

Sacred Land Regained:
Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and
“The Massachusetts Fifty-Four,” A Lost Poem

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Courtesy Library of Congress



Frances Ellen Watkins Harper.

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825-1911), writer, abolitionist, and feminist, was the most widely read African-American poet before the advent of the Harlem Renaissance.¹ Although best remembered for her powerful antislavery poem "Bury Me in a Free Land" (1858)² and *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted* (1892), a provocative novel about slavery and race in the old South, Harper wrote seven volumes of poetry and prose from the 1840s to 1901. Her *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects* (1854) sold 10,000 copies in three years and the combined sales of her first four books totaled at least 50,000.³ Blacks and whites avidly bought her books and flocked to her public readings. Mary Ann Shadd Cary, the talented black abolitionist editor of Toronto Canada's *Provincial Freeman*, marveled at Harper's popularity. The public, she declared, is "just crazy with excitement about her."⁴

Watkins, who lived with the William and Letitia Still family above the offices of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society in Philadelphia, first became known as an abolitionist poet and speaker. In 1853, she published "Eliza Harris"—inspired by Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*—in the *Liberator* and in *Frederick Douglass' Paper*. The Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society soon hired her as their official lecturer and agent for eastern Pennsylvania and New Jersey. Then in 1858, she began speaking throughout the mid-west. Harper's lectures left her audiences amazed at her eloquence and many observers compared Harper to some of the antislavery movement's most articulate women. She returned to Philadelphia after the Civil War where she fought to end the city's segregated street car system and began her second career as a women's rights advocate. Harper's success as a lecturer kept her constantly on the move, but Philadelphia remained her home.⁵

Though scholars once dismissed Harper's writing as "tearful sentimentality [that] wearies us" and scarcely "deserving of preservation,"⁶ she is now recognized as a "central figure" in the African-American women's literary tradition.⁷ Thus, it is astonishing, if not scandalous, that such an important and celebrated African-American writer would go so long without attracting a modern full-scale biography. Published studies of Harper have dwelled on her literary career and are largely confined to scrutinizing her novel *Iola Leroy*.⁸ This biographical deficit restricts our understanding of African-American history and perpetuates misinformation about Harper. Equally important, the dearth of biographical work on Harper has left an untold amount of her writing in obscurity. If the newly discovered work discussed in this essay is any measure, there is still important and well-crafted Harper poetry yet to find.⁹

Harper's writings resonate with religious faith, compassion, and defiance. At their best, her poems are a powerful evocation of the African-American response to slavery and racial oppression. "The Massachusetts Fifty-fourth," (1863)¹⁰ which appeared in the New York *Weekly Anglo-African*, the most important black paper of the Civil War era, is one of Harper's most commanding poetic works. It honors the first regular Civil War army unit of free Northern blacks and also places Harper's more famous work, "Bury Me in a Free Land," in a new light. When read together, the poems document the struggle against slavery and immortalize the black role in national regeneration, a force so potent that to Harper it appeared to transform and sanctify the land. The poems form a literary diptych, revealing the African-American response to the evil of slavery and asserting the crucial part blacks played in restoring the Union and securing emancipation.

Although the outline of Harper's life is well known, there remains disagreement over basic facts. Nearly every reference work and secondary source cites 9 September 1825 as her birthdate. At least one author, however, citing Harper's death certificate, places her birth in 1824.¹¹ A free black from Baltimore, Maryland, Harper was orphaned at age three, may have boarded with some unknown family members, and was eventually taken in by her aunt and uncle, Henrietta and William Watkins.¹² She attended the Watkins Academy, a school for free blacks founded in 1820 by her uncle William at the age of nineteen. William Watkins—often confused with his son, William J. Watkins—was trained by the black evangelical Daniel Coker at the Sharp Street Church and assumed responsibility for many of his students after Coker's departure for Africa. Watkins quickly rose to become the city's influential black leader and the black community's most outspoken abolitionist.¹³ Harper's later career as an abolitionist and writer may owe much to the Watkins's influence. At about age thirteen, after assisting her uncle with operation of the school, Harper began work as a domestic servant in the home of a white Baltimore bookseller and remained there for seven years. She built on the education received from her uncle by reading the volumes in her employer's library and began publishing poetry in local newspapers. At age sixteen she wrote *Forest Leaves*, her first book of poetry. Unfortunately, no copy of this work survives.

Those who have written about Harper rely heavily on William Still's brief account of her life in his history of the Underground Railroad. Although Still, the Philadelphia black abolitionist leader and head of the city's important Underground

Railroad station, knew Harper better than anyone, his sketch is ambiguous and disappointingly incomplete. For example, he reported that Harper did not leave Baltimore until "about the year 1851" for Ohio. But Harper stated that she had taught school in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1850.¹⁴ Sometime in 1851, Harper did join the faculty of Union Seminary near Columbus, Ohio, an African Methodist Episcopal manual labor school founded in 1847, where she taught sewing and embroidery. In 1852, she moved to York, Pennsylvania, where she taught at the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church's Smallwood School.¹⁵

