

Black, Christian, and Feminist in Antebellum New England
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On September 21, 1832, Maria Wellington Miller Stewart, a mixed-race woman of African descent, addressed a gathering of the New England Anti-Slavery Society in Boston, Massachusetts. After her husband's untimely death, she became the first United States-born woman of any race to address mixed audiences of men and women. She defied the gender norms of her time because she believed that God required her to speak publicly on behalf of people of African descent.¹

She provocatively began her September 1832 speech by appropriating the words of 2 Kings 2:3-4, "Why sit ye here and die? . . . Come let us plead our cause before the whites: if they save us alive, we shall live—and if they kill us, we shall but die."² Stewart's words, which were emblematic of the sentiments of abolitionist Black women, enslaved and free, reflected a desire that many Black women who practiced Christianity had. Their demand was simple. They wanted to live. Their demand was the essence of an ideology I describe as Black Christian feminism in antebellum New England.

The desire to live remains central to Black feminist thought, as was reflected in 1979 when Black women who described themselves as "Black lesbian socialists" wondered why Black women were being killed in neighborhoods surrounding Boston, Massachusetts. The group, which called themselves the Combahee River Collective in memory of Harriet Tubman's military raid on the Combahee River in South Carolina, published a pamphlet called "Eleven Black Women (Why Did They Die?)."³ In it, they explained that "our sisters died *because* they were women just as surely as they died because they were Black."

My book project, "We Will Live: Black Christian Feminists in the Age of Revolutions," will use Black feminist and womanist theory to explore the factors that led Black women throughout New England's history to demand that they must be allowed to live. This project looks back to the crises Black women have historically endured in New England, but I recognize the ongoing problem of premature death facing Black women. By recovering a long-submerged intellectual history of Black women's political organizing in defense of their lives, we gain the tools that help us preserve Black women's lives in the present and well into the future.

¹ Maria W. Stewart, *America's First Black Woman Political Writer: Essays and Speeches*, ed. Marilyn Richardson, (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1987). In Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, (New York: Routledge, 1990), Hill Collins describes Stewart as the first in an intellectual lineage of Black feminist women in the United States.

² Stewart, 45.

³ Combahee River Collective, "Eleven Black Women Why Did They Die?" (Boston, Massachusetts, 1979), LHA Special Collections: Barbara Smith Collection, <https://cdm16694.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p274401coll1/id/1063>, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, ed., *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective* (Chicago, Ill: Haymarket Books, 2017), and Edda L. Fields-Black, *Combahee: Harriet Tubman, the Combahee River Raid, and Black Freedom during the Civil War* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2023).