

“One Great Bundle of Humanity”: Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825-1911)

AMONG THE SPEAKERS AT THE Eleventh Annual Woman's Rights Convention, held in New York on May 8 and 9, 1866, was a new recruit to women's rights, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, a forty-one-year-old black poet, known before then for her activism in the antislavery movement. She was, as she said in her introductory remarks, a novice on the platform of women's rights:

Born of a race whose inheritance has been outrage and wrong, most of my life has been spent battling these wrongs. But I did not feel as keenly as others that I had these rights in common with other women, which are now demanded.¹

What had changed her mind, she told her audience, was the experience of being left a widow, and having the administrator of her husband's estate seize the farm, which she had originally purchased with her own money, to pay his debts, leaving her with nothing but a looking glass.

Had I died instead of my husband, how different might have been the result. By this time he would have another wife, it is likely; and no administrator would have gone into his house, broken up his home, sold his bed, and taken away his means of support . . . I say then that justice is not fulfilled so long as woman is unequal before the law. We are all bound together in one great bundle of humanity, and society cannot trample on the weakest and feeblest of its members without receiving the curse in its own soul.²

Frances Harper's subsequent commitment to the women's rights movement marked her as one among a handful of black women who took the feminist position publicly in the latter half of the nineteenth

¹ *Proceedings, Eleventh Woman's Rights Convention* (New York, 1866), 45-46.

² *Ibid.*, 46.

century. Along with Sojourner Truth, Mary Shadd Cary, Harriet Tubman, and such younger women as Ida B. Wells, Josephine Ruffin, and Mary Church Terrell, she appeared at suffrage conventions and served on committees of largely white women's organizations, despite the racism and nativism rising within these groups.³

While only a few black women participated in the antebellum women's rights conventions, an even smaller number continued to consider themselves members of the women's rights movement in the postbellum period. After the war the movement's focus narrowed to suffrage, and its leaders tried to appease southern congressmen and southern women by giving way to racism, refusing to support black members' demands for a stand against segregated Pullman cars and urging black members not to appear on platforms or take part in parades which might offend southerners. Under such circumstances, it became increasingly uncomfortable for black feminists to remain in the ranks. Yet, at the same time, these women were well aware that black women suffered double oppression, as blacks and as women, and had nowhere to turn to advocate their rights as women aside from the white-dominated suffrage movement. So, while protesting the racism and keeping strong ties with their own black community, they continued to work with their white feminist colleagues. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, however, black feminists began organizing clubs for black middle-class women. The career of Frances Watkins Harper suggests the kinds of personal and institutional arrangements reform-oriented Victorian black women adopted as the breach between black and white feminists widened.

Most of the black women who played a part in the organized antislavery movement had either a middle-class background or middle-class aspirations. Frances Ellen Watkins had both. Born in Baltimore in 1825, she was the only child of two free blacks, who had ties to Baltimore's extensive middle-class black society. Orphaned at the age of three, she was raised by an aunt and an uncle, Henrietta and William Watkins. It was an exciting household in which to grow up.

³ See Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, "Discrimination Against Afro-American Women in the Woman's Movement, 1830-1920," in Sharon Harley and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, eds., *The Afro-American Woman* (Port Washington, 1978), 17-27. See also Aileen Kraditor, *The Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement 1890-1920* (New York, 1965), 172, 213-14.

William Watkins was himself born a member of Baltimore's large free black population. Having been educated at a school run by a prominent black clergyman, he established his own school, the Watkins Academy, in 1820. He also served as a preacher in the American Methodist Episcopal church, practiced self-taught medicine in the black community, worked as a shoemaker to earn his income, and organized a local black literary society. But it was as an outstanding abolitionist and a foe of the American Colonization Society that he was best known. While William Lloyd Garrison lived in Baltimore and worked as a reporter for Benjamin Lundy's *The Genius of Universal Emancipation*, he came to know Watkins and was converted by him to oppose colonization. This led him to leave Baltimore and *The Genius* and move to Boston where he founded *The Liberator*. It also led to a long friendship between the Watkins family and Garrison.⁴