Harper's stay in York proved a painful ordeal. She doubted her abilities as a teacher and, as Still wrote, the "fifty-three untrained little urchins" she instructed there "overtaxed her naturally delicate physical powers." Uncertainty and indecision left her depressed and she contacted a friend for advice. "What would you do if you were in my place?" she asked. "Would you give up and go back and work at your trade [dress-making]? There are no people that need all the benefits resulting from a well-directed education more than we do. The condition of our people, the wants of our children, and the welfare of our race demand the aid of every helping hand, the God-speed of every Christian heart."¹⁶

Harper's own doubts and personal crisis developed at precisely the same time as the nation plunged into a bitter crisis over the institution of slavery. The 1850 Fugitive Slave Law, adopted by Congress as part of compromise legislation to prevent the dissolution of the Union, threatened all Northern blacks and sent thousands of African Americans fleeing to Canada. Kidnapping rings, which operated throughout the early nineteenth century in Philadelphia and in all other major Northern cities, now acted more brazenly. Black Pennsylvanians organized to meet the challenge. Harper met many African-American activists in the York, Columbia, and Lancaster region who told her of the Northern black struggle against slavery and introduced her to William Still and his circle of Underground Railroad workers. Moved by the tragic stories of runaway slaves, Harper abandoned teaching and joined the black abolitionist movement.¹⁷

A personal confrontation with slavery frequently drew Northern African Americans into abolitionism. Sarah M. Douglass, a prominent member of Philadelphia's black elite, for example, joined the movement in her twenties after the Pennsylvania legislature considered measures during the early 1830s to restrict free black rights and strengthen fugitive slave laws. "I had formed a little world of

my own, and cared not to move beyond its precincts," she declared to the Female Literary Society of Philadelphia. "But how was the scene changed when I beheld the oppressor lurking on the border of my own peaceful home! I saw his iron hand stretched forth to seize me as his prey, and the cause of the slave became my own."¹⁸

For Harper, the moment of decision came in 1853 when she learned about the tragic case of a free black who unwittingly violated a Maryland law prohibiting free African Americans from settling in the state, and was sold away as a slave to Georgia. Maryland maintained the country's most aggressive state colonization society and remained committed to reducing its free black population. The fugitive eluded his enslavers until just before his arrival in the North when slave catchers discovered him and returned the man to Georgia where he soon died as a result of his ordeal. This incident, which reminded Harper that she could no longer return to her native state, personalized the injustice of slavery, transformed Harper, and redirected her life. "Upon that grave," she declared, "I pledged myself to the anti-Slavery cause." It now seemed to her that "God himself has written upon both my heart and brain a commission to use time, talent and energy in the cause of freedom."¹⁹

Harper quickly enlisted her literary talents in the antislavery cause. Probably with the assistance of Boston's great abolitionist leader William Lloyd Garrison, who wrote a preface for her book, Harper published *Poems on Various Subjects* (1854). Her poetry also appeared in the antislavery press and was sung as hymns at abolitionist meetings and conventions. The following antislavery hymn, "Freedom's Battle," a version of "Be Active" (1856), has never been reprinted and is not discussed in the growing body of Harper scholarship.²⁰ The poem's strength rests on its appeal to conscience and the Christian imagery that would have spoken with equal force to blacks and whites.

Onward, O ye Sons of Freedom,
In the great and glorious strife;
You've a high and holy mission
On the battle-fields of life.

See Oppression's heel of iron
Grinds a brother to the ground,
And from bleeding heart and bosom
Gapeth many a fearful wound.

On my blighted people's bosom
Mountain loads of sorrow lay;
Stop not, then, to ask the question,
Who shall roll the stone away?

O be faithful, O be valiant,
Trusting not in human might,
Know that in the darkest conflict
God is on the side of right.²¹

Harper, like other black abolitionists, came to identify with the slaves and saw that their bondage threatened all black freedom: a "blow has been struck at my freedom, in every hunted and down-trodden slave in the South."²² Her commitment to the slave and the cause of freedom and democracy defined her life and became her calling. Although many abolitionists rejected the "Free Produce" movement as ineffective, Harper believed in the duty of all blacks to avoid any complicity with the institution of slavery, even if they had to pay more for goods produced without slave labor. "I can thank God," she wrote, "that upon its warp and woof I see no stain of blood and tears; that to produce a little finer muslin for my limbs no crushed and broken heart went out in sighs."²³

Harper, although never a slave, did not have to endure bondage to know its terrors. Nor did she have to leave Baltimore to know the effects of racism. Slavery was an unavoidable fact during the years Harper spent in Baltimore. Even as late as 1850, about seven thousand Baltimore County blacks remained in servitude. Equally important, as Frederick Douglass discovered during his stay in the city, the "slavery" of racial prejudice in Baltimore was palpable.²⁴ The phrase "Damn Niggers" or "they ought to be killed" tumbled from the lips of white men threatened by the mere presence of African Americans.²⁵

