pennsylvania Abolition Society's Mission for Black Education," *Pennsylvania Legacies* 5, no. 2 (2005): 24, https://www.jstor.org/stable/27764999.
[17] Marie Lindhorst, "Politics in a Box: Sarah Mapps Douglass and the Female Literary Association, 1831-1833," *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 65, no. 3 (1998): 263, https://www.jstor.org/stable/27774117.
[18] Sarah Mapps Douglass, "My Friends -- My Sisters," speech presented at Female Literary Society, Philadelphia, PA, September 20, 1831, University of Detroit Mercy Black Abolitionist Archive, last modified July 21, 1832, https://libraries.udmercy.edu/archives/special-collections/index.php?collectionCode=baa&record_id=2135.
[19] Lindhorst, "Politics in a Box," 275.
[20] Dunbar, *A Fragile*, 87.
[21] WIlliam Lloyd Garrison to Sarah Mapps Douglass, March 5, 1832, https://www.digitalcommonwealth.org/search/commonwealth:cv43px904.

Douglass, the interests of free and enslaved African Americans "are one, that we rise or fall together, and that we can never be elevated to our proper standing while they are in bondage."[22]

With the newly created Ladies' Department, Douglass was eager to publish both the FLA's constitution as well as some of her own work so that they would serve as an example for other elite Black women to "form a similar association" in their respective cities.[23] Douglass's influence on educational spaces crossed state borders, as others felt the same responsibility to educate and empower Black women using literacy. Furthermore, her philosophy transcended time, with modern groups such as the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) and the National Organization for Women (NOW) taking elements from the FLA's mission to create a community and platform through the right to education.[24]

Sarah Mapps Douglass assumed the responsibility to raise Black women to the level of white men and women through her fearless championship of literature, art, and education. Simultaneously, she recognized the gap forming between rising upper-class Black women and enslaved Black women. Thus, Douglass advocated for the right to education as a way to bridge the disparity, creating the FLA and founding a girl's school to promote a unified Black female identity. The Black feminist discourse that Sarah Mapps Douglass contributed to and the institutions she erected have impacted Black women across generations, and her legacy stands as a symbol of the power of the right education and the responsibility of educated individuals to lift others as they climb.

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[22] Holly M. Kent, *Her Voice Will Be on the Side of Right : Gender and Power in Women's Antebellum Antislavery Fiction* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2017), 52, ProQuest Ebook Central.
[23] Sarah Mapps Douglass to William Lloyd Garrison, February 29, 1832, https://www.digitalcommonwealth.org/search/commonwealth:2z10zg790.
[24] Eleanor Kerr, "Female Literary Association," Women in U.S. History, Temple University, last modified February 16, 2018, https://sites.temple.edu/womenushist/tag/female-literary-association/.

Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources

Douglass, Sarah Mapps. *I Love a Flower*. 1833. Illustration. The Library Company of Philadelphia (P.9764.9).

This watercolor painting provided a first-hand illustration of Sarah Mapps Douglass's work as the first Black woman to sign her paintings.

———. Letter to William Lloyd Garrison, February 29, 1832. https://www.digitalcommonwealth.org/search/commonwealth:2z10zg790.

This letter from Douglas helped me understand her reasoning behind the publication of the FLA's constitution in *The Liberator*. She believed that it would encourage Black women across the United States to form literary groups and educate themselves.

———. "A Mother's Love." *The Liberator* (Boston, MA), July 28, 1832, Ladies' Department. https://fair-use.org/the-liberator/1832/07/28/the-liberator-02-30.pdf.

As one of Douglass's essays published in the Ladies' Department of *The Liberator*, "A Mother's Love" gave insights on Douglass's views of the racial divide within the feminist movement. The essay also provided the marginalized perspective of enslaved women at the time.

———. "My Friends -- My Sisters." Speech presented at Female Literary Society, Philadelphia, PA, September 20, 1831. University of Detroit Mercy Black Abolitionist Archive. Last modified July 21, 1832. https://libraries.udmercy.edu/archives/special-collections/index.php?collectionCode=baa&record_id=2135.

This is a transcript of Douglass's speech from the first "mental feast" of the FLA. The speech improved my understanding of Douglass's mission for the FLA of the rights and responsibilities of education through literacy.

Garrison, William Lloyd. Letter to Sarah Mapps Douglass, March 5, 1832. https://www.digitalcommonwealth.org/search/commonwealth:cv43px904.

William Lloyd Garrison, the editor-in-chief of *The Liberator*, wrote to Sarah Mapps Douglass, showcasing his thought process for creating the Ladies' Department and publishing the FLA's constitution, as well as his argument for the importance of including Black women in abolitionist literature.