Frances, along with her cousins, attended the Watkins Academy, studying grammar, reading, writing, natural philosophy, music, and mathematics. She remained there until she was thirteen, the age at which all the Watkins children were expected to learn a trade to support themselves. Frances took a job as seamstress and nursemaid in the home of the Armstrongs, a white family who owned a bookshop. Soon discovering Frances's literary bent, Mrs. Armstrong allowed her to use whatever spare time she had in reading books from the shop, and she encouraged Frances to write. By the time she was twenty-one, Frances had written enough poems to fill a small volume, entitled *Forest Leaves*.⁵

The only career open to most women at this time was teaching. In 1851, at the age of twenty-six, Frances Watkins left Baltimore to become the first woman instructor at Union Seminary, a school for free blacks near Columbus, Ohio, opened in 1847 by the A.M.E. church and operated on the manual labor plan. Despite her interest in literature, she was asked to teach domestic science. The following year she moved to a school in York, Pennsylvania, where she was

⁴ C. Peter Ripley, et al., eds., *The Black Abolitionist Papers* (2 vols. to date, Chapel Hill, 1985), 2:234-35; Wendell P. Garrison and Francis J. Garrison, *William Lloyd Garrison 1805-1879: The Story of His Life as Told by His Children* (4 vols., New York, 1885-1889), 1:145, 148.

⁵ Unfortunately all copies of this have been lost.



Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (ca 1900) From the Papers of the Universal Peace Union, Swarthmore College Peace Collection

made solely responsible for fifty-three students. There she began to question whether teaching was her real bent. Black children needed education more than anyone else, she reasoned, but it should be a work of love, not duty alone. Having met in York a number of black men and women involved in the operation of the underground railroad—some of them passengers—she was torn between teaching and social reform. Since the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850, the number of fleeing slaves and the efforts to rescue them had risen markedly. So, too, had the fervor of the abolitionists, black and white. Watkins had grown up in the cause and now wondered if she should give it full time.

While she was debating what to do, her own native Maryland passed a law forbidding—on pain of being sold into slavery—free blacks who lived in the North to enter that state. She was therefore made an exile, cut off from returning to her home. She learned soon

after of a black man who disobeyed the new law, was sold into slavery in Georgia, tried to escape by hiding on a paddle-wheel boat on the Mississippi, was discovered, and died from exposure. She wrote William Still, a noted abolitionist and friend of her uncle, that this story had caused her to decide to give up teaching and devote herself full time to the antislavery cause.⁶

A clerk and janitor in the office of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society in Philadelphia, Still was also chairman of the Acting Committee of the General Vigilance Committee, reorganized in 1844 from the earlier Philadelphia Vigilance Committee. In this role he developed a network of safe hiding places for fugitives in the city's black community, raised funds for the refugees, and monitored the activities of the slave catchers in Pennsylvania. The careful notes he kept on this work led to the publication of his book, *The Underground Rail Road*. He and his wife Letitia George Still invited Watkins to stay with them in their home, an apartment over the antislavery office at 31 North Fifth Street. While with the Stills, Frances continued to write poetry, much of it designed for the antislavery press. Her poem, "Eliza Harris," inspired by the book *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, was published in *The Liberator* on December 16, 1853, and in *Frederick Douglass' Paper* on December 23. By the time she left Philadelphia, she had gathered her poetry into her second small volume, which was published in Boston in 1854 under the title *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects* and included an introduction by William Lloyd Garrison. This book proved such a success that it was reprinted at least five times with some twenty editions between 1854 and 1871, and earned Frances Watkins Harper the reputation as the most popular black poet before Paul Dunbar.

Harper's style was markedly sentimental, in keeping with the popular Victorian style, and her subjects were primarily women caught in the agony of slavery. "The Slave Auction" is an example:

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

⁶ William Still, *The Underground Rail Road: A Record of Facts, Authentic Narratives, Letters, Etc.* . . . (Philadelphia, 1872), 757.