Northern life, as Harper soon discovered, offered no refuge from the racism found in Maryland. She quickly learned what other Northern black leaders always had known, that “we are treated worse than aliens among a people whose language we speak, whose religion we profess, and whose blood flows and mingles in our veins.”²⁶ Riots against urban black communities punctuated the antebellum years and degrading images of blacks poured from the popular presses. In Pennsylvania, African Americans had lost the franchise in 1838, the same year that rioters burned Philadelphia’s Pennsylvania Hall, a meeting place for integrated abolitionist meetings.²⁷ Whites excluded blacks from the city’s public meetings and cultural activities; blacks would no more be welcomed at a white library society “than a donkey or a rattlesnake.”²⁸ Philadelphia’s “Jim Crow” laws also proscribed black attendance at schools and restricted their use of public conveyances, where, regardless of the weather, they were permitted to ride only on the exterior steps of the cars. Failure to observe this rule would result in a swift ejection, arrest, or personal injury. Despite many protests and several petitions to abolish the “Jim Crow” transportation system, even by some of the city’s leading white citizens,²⁹ blacks remained excluded from the cars until after the Civil War. Harper’s move to Philadelphia, probably in 1853, exposed her to the stifling effects of Northern racial hatred. She was harassed on the city’s street cars and threatened on the state roads. Harper later wrote that “I have been in every New England state, in New York, Canada and Ohio, but of all these places, this [Pennsylvania] is about the meanest of all, as far as the treatment of colored people is concerned.”³⁰

Harper, because she lived over the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society’s offices in Philadelphia, saw countless fugitives on their way to Canada or resettlement in safe Northern communities. Through them she could gain a more intimate knowledge of the wickedness and cruelty that fugitive slaves sought to escape. Harper’s “The Slave Auction” (1854) spoke with the authority of a witness.

The sale began — young girls were there,
 Defenseless in their wretchedness,
 Whose stifled sobs of deep despair
 Revealed their anguish and distress.

And mothers stood with streaming eyes,
And saw their dearest children sold;
Unheeded rose their bitter cries,
While tyrants bartered them for gold.³¹

Although Harper lived in a hub of black antislavery activism, at first she failed to become involved. William Still believed that a combination of her uncertainty and modesty, and other black leaders' assumptions that her youth and inexperience offered nothing to the movement, prevented her from taking a more active role. In short, she did not ask to become more involved and they did not offer. That may well explain why, at first, Harper's immense talents as a lecturer remained undiscovered. Some degree of sexism may also have been at work. Later, when Harper was earning an income from her various publications, Still advised her to save her money and not give so much to the antislavery cause. Such condescension did not sit well with her. "Let me explain a few matters to you," she told Still. "In the first place, I am able to give something. In the second place, I am willing to do so."³²

In the summer of 1854, Harper went to New Bedford, Massachusetts, a center of black abolitionism, with her cousin William J. Watkins. There she delivered her first public address, "The Elevation and Education of Our People." The public response to her speech launched one of the most successful speaking careers by an African-American woman. The Maine Anti-Slavery society hired her as a lecturer and brought her before scores of white audiences throughout the state. Harper had become so popular, she reported, that "I took breakfast with the then Governor of Maine."³³ From 5 September to 20 October 1854, Harper delivered 33 lectures in 21 New England towns. In 1856, she visited fugitive slave and free black expatriate settlements in Canada. From October 1857 to May 1858 she lectured for the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society and spoke throughout Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York. She then traveled west, lecturing in Michigan and in Ohio where she helped found the Ohio State Anti-Slavery Society, an independent black organization. The experience transformed her life and increased her self-confidence. "My life reminds me of a beautiful dream," she wrote. "What a difference between this and York!"³⁴

One cannot overestimate the appeal and power Harper displayed from the antislavery podium. William C. Nell, Boston's black Garrisonian abolitionist leader, characterized one of her addresses as "eloquent indignation."³⁵ According to the popular author Grace Greenwood (pen name of Sara J. Lippincott), Harper presented herself with great dignity and spoke from the rostrum without notes and with few gestures. "Her manner is marked by dignity and composure," Greenwood wrote. "She is never assuming, never theatrical." Still, the "woe of two hundred years sighed through her tones."³⁶ After the Civil War, when Harper toured the South in what must have been one of the most courageous and dangerous lecture tours in American history, she even charmed crusty old Confederates. One gray veteran found Harper's voice "remarkable—as sweet as any woman's voice we have ever heard." Harper was a singular phenomenon who, as William J. Scheick noted, possessed the ability to dissolve "the boundary between stories and lives."³⁷

Harper's marriage in 1860 and its relationship to her professional career is also clouded with misconceptions. During her lecture tour of Ohio in the late 1850s, Frances Watkins met Fenton Harper, a widower with three children. They married on 22 November 1860 and with funds supplied by Watkins, purchased a farm in Grove City near Columbus, Ohio. The Harpers had one child, Mary, who never married and remained with her mother for the rest of her life. Fenton Harper died in 1864, leaving his wife and family in debt. Creditors sold everything from livestock and washtubs to a featherbed.

