

“Traveling Up and Down”: Reading *The Sum of Us*

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While I was reflecting on Heather McGhee’s book, *The Sum of Us*, I immediately recalled *Narrative of the Life of Sojourner Truth*, one of the first black women to publish a book in the United States. Born into slavery, upon securing her freedom, Sojourner Truth devoted the rest of her life to advocating for abolitionism and women’s rights. Although McGhee’s book arrives well over a hundred years after Sojourner Truth’s narrative, she demonstrates that she is a worthy heir to her sister of the spirit.

Structurally, *The Sum of Us* resembles Sojourner Truth’s narrative in that it does not neatly fit into a literary genre. Because she was non-literate, *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth* was assembled from multiple documents informed by witnessing her in roles as activist, strategist, preacher, and social reformer. It’s more of a scrapbook than a linear narrative. Likewise, McGhee’s book, while powered by the strong and informed autobiographical voice of a highly-educated and experienced professional, also pieces together different kinds of writing, including pages of economic and social policy analysis, descriptive ethnographies, personal testimony, and activist strategies for accomplishing what both she and Sojourner Truth hoped to achieve in publishing their books: to reassert the value of all of us and how individually and collectively we can move in a direction that creates such a world.

Born Isabella Baumfree, Sojourner Truth describes her name change in language that describes the effort behind both women’s narratives: The Lord gave me 'Sojourner,' because I was to travel up and down the land, showing the people their sins and being a sign unto them. Afterwards, I told the Lord I wanted another name because everybody else had two names, and the Lord gave me 'Truth,' because I was to declare the truth to people.”

Both authors are sojourners, travelers through the Black experience, who seek to tell the truth about racial inequality in America and how it results in diminishment of our souls.

When she published her book in 1850, Sojourner Truth enjoyed a literary success few did at the time, especially remarkable since the works of so few black women had been published. Primarily a woman of action, reaching a wide audience in her quest to abolish slavery and vindicate rights for women was a practical matter for Sojourner Truth. She viewed the book as a way to raise money to support her work. Likewise, McGhee’s approach to her audience’s context makes her an effective agent for change. A simple reading of the variety of people from many walks of life who provided praise

for her book on its covers illustrates the wide reach and potential impact McGhee's work can have.

The strong presence and powerful voices of Heather McGhee and Sojourner Truth underscore an implicit reminder that changing laws does not necessarily change hearts and minds. This is soul work that needs to continue but in ways that call people into the better angels of their nature rather than calling them out as unredeemable racists. Such a move does not absolve one of responsibility. Rather it seeks to find the reasons why, what James Baldwin called "willed innocence," is so persistent, recognizing the fear and misinformation that wills white people's resistance to knowledge that would challenge their racist narratives. In the case of the formidable evidence from across sectors and disciplines that McGhee assembles, a reader begins to question if Baldwin's term "innocence," is too mild. Rather Anthony Appiah's concept of "cognitive incapacity" seems apt when it comes to demythologizing white racism. The variety and scope of her evidence is compelling and convincing; yet it is also where the math starts to add up to a different sum.

McGhee doesn't leave us with despair. What McGhee offers in her discerning approach is hope in the mathematics of human possibility, that we can change hearts and minds. Our humanity isn't defined by the sum of our racism. We are more than the sum of our worst racist inclinations and actions. The sum of us is "a new story of who we could be to one another." Like Sojourner Truth before her, McGhee understands that while extraordinary in their efforts, both writers come from the same place as ordinary folks, the all of us who can lend our voices to writing this new story if we choose to recognize that diversity is our unappreciated "superpower," that makes the math add up to benefit all of us.

What encourages me to be hopeful when I encounter a work like Heather McGhee's *The Sum of Us*, I also see reflected in Ignatian spirituality. Her work is a companion to other gifts of the spirit, like *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth* and the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius, because it moves us towards transformation. She practices the fine art of discernment by listening to many voices expressed in multiple moods and contexts to seek a fuller and deeper basis for identifying how we can contribute to the Common Good. A way of describing the sum of us and "who we are to each other," finds expression in St. Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises* as "finding God in all things." McGhee's book, which travels up and down in a search for truth, finds God in all of us.

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