Stanton, Elizabeth Cady, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage, eds. *History of Woman Suffrage*. Vol. 2. Project Gutenberg, 2009. Digital file.

This book by Susan B. Anthony and other white feminists stands as a personal testimony of how the unequal right to education was used to employ racism within the feminist movement.

Tenth Biennial Convention of the National Association of Colored Women. 1916. University of North Florida Digital Commons.

On the cover of this pamphlet was “Lifting as we climb,” which inspired the framework of my paper. Sarah Mapps Douglass and other Black women lifted others up with them as they climbed to the same level as white men and women in America.

Truth, Sojourner. "Sojourner Truth: Ain't I a Woman?" Speech presented at Women's Rights Convention, Akron, OH, May 29, 1851. NPS. U.S. Department of the Interior. Last modified November 17, 2017. https://www.nps.gov/articles/sojourner-truth.htm.

Sojourner Truth’s speech offered me an original account of the frustration that many Black women felt in response to society’s unequal treatment of Black women when compared to white women.

Wollstonecraft, Mary. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects*. London: Joseph Johnson, 1792. PDF e-book.

Mary Wollstonecraft’s book gave me a solid understanding of the origins of feminism and the foundational theory that the equal right to education would lead to gender equality.

Secondary Sources

Bacon, Margaret Hope. "The Pennsylvania Abolition Society's Mission for Black Education." *Pennsylvania Legacies* 5, no. 2 (2005): 21-26. https://www.jstor.org/stable/27764999.

This article details the impacts of Sarah Mapps Douglass’s work in formal education, including teaching Black students who eventually worked in schools in the south.

Dunbar, Erica Armstrong. *A Fragile Freedom: African American Women and Emancipation in the Antebellum City*. Society and the Sexes in the Modern World Series. Yale University Press, 2008. ProQuest Ebook Central.

This book provided me with a chronological overview of Douglass’s work in the PFASS as well as her letters to *The Liberator*. In addition, Dunbar touches on Douglass’s role as a teacher and her experience with Quakerism.

James, Milton M. "The Institute for Colored Youth." *Negro History Bulletin* 21, no. 4 (1958): 83-85. https://www.jstor.org/stable/44213172.

This article presented the basic structure of student life at Sarah Mapps Douglass's school, including what subjects she taught her children as well as their extracurricular work.

Kent, Holly M. *Her Voice Will Be on the Side of Right : Gender and Power in Women's Antebellum Antislavery Fiction*. Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2017. ProQuest Ebook Central.

This book introduced me to many of Douglass's essays, and Kent's close reading analysis allowed me to draw conclusions on Douglass's goals with her writings—abolitionist discourse and social change.

Kerr, Eleanor. "Female Literary Association." Women in U.S. History. Temple University. Last modified February 16, 2018. https://sites.temple.edu/womenushist/tag/female-literary-association/.

Kerr delivered a fascinating argument extrapolating Douglass's work in the FLA and expanding its impacts to modern groups such as the Human Rights Campaign and the National Organization for Women (NOW). This helped me see the greater social impact Douglass had as she fought for the right to education.

Lindhorst, Marie. "Politics in a Box: Sarah Mapps Douglass and the Female Literary Association, 1831-1833." *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 65, no. 3 (1998): 263-78. https://www.jstor.org/stable/27774117.

This article gave me an overview of the history of the FLA, as well as important essays published by the FLA in newspapers such as *The Liberator*. In addition, Lindhorst presented a few of the arguments and speeches brought up in the FLA's mental feasts.

"More To the Movement." Library of Congress. https://www.loc.gov/exhibitions/women-fight-for-the-vote/about-this-exhibition/more-to-the-movement/.

This passage is a part of the Library of Congress's *Shall Not Be Denied: Women Fight for the Vote* exhibit, and it revealed the extent of the segregation within the feminist movement. I was most surprised by the fact that the iconic Seneca Falls Convention, the proclaimed first women's rights convention in the United States, did not include any Black women.

Morgan, Tabitha A. "Revolution and Roses: The Voice and Aesthetic of Sarah Mapps Douglass." *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 87, no. 4 (2020): 657-63. https://doi.org/10.5325/pennhistory.87.4.0657.

Morgan delivered a niche argument on Douglass's lesser-known watercolor paintings and their impact on artistic and social norms of the 19th century. My scope of Douglass's

individual action was greatly increased, and I was able to grasp her responsibility to use her education to break barriers within the arts.

Span, Christopher M. "Learning in Spite of Opposition: African Americans and their History of Educational Exclusion in Antebellum America." *Counterpoints* 131 (2005): 26-53. https://www.jstor.org/stable/42977282.

This argument gave me context on 19th century public perception of the equal right to education. I learned that many states were against the literacy and education of Black individuals, and that some Americans were scared of the power of the equal right to education.