Most accounts of Harper's life in this period assume that during her marriage Harper "retired" from the antislavery movement. She was "content to stay at home," as one historian phrased it, and did not return to the lecture circuit until after her husband's death.³⁸ Yet another scholar went on to speculate that the white woman in Harper's short story "The Two Offers" (1859) who gave up a marriage to become an abolitionist represented "perhaps a fantasy Harper herself entertained."³⁹ The facts confound such assumptions and speculations. With responsibility—shared or otherwise—for four children, Harper could not continue her former demanding lecture schedule. She did, however, continue to write correspondence and poetry for the reform press and lecture in Ohio, but among African Americans. The racial prejudice of white abolitionists may have led them to discount her labors in the black communities and thus not report it. Our knowledge of her activities may also be hampered by the lack of African-American newspapers in the Midwest to

record her work. Still, as she made clear in a letter to the white Ohio abolitionist Jane Hitchcock Jones just before her marriage, Harper had no plans to abandon her career. "I am going to spend part of this fall visiting and lecturing among the colored people. We need some earnest and elevating influence among ourselves, and possibly some of the very best anti-slavery work I can do is to labor earnestly and faithfully among those with whom I am identified by complexion, race and blood."⁴⁰

As errors and misconceptions limit our knowledge of Harper's life, similar lapses plague our understanding of her writings. Critical assessments of her work too often have centered on the relationship between what she wrote and what she spoke. Hazel Carby, for instance, has attempted to defend the quality and value of Harper's writing by showing close parallels between her post-war speeches and her novel *Iola Leroy*.⁴¹ To make her relevant to contemporary readers, historians and literary critics have downplayed the sentimental element of Harper's writings and asserted that her work grew out of her life experience, displaying little or no difference between the written and spoken word.

Some of Harper's poems, like much nineteenth-century poetry, do not wear well today. Their sentimentality and heavy reliance upon simple rhyme and meter strike modern tastes as irritating and simple minded. But conceding that Harper's poetry employed contemporary styles and methods by no means diminishes those poems that display genuine power and, like "The Slave Auction," remain deeply moving. The question of the relationship between texts and speeches is quite beside the point. Harper wrote for the nineteenth century in idioms and in a style intended to reach Americans of all classes. When she wrote poetry she adopted a style heavy with sentimentality and religious appeal; when addressing an audience she relied upon an appeal to conscience and its sense of justice; and when writing essays or letters intended for the reform press, she wrote with authority and few flourishes.

Harper's writing demonstrated flexibility, adaptability, wit, and energy. It utilized a style appropriate for the task at hand. She was no mere sentimentalist. When considering President Abraham Lincoln's plans for renewing the hated colonizationist

scheme during the Civil War, Harper was clear and to the point. “The president’s dabbling with colonization just now suggests to my mind the idea of a man almost dying with a loathsome cancer and busying himself about having his hair trimmed according to the latest fashion.”⁴² Considering the amount of “sentiment” that gushed from the popular press in response to Lincoln’s assassination, Harper’s view of the incident epitomizes clarity and foresight.

Well, it may be in the providence of God this blow was needed to intensify the nation’s hatred of slavery, to show the utter fallacy of basing national reconstruction upon the votes of returned rebels, and rejecting loyal black men, making . . . a return to the old idea that a white rebel is better or of more account in the body politic than a loyal black man. . . . God has seen fit to summon for the new era another man.⁴³

Harper’s analysis of the postwar South found widespread agreement among other black leaders. It might cause some modern historians to blush with envy for its brevity and succinctness, and others to rage. Harper divided the South into three classes: the “scum of society, the dregs of society, and the colored man.”⁴⁴ Rather than dismissing Harper for her sentimentality or making exaggerated claims for her modernity, we should read Harper in the context of her times and appreciate the ways she could meet the requirements of the various mediums she worked in and the audiences she addressed.

“The Massachusetts Fifty-Fourth” is further indication of Harper’s continued labors during the years of her marriage. It is also, by any measure, one of her most arresting poems. The piece commemorates the Civil War’s best-known African-American regiment and its heroic charge against Battery Wagner, South Carolina, on 18 July 1863. Organized by Massachusetts Gov. John A. Andrew and commanded by Col. Robert Gould Shaw, the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts embodied the black abolitionist struggle against slavery and racism. On its shoulders rested the hopes and aspirations of Northern blacks. “[E]very black man and woman feels special interest in the success of this regiment,” New York’s *Weekly Anglo-African* declared. “The eyes of the whole world are upon you, civilized man everywhere waits to see if you will prove yourselves.”⁴⁵

Although the assault failed to take the Confederate fortification, the regiment more than proved its valor at Battery Wagner. Of the original 600 men of the Fifty-

fourth Massachusetts who participated in the attack, 272 were either killed, wounded, or captured. Nevertheless, the unit's heroism dispelled racist allegations that blacks could not or would not be soldiers. As the *Philadelphia Press* announced shortly after the assault, the "employment of colored troops has ceased to be an experiment. . . . We shall welcome the day when one hundred thousand of them are fighting for our flag."⁴⁶ The Fifty-fourth's action at Battery Wagner paved the way for the recruitment of nearly 180,000 African-American troops—about ten per cent of all Union forces—and a Union victory.⁴⁷ Harper's poem, written in the weeks after the regiment's famed charge, fits into the one hundred and thirty year tradition of memorializing the regiment by both black and white authors, artists, and, recently, filmmakers.⁴⁸ Without question the figure of Robert Gould Shaw looms over this commemorative literature and art.

Anna Waterston's "Together" typifies concern for the "pure" image of Shaw as martyr and Christ figure that preoccupied most nineteenth-century authors who wrote about the Fifty-fourth:

Oh, fair-haired Northern Hero,
 With thy guard of dusky hue,
 Up from the field of battle
 Rise to the last review!⁴⁹

Thomas Bailey Aldrich's "An Ode," that commemorated the unveiling of Augustus Saint Gauden's famous 1897 sculpture of Shaw and the Fifty-fourth on Boston Common, is more audacious in its effort to immortalize Shaw and diminish the memory of the African Americans he commanded.