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

And woman, with her love and truth—
For those in sable form may dwell—
Gazed on the husband of her youth,
With anguish none may paint or tell. . . .⁷

Women were not always victims in Harper's writing. In "Eliza Harris" as well as several of the other poems, black women played heroic roles in slave rescues. In an essay called "The Colored People of America" and published along with her poems, Harper praised black women for their perseverance in gaining an education: "In my own southern home I see women whose lot is hard labor, saving a pittance from their scanty wages to defray the expense of learning to read."⁸

Another theme to emerge in this first collection, and to be repeated throughout her career, was her warning to young women to avoid marrying a man for his looks instead of his character. A champion of women, Harper frequently voiced her distrust of the handsome rascal who takes advantage of the trusting young girl, and lamented the sexual double standard. In her poem "Advice to the Girls," she warned:

Wed not a man whose merit lies
In things of outward show,
In raven hair or flashing eyes,
That please your fancy so.

But marry one who's good and kind,
And free from all pretense,
Who, if without a gifted mind,
At least has common sense.⁹

⁷ Frances E. Watkins, *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects* (Philadelphia, 1857), 14.

⁸ Frances E. Watkins, "The Colored People of America," in *ibid.*, 45.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

In addition to her writing, Frances Watkins also had embarked on a career as an antislavery lecturer. With her cousin, William Watkins, Jr., also an abolitionist, she went to Boston to visit the American Anti-Slavery office, then proceeded to New Bedford, where she was invited to speak at a public meeting to a mixed black and white audience. Her first speech, "The Elevation and Education of our People," was well received; she was hired by the Maine Anti-Slavery Society as a lecturer and traveled all over the state with the Society's agent, a white woman who ate and slept with her and provided her with hospitality in white homes. "I have not been in a colored person's house since I left Massachusetts; but I have had a pleasant time," Watkins wrote Still. "My life reminds me of a beautiful dream. What a difference between this and York! I have met with some of the kindest treatment up here that I have ever received."¹⁰ To be temporarily freed from the pain of race prejudice and treated as equal by white colleagues was a pleasant experience for Frances Watkins. On the other hand, she missed her connections with blacks—as revealed by the phrase in her letter to Still, "but I have had a pleasant time." There also may have been a sense of guilt attached to this isolation. While a few other black women, like antislavery lecturer Sarah Remond and sculptor Edmonia Lewis, settled abroad during the latter half of the nineteenth century to escape a segregated and hostile society, Frances spent most of her life in Pennsylvania and Ohio, where prejudice remained strong. The two-way pull between her desire to participate in the largely white reform movements of the day, on the one hand, and her loyalty to her own race, on the other, remained with her all her life.

After traveling in Maine, other New England states, and Canada for a year and a half, she was hired in October 1857 by the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society as a lecturer and agent for eastern Pennsylvania and New Jersey. She spoke throughout the region for eighteen months, winning plaudits everywhere. Reporters in Trenton and Mt. Holly, New Jersey, praised her oratorical powers, and a listener in Norristown, Pennsylvania, said she was the most eloquent speaker he had listened to with the exception of Lucy Stone. Journalist

¹⁰ Still, *The Underground Rail Road*, 759.

Grace Greenwood described her as a "bronze muse," poised and eloquent, with a voice that could be heard in the back of any hall without her having to raise it.¹¹

While traveling in Pennsylvania, Watkins was asked to ride on the platform of one of the city trolley cars. Her indignant response marked her growing confidence as a lecturer and as a woman at this period:

Now let me tell you about Pennsylvania. I have been in every New England state, in New York, Canada, and Ohio, but of all these places, this is the meanest of all as far as the treatment of colored people is concerned. The other day I, in attempting to ride in one of the city cars, after I had entered, the conductor came to me and wanted me to go out on the platform. Now was not that brave and noble? As a matter of course, I did not. Someone interfered and asked or requested that I might be permitted to sit in a corner. I did not move, but kept the same seat. When I was about to leave, he refused my money and I threw it on the car floor and got out, after I had ridden as far as I wished. Such impudence!