O soul of loyal valor and white truth,
 Here, by this iron gate,
 Thy serried ranks about thee as of yore,
 Stand thou for evermore
 In thy undying youth!
 The tender heart, the eagle eye!
 Oh, unto him belong
 The homages of Song;

Our praises and the praise
 of coming days
 To him belong—
 To him, to him, the dead that shall not die!⁵⁰

As a heroic figure, Robert Gould Shaw possesses undeniable appeal. African-American artists, like the sculptor Edmonia Lewis and the painter Edward M. Bannister, honored Shaw's sacrifice and memory with their art.⁵¹ But African Americans also revered the rank-and-file of the regiment as an expression of black capability and as undeniable evidence of their worth, their right to full citizenship, and of the injustice of slavery.⁵² For Harper, the sacrifices of the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts Regiment redeemed a blighted land, sanctifying it with the blood of true Christian martyrs.

Reading Harper's well-known poem "Bury Me in a Free Land" together with the newly discovered "The Massachusetts Fifty-fourth" establishes a moral symmetry, following in the Christian tradition of death and rebirth. The new poem allows us to appreciate better the artistry of her more famous piece; equally important, it reveals how vital images of "the land" were to Harper. In "Bury Me in a Free Land" slavery polluted the American earth, rendering it unfit to die in. Burial in "lowly vale or a lofty hill" or "among earth's humblest graves" was preferable to "a land where men are slaves." In "The Massachusetts Fifty-fourth," the sacrifices of African-American men had redeemed the land, hallowed it, and made it flourish. "And from the soil drenched with their blood/ The fairest flowers of peace shall bloom/ And history cull rich laurels there/ To deck each martyr hero's tomb."

In "Bury Me in A Free Land," a "mother's shriek of wild despair" rang in Harper's ears. As long as slavery blighted the soil, America was a cursed nation. There could be no rest, no repose, no final concession to the land that absorbed the blood and tears of the oppressed slave. "I could not sleep if around my grave/ I heard the steps of a trembling slave/ His shadow above my silent tomb/ Would make it a place of fearful gloom." To Harper, the gallantry of the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts Regiment at Battery Wagner had transformed and transfigured the land into a sacred resting place. "And ages yet uncrossed with life/ As sacred urns, do hold each mound/ Where sleep the loyal, true, and brave/ In freedom's consecrated ground."

Where the land once symbolized death and despair, African Americans restored it. "Each dying heart poured out a balm/ To heal the wounded nation's life." In 1858, when Harper published "Bury Me in a Free Land," blacks had witnessed decades of buoyant growth for the institution of slavery. One year earlier they suffered the effects of the Dred Scott case that officially enshrined in constitutional law what always had been the experience of most African Americans: blacks had no rights that white men were bound to respect.⁵³ "Bury Me in a Free Land" reflected the remorse and sadness that blacks felt, but also expressed their defiant stand not to accept slavery and racism as fixed features of American life. "Bury Me in a Free Land" was not a poem of hopelessness and despair, but of tragedy and resistance. This nation, the very ground itself was poisoned by the institution of slavery and blacks would have none of it. Not even in death would Harper submit to the injustice of slavery and racial oppression. The heroism of the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts Regiment had redeemed and altered the landscape. These "Bearers of a high commission," "onward pressed through shot and shell," "To break each brother's chain" and make America "freedom's consecrated ground."

"I remember the first time I ever saw free land," Harper once declared. No, it was not when she had visited Virginia. The "air of Virginia was heavy with American slavery." She recalled her move to Pennsylvania with its "memories of William Penn, the reminiscences of the Revolution, and Independence; but there was no free soil." Not in New Jersey or New York, she declared, and not even in Massachusetts. There, the fugitive slaves Thomas Sims "had been hurled again to bondage; [and] Anthony Burns had been thrust back to chattel slavery." To Harper, the laws of New England ultimately were of no account to "prove whether I have a right to be a free woman or am rightfully the chattel of another."⁵⁴ She could not forget the moment when she had gazed across Lake Ontario to Canada and for the first time saw "Free Land!" "And would you believe it, tears sprang to my eyes, and I wept." There, she knew that in an instant a slave's fetters were broken and his shackles loosened. There, "he becomes 'a man and a brother.'"⁵⁵

During the last years of the war, in the glow of the heroism of the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts, before the failures of Reconstruction and the harrowing cries of lynch mobs, for Harper, America had become, however briefly, sacred land.

BURY ME IN A FREE LAND

You may make my grave wherever you will,
In a lowly vale or a lofty hill;
You may make it among earth's humblest graves,
But not in a land where men are slaves.

I could not sleep if around my grave
I heard the steps of a trembling slave;
His shadow above my silent tomb
Would make it a place of fearful gloom.

I could not rest if I heard the tread
Of a coffle-gang to the shambles led
And the mother's shriek of wild despair
Rise like a curse on the trembling air.

I could not rest if I heard the lash
Drinking her blood at each fearful gash,
And I saw her babes torn from her breast
Like trembling doves from their parent nest.

I'd shudder and start, if I heard the bay
Of the bloodhounds seizing their human prey;
If I heard the captive plead in vain
As they tightened afresh his galling chain.

If I saw young girls, from their mother's arms
Bartered and sold for their youthful charms
My eye would flash with a mournful flame,
My death-paled cheek grow red with shame.

I would sleep, dear friends, where bloated might
Can rob no man of his dearest right;
My rest shall be calm in any grave,
Where none calls his brother a slave.

I ask no monument proud and high
To arrest the gaze of passers by;
All that my spirit yearning craves,
Is—bury me not in the land of slaves.⁵⁶

THE MASSACHUSETTS FIFTY-FOURTH

Where storms of death were sweeping,
Wildly through the darkened sky,
Stood the bold but fated column,
Brave to do, to dare, and die.

With cheeks that knew no blanching,
And brows that would not pale;
Where the bloody rain fell thickest,
Mingled with the fiery hail.

Bearers of a high commission
To break each brother's chain;
With hearts aglow for freedom,
They bore the toil and pain.

And onward pressed though shot and shell
Swept fiercely round their path;
While batteries hissed with tongues of flame,
And bayonets flashed with wrath.

Oh! not in vain those heroes fell,
Amid those hours of fearful strife;
Each dying heart poured out a balm
To heal the wounded nation's life.

And from the soil drenched with their blood,
The fairest flowers of peace shall bloom;
And history cull rich laurels there,
To deck each martyr hero's tomb.

And ages yet uncrossed with life,
As sacred urns, do hold each mound
Where sleep the loyal, true, and brave
In freedom's consecrated ground.⁵⁷

Notes

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1. Blyden Jackson, *A History of Afro-American Literature* vol. 1 *The Long Beginning, 1746-1895* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), pp. 265-266.
2. The chronological list of Harper's poetry in Maryemma Graham, ed., *Complete Poems of Frances E. W. Harper* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 220, erroneously states that "Bury Me in a Free Land" "originally" appeared in the *Liberator* in 1864. The first known publication of this piece was in the *Anti-Slavery Bugle*, 20 November 1858. C. Peter Ripley et al., eds., *The Black Abolitionist Papers*, vol. 4, *The United States, 1847-1858* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), pp. 403-406 (hereafter *BAP*).
3. Frances Smith Foster, *A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Reader* (New York, NY: Feminist Press at City University of New York, 1990), p. 14; William Still, *Underground Railroad* (1871; reprint, Chicago, IL: Johnson Publishing Company, 1970), p. 811. For a very useful bibliography of Harper's work see: Jean Fagan Yellin and Cynthia D. Bond, comps., *The Pen is Ours: A Listing of Writings by and about African-American Women before 1910 with Secondary Bibliography to the Present* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1991).
4. *BAP*, vol. 2, *Canada, 1830-1865* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), p. 192; Dorothy Sterling, ed., *We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Co., 1984), p. 174 quoted.
5. Margaret Hope Bacon, "'One Great Bundle of Humanity': Frances Ellen Watkins (1825-1911)," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 113 (January 1989): 21-38.
6. Jean Wagner, *Black Poets of the United States, From Paul Laurence Dunbar to Langston Hughes* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1973), p. 23.
7. Bacon, "'One Great Bundle of Humanity,'" 25; Mary Helen Washington, "'The Darkened Eye Restored: Notes Toward a Literary History of Black Women,'" in Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed., *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology* (New York, NY: Penguin, 1990), pp. 34-35; *New York Times*, 23 September 1990, pp. 38-39.
8. The best biographical studies of Harper are Bacon, "'One Great Bundle of Humanity,'" pp. 21-43 and Foster, *A Brighter Coming Day*. All studies of Harper rely on William Still's *Underground Railroad*, pp. 783-811. For critical studies of Harper's work see: Elizabeth Ammons, "Legacy Profile: Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825-1911)," *Legacy: A Journal of Nineteenth-Century American Women Writers* 2 (Fall 1985):61-66; Roseann P. Bell, Bettye J. Parker, and Beverly Guy-Sheftall, eds., *Black Bridges: Visions of Black Women in Literature* (Garden City, NY: Anchor/Doubleday, 1979); Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergency of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1987); John Ernest, "From Mysteries to Histories: Cultural Pedagogy in Frances E. W. Harper's *Iola Leroy*," *American Literature* 64 (September 1992):497-518; Gabrielle P. Foreman, "Looking Back from Zora, or Talking Out Both Sides my Mouth for those who have Two Ears," *Black American Literature Forum* 24 (Winter 1990):649-666; Jackson, *History of Afro-American Literature*; Paul Lauter, "Is Francis Ellen Watkins Good Enough to Teach?" *Legacy: A Journal of Nineteenth Century American Women* 5 (Spring 1988):27-32; Vashti Lewis, "The Near-White Female in Frances Ellen Harper's *Iola Leroy*," *Phylon* 45 (1984):314-22; William J. Scheick, "Strategic Ellipsis in Harper's Two Offers," *The Southern Literary Journal* 23 (Spring 1991):14-18; Joan R. Sherman, *Invisible Poets: Afro-Americans of the Nineteenth Century* (Urbana, IL: University of