On the Carlisle road, I was interrupted and insulted several times. Two men came after me in one day.

I have met, of course, with kindness among individuals and families, all is not dark in Pennsylvania, but the shadow of slavery, oh how drearily it hangs!¹²

In May 1858 Watkins completed her assignment with the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society, and began to accept speaking engagements in the Midwest. In September she spoke in Detroit. Mary Ann Shadd Cary described her visit:

Miss Watkins and Mr. Nell come back to Detroit and she is to go West a ways. Why the whites and colored people here are just crazy

¹¹ *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, Jan. 13, 1857; Benjamin Quarles, *Black Abolitionists* (New York, 1969), 179; Still, *The Underground Rail Road*, 779. The comparison with Lucy Stone suggests how lecturers were rated and judged in the middle of the nineteenth century, when oratory was one of the most important forms of public recreation. Sojourner Truth, Lucretia Mott, Abby Kelley Foster, Lucy Stone, and other antislavery women lecturers were regularly covered by local newspapers. Much of what we know today about Frances Watkins comes from this coverage.

¹² *The Liberator*, April 23, 1858.

with excitement about her. She is the greatest female speaker as ever was here so wisdom obliges me to keep out of the way as with her prepared lectures there would just be no chance of a favorable comparison. I puff her as strong as any body in fact it is the very best policy for me to do so otherwise it would be set down to jealousy.¹³

With the exception of Frederick Douglass, Charles Remond, William Nell, and a few others, black men were not receptive to the participation of black women in public affairs at this time. Yet, in 1858, Watkins played an active role in the Ohio State Convention of Negroes, which met in Cincinnati. When this convention organized the Ohio State Anti-Slavery Society, Watkins helped frame a constitution for the new organization, and pledged \$10 to support it. She was then placed on a committee to raise \$500 for operating expenses.¹⁴

She continued to write with increasing vigor and confidence. She was listed in the 1859 *Anglo-African Magazine* as one of the most prominent Afro-Americans in the United States, and she contributed two poems ("The Dying Fugitive" and "Gone to God"), a short story, and an essay to that journal. Her story, "The Two Offers," is regarded as the first short story published by a black woman. It also has a feminist theme. In the story a young woman, Laura, has had two offers of marriage, and cannot decide which one to accept. Her cousin Janet, an older woman who has loved and lost, advises her not to marry at all if she is unsure which one of the two men she really loves. Janet is depicted as a self-reliant, strong, talented woman, and she seems to bear a resemblance to Frances herself:

Too self reliant to depend on the charity of relations, she endeavored to support herself by her own exertions, and she had succeeded. Her path for a while was marked with struggle and trial, but instead of uselessly repining, she met them bravely, and her life became not a thing of ease and indulgence, but of conquest, victory, and accomplishments. At the time when this conversation was taking place, the deep trials of her life had passed away. The achievements of her genius had won her a position in the literary world, where she shone as one of its bright, particular stars. And with her fame came a competence in worldly

¹³ Dorothy Sterling, ed., *We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1984), 174.

¹⁴ Quarles, *Black Abolitionists*, 179.

means, which gave her leisure for improvement, and the riper development of her rare talents.¹⁵

The younger cousin fails to heed the older woman's advice, marries a handsome gambler, and dies of a consumption brought on by a broken heart. Watkins ends the story with a lecture on women's education:

But woman—the true woman—if you would render her happy, it needs more than the mere development of her affectional nature. Her conscience should be enlightened, her faith in the true and right established, and scope given to her Heaven-endowed and God-given faculties. The true aim of female education should be, not the development of one or two, but all the faculties of the human soul, because no perfect womanhood is developed by imperfect culture.¹⁶

Like Janet in her story, Watkins was now beginning to earn a reasonable income from her lectures and her writings. Much of it she turned over to Still for the support of the underground railroad. She followed news of escaped slaves avidly. "How fared the girl who came robed in male attire?" she wrote Still, and "Do write how many come to your house, and my dear friend, if you have that much in hand from my books, will you please pay the Vigilance Committee two or three dollars to help carry on this glorious enterprise."¹⁷