- Illinois Press, 1979); Ann Allen Shockley, *Afro-American Women Writers, 1746-1933: An Anthology and Critical Guide* (Boston, MA: G. K. Hall, 1988); and Elizabeth Young, "Warring Fictions: *Iola Leroy* and the Color of Gender," *American Literature* 64 (June 1992): 273-297.
9. Frances Smith Foster, a Harper scholar, recently uncovered three additional Harper novels. See Foster, ed., *Minnie's Sacrifice, Sowing and Reaping, Trial and Triumph: Three Rediscovered Novels* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1994).
10. *Weekly Anglo-African*, 10 October 1863.
11. Edward T. James, Janet Wilson James, and Paul S. Boyer, eds., *Notable American Women* 3 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), 2:137-39 cite the traditionally accepted dates. But Sherman's *Invisible Poets*, pp. 62-63 makes the claim for a year earlier. The most relied-upon sources for Harper biographical information appear to be Still's *Underground Railroad* and Theodora Williams Daniel, "The Poems of Frances E. W. Harper, Edited with a Biographical and Critical Introduction and Bibliography," Master's Thesis, Howard University, 1937. Such inconsistencies and shaky scholarship point up the need for a modern scholarly biography.
12. Neither Still's book nor other secondary literature is clear as to whether Harper immediately went to the Watkins home upon her mother's death or went to another, unspecified, aunt first. Foster, *A Brighter Coming Day*, pp. 5-6 states that there was another aunt; William Still's account is ambiguous, *Underground Railroad*, p. 784. All other accounts skirt the issue by jumping from the death of Harper's mother—almost nothing is mentioned of her father—to her enrollment at the Watkins Academy in Baltimore.
13. William Watkins (1801-1858) led Baltimore's black community from the late 1820s to the 1840s. He ministered to several black churches in the city and practiced medicine, but earned his most enduring reputation by his early and persistent opposition to slavery and American attempts to colonize blacks in Africa. For a fuller biography, see *BAP*, 3:96-97n.6 and Bettye J. Gardner, "William Watkins: Antebellum Black Teacher and Antislavery Writer," *Negro History Bulletin* 37 (September-October 1976):623-525.
14. Still, *Underground Railroad*, p. 785; Gardner, "William Watkins," p. 623; Bacon, "One Great Bundle of Humanity," pp. 22-23; Graham, *Complete Poems*, pp. xxxiv-xxxv, liiin.4; Frances Ellen Watkins [Harper] to Editor, 15 April 1859 in *Anti-Slavery Bugle*, 23 April 1859, *Black Abolitionist Papers Microfilm Edition*, ed. George Carter and C. Peter Ripley, Ann Arbor, MI: Microfilming Corporation of America, 1974, reel 11, frame 0698 [hereafter *BAP* Microfilm reel:frame].
15. Foster, *A Brighter Coming Day*, p. 9; Sherman, *Invisible Poets*, pp. 62-63; Union Seminary later relocated to Xenia, Ohio, and became part of Wilberforce University, Ammons, "Frances Ellen Watkins Profile," p. 61; Still, *Underground Railroad*, p. 784. Still—and those who rely on his work—referred to "Little York," Pennsylvania, a nickname for the city commonly used from the 1790s to the Civil War. Information kindly provided by Lila Fourhman-Shaull, assistant librarian, Historical Society of York County. Prof. Leroy Hopkins, Millersville University, informed me of Harper's work at the Smallwood School.
16. Still, *Underground Railroad*, pp. 785-786.
17. Bacon, "One Great Bundle of Humanity," pp. 24-25; Julie Winch, "Philadelphia and the Other Underground Railroad," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 111 (January 1987):3-35; *BAP*, 3:37-40; Still, *The Underground Railroad*, pp. 783-785.
18. "Speech by Sarah M. Douglass Delivered before the Female Literary Society of Philadelphia [June 1832]," in *BAP*, 3:116-117.
19. Penelope Campbell, *Maryland in Africa: The Maryland State Colonization Society, 1831-1857* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1971); Still, *Underground Railroad*, pp. 785-786.
20. *Weekly Anglo-African*, 30 July 1859, *BAP*

- Microfilm 11:0883; Benjamin Quarles, *Black Abolitionists* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 179, 233.
21. The hand-written copy of "Freedom's Battle" I read is undated and reads "By Miss Watkins." Banneker Institute Papers, Leon Gardiner Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Reproduced with permission.
22. Sherman, *Invisible Poets*, p. 64 quoted.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 62; Quarles, *Black Abolitionists*, pp. 75-76; Still, *Underground Railroad*, p. 788 quoted.
24. William S. McFeeley, *Frederick Douglass* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Co., 1991), pp. 60-67.
25. McFeeley, *Frederick Douglass*, pp. 60-61.
26. Still, *Underground Railroad*, p. 785 quoted.
27. Leon Litwack, *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790-1860* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1961); Winch, *Philadelphia's Black Elite*, pp. 86-87, 128, 138-139, 144-148, 150-151, 208n.53.
28. Frank J. Webb, *The Garies and their Friends* (London, Eng., 1857, reprint, New York, NY: Arno Press, 1969), p. 48.
29. *The Press*, 30 April 1863.
30. Bacon, "'One Great Bundle of Humanity,'" 28; Ammons, "Legacy Profile," p. 65 quoted. On the effort to end Philadelphia's "Jim Crow" transportation system see: Philip S. Foner, *Essays in Afro-American History* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1978), pp. 19-76.
31. Graham, *Complete Poems*, p. 10.
32. Still, *Underground Railroad*, pp. 786-787; Foster, *A Brighter Coming Day*, p. 16 quoted.
33. Still, *Underground Railroad*, pp. 786-787; Bacon, "'One Great Bundle of Humanity,'" p. 27.
34. Bacon, "'One Great Bundle of Humanity,'" p. 29; Sherman, *Invisible Poets*, pp. 62-63; BAP, 4:282n.1; Foster, *A Brighter Coming Day*, pp. 10-11, 13, 44 quoted.
35. Foster, *A Brighter Coming Day*, p. 17 quoted.
36. Ammons, "Legacy Profile," p. 62 quoted.
37. *Ibid.*; Scheick, "Strategic Ellipsis," pp. 14-18.
38. Bacon, "'One Great Bundle of Humanity,'" p. 31 quoted; Ammons, "Legacy Profile," p. 62; Sherman, *Invisible Poets*, p. 64; Jackson, *Long Beginning*, p. 267, went a step further and declared that from 1860 to 1864 Harper was "something of a recluse." Frances Smith Foster, perhaps Harper's best biographer, at first rejected the "retirement" theme but later characterized her marriage as "semiretirement from political life." Foster, *A Brighter Coming Day*, p. 18 and "Frances E. W. Harper," in *African American Writers*, ed., Valerie Smith, Lea Baechler, A. Walton Litz (New York, NY: Scribner's 1991), p. 166.
39. Cheryl Walker, *The Nightingale's Burden: Women Poets and American Culture Before 1900* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1982), p. 78.
40. Frances Ellen Watkins [Harper] to Jane E. Hitchcock Jones, 21 September 1860, in BAP, 5:81-82.
41. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, pp. 86-87.
42. *Christian Recorder*, 27 September 1862, BAP Microfilm, 14:0511.
43. Still, *Underground Railroad*, p. 796 quoted.
44. *Liberator*, 11 August 1865, BAP Microfilm, 16:0042.
45. For the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts see: Luis F. Emilio, *A Brave Black Regiment: History of the Fifty-Fourth Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, 1863-1865* (Boston: Boston Book Company, 1894, reprint, New York: Johnson Reprint Co., 1968); Peter Burchard, *One Gallant Rush: Robert Gould Shaw and His Brave Black Regiment* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965); Virginia M. Adams, ed., *On the Altar of Freedom: A Black Soldier's Civil War Letters from the Front* (Amherst, MA.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1991); Russell Duncan, ed., *Blue Eyed Child of Fortune: The Civil War Letters of Colonel Robert Gould Shaw* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1992); Donald Yacovone, "A Voice of Thunder": *The Civil War Writings of George E. Stephens* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, forthcoming); BAP 3:59 quoted.
46. *The Press*, 31 July 1863.

47. Ira Berlin, Joseph P. Reidy, Leslie S. Rowland, eds., *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867: series 2 The Black Military Experience* (Cambridge, Eng. and New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 14; Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the Civil War* (Boston, MA., 1953, reprint, New York, NY: Da Capo, 1989), pp. 20-21.
48. See Stephen T. Riley, "A Monument to Colonel Robert Gould Shaw," *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 75 (1963): 27-38; Stephen J. Whitfield, "Sacred in History and in Art: The Shaw Memorial," *New England Quarterly* 60 (March 1987): 3-27; Gary Scharnhorst, "From Soldier to Saint: Robert Gould Shaw and the Rhetoric of Racial Justice," *Civil War History* 34 (December 1988):308-322; *New York Times*, 17 December 1989.
49. *Boston Commonwealth*, 30 October 1863.
50. Thomas Bailey Aldrich, *Poems* 2 vols. (Boston, MA and New York, NY: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1904), 2:205-208.
51. Lewis executed a bust of Shaw that was exhibited on 12 November 1864 at the Boston Sailor's Fair. Bannister [many nineteenth-century sources mistakenly refer to him as Edwin Bannister] painted a portrait of Shaw, at the time valued at \$200, which was displayed at the 18 October 1864 Colored Ladies Sanitary Commission Fair also in Boston. *Liberator*, 21 October, 9 December 1864.
52. James Monroe Trotter, a member of the Fifty-fifth Massachusetts Regiment, wrote "The Fifty-fourth at Wagner"—another unrecognized African-American poem—and barely mentioned Shaw. His concern was the meaning of the regiment and its charge at Battery Wagner for blacks. In part it reads:
- Ay, noble men, dead and living, O "famous 54,"
In charge through deadly field, o'er fiery
ramparts then you bore
A race's honor, its friends' deep hopes, a state's
free banner—
These, in thy keeping, were not lost, but saved
in glorious manner!
Boston Commonwealth, 8 December 1883.
53. See Don E. Fehrenbacher, *The Dred Scott Case: Its Significance in American Law and Politics* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1978); *BAP* 4:362-365.
54. "Twenty-fifth Annual Meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society," in *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, 22 May 1858, *BAP Microfilm*, 11:0231.
55. Foster, *A Brighter Coming Day*, p. 45 quoted.
56. *Anti-Slavery Bugle*, 20 November 1858.
57. *Weekly Anglo-African*, 10 October 1863.