Following the Dred Scott decision of 1857, the antislavery movement grew more militant, and several escaped slaves were rescued by angry crowds from slaveholders and U.S. marshals. In Philadelphia, in May 1860, a group of blacks rushed a carriage in which a recaptured runaway, Moses Horner, was being returned to slavery. The attempt was a failure, and five of the would-be rescuers were seized, fined twenty-five dollars, and imprisoned for thirty days. Watkins sent thirty dollars to William Still for the prisoners and wrote a stirring article for the *Weekly Anglo-African*, appealing for funds for their defense.¹⁸

A passionate advocate of John Brown, Watkins was deeply moved

¹⁵ Frances Watkins, "The Two Offers," in *The Anglo-African Magazine* 1 (Sept. 1859), 288-91.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 291.

¹⁷ Still, *The Underground Rail Road*, 763.

¹⁸ Quarles, *Black Abolitionists*, 214.

by the events at Harpers Ferry, and when "old Osawatomie" was in jail awaiting execution for the armed uprising, she wrote his wife a letter of sympathy that was thereafter widely circulated. She eventually spent two weeks with Mary Ann Brown, and after Brown's execution she asked William Still to send a weekly box of gifts to the condemned men. To one of the prisoners, Aaron Stevens, she sent a poem, "Bury Me in a Free Land," which she had earlier published in *The Anti-Slavery Bugle*.

This poem had special significance for Frances Watkins. At the time of writing her voice was cracking, a common complaint of the female antislavery lecturers who had to project their voices without the aid of any acoustical devices to fill large halls. She was also worn out from traveling and evidently depressed, for she wondered if she might be going to die, far from her friends and family. Yet the thought of returning to a slave state was anathema to her. She was in consequence often lonely. During her travels in Ohio she had met Fenton Harper, a free black, a widower with three children, and an Ohio resident. On November 22, 1860, Frances and Fenton were married in Cincinnati.¹⁹

To make a home for her new family, Frances Watkins Harper invested her small savings in a farm in Grove City, near Columbus, Ohio. Here her only daughter, Mary, was born. Although she lectured once or twice during this period, she was mainly content to stay at home, helping to augment the family income by making and selling butter. But when she heard about a young black woman sent back from Cleveland to her southern master, her indignation drove her to write an eloquent poem on the subject:

UNION SAVERS OF CLEVELAND

Men of Cleveland had a vulture
Sought a timid dove for prey,

¹⁹ A brother of Fenton's, Clarence, was a barber in Richmond, Virginia, who married Martha, an escaped slave, part Indian and part white. These two named their first daughter Frances Ellen. Otherwise very little is known about the Harper family or Fenton. Two additional generations of the Clarence Harper family have followed the custom of naming the oldest daughter after their famous relative. This information was given the writer by Dr. Melba Boyd of the University of Iowa, who is writing a biography of Frances Watkins Harper, and by Louise West, a granddaughter of Clarence Harper.

Would you not, with human pity,
Drive the gory bird away? . . .

On the Union's bloody altar
Was your hapless victim laid.
Mercy, truth and justice shuddered
But your hand would give no aid.

And ye sent her back to torture,
Robbed of freedom and of right,
Thrust the wretched, captive stranger
Back to slavery's gloomy night. . . .²⁰

Her quiet life in Grove City came to an abrupt end in May 1864 when Fenton Harper died. Adding to Frances Harper's grief was the surprising discovery that her husband had been deeply in debt. Frances Harper had bought the farm with her own savings, but the administrator of Fenton's estate seized it and all her possessions, including her butter tubs, her chief means of support, to pay his debts. She was left with virtually nothing. Later a neighbor went before a magistrate to swear that she was a non-resident and to lay an attachment on her bed. It was necessary for Harper to leave and to find a way to earn a living once more. She returned to the lecture circuit, at first taking her children with her, but later placing them to board with various families.

Within five months of her husband's death, Harper spoke at the National Convention of Colored Men in Syracuse. She and Edmonia Highgate, a black teacher who had just returned from teaching newly freed slaves in Norfolk, Virginia, were the only women speakers. She then made a swing through New England, speaking on "The Mission of War," "The Claims of the Negro," and "The Demands of the Colored Race in Reconstruction." In March 1865 she was back in Philadelphia, lecturing on "The Nation's Great Opportunity" as part of a lecture series organized by William Still and sponsored by the

²⁰ *The Liberator*, March 8, 1861, p. 40.

Social, Civil and Statistical Association of the Colored People of Philadelphia, and held at Concert Hall.²¹

From February 1865 to April 1867, Harper was mainly in Philadelphia, boarding with the Stills while she worked on a long narrative poem, "Moses," published in 1869. William Still was engaged during this period in a drive to end discrimination on the public streetcars, and he was supported by several groups, including the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society. Under the leadership of Lucretia Mott, this group supported both interracial measures and women's rights. Among the prominent black women members were Harriet, Hattie, and Sarah Purvis; Charlotte and Margaretta Forten; and Sarah Douglass. Frances Harper may have worked with these women in the streetcar campaign. Years later when she wrote a poem lauding the antislavery pioneers, she included a verse to the Female Anti-Slavery Society and Mott:

Nor let it be said that we forgot
The women who stood with Lucretia Mott
The women faithful, true and brave;
Who came to the rescue of the slave.²²

It was shortly after this that she attended a meeting of the Pennsylvania Peace Society. Many years later she became an officer of the Pennsylvania Society and its national affiliate, the Universal Peace Union, which worked for justice for the American Indians, the abolition of the death penalty, the elimination of military training from the schools, compulsory arbitration of international disputes, and an end to lynching. The last crusade was closest to her heart.²³

In her speech at the Eleventh Woman's Rights Convention in New York in May 1866, she described in moving terms her experience in the bankruptcy proceedings after Fenton Harper died, and her subsequent conversion to the women's rights cause. She was not, however, converted to universal suffrage as a panacea for women. She told her audience:

²¹ Ibid., Oct. 28, 1864; "Information on Social, Civil and Statistical Lecture Series," Box 136, Leon Gardiner Collection (Historical Society of Pennsylvania).

²² Verse from "25th Anniversary of Freedom" poem by Frances E. W. Harper, Leon Gardiner Collection.

²³ *The Peacemaker* 17 (no. 5, 1898), 103, and (no. 10, 1899), 198-99.

I do not believe that giving the woman the ballot is immediately going to cure all the ills of life. I do not believe that white women are dewdrops just exhaled from the skies. I think that like men they may be divided into three classes, the good, the bad, and the indifferent. The good would vote according to their convictions and principles; the bad, as dictated by prejudice or malice; and the indifferent will vote on the strongest side of the question, with the winning party.²⁴

Later in the same speech, she pointed out to her largely white audience that black women had a double burden, and she illustrated her point by her own experience of being ejected from a Philadelphia streetcar. When a woman in the audience objected that the Philadelphia streetcar conductors would no longer oust a black woman, Harper said that last time she had seen Harriet Tubman, "a Moses to her people, her hands were swollen from conflict with a brutal conductor, who had tried to eject her from her place."²⁵

The day following the Woman's Rights Convention, the reformers held a meeting to organize the American Equal Rights Association (ERA), pledged to work for suffrage for both black men and women. Frances joined this organization, along with black abolitionists Frederick Douglass, Charles Remond, Sojourner Truth, and Harriet and Robert Purvis. The ERA, headed by Lucretia Mott, continued in existence until 1869 when it split over the issue of the Fifteenth Amendment. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and other radical feminists insisted that this amendment must be defeated and in its place another written enfranchising women *and* black men. In the ensuing battle, some angry feminists expressed a good deal of racism as well as nativism. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, in particular, argued against granting the vote to "ignorant negroes and foreigners" before it was given to educated and refined women. Stanton and Susan B. Anthony were already suspected of catering to racists, having accepted for their magazine, *Revolution*, the financial backing of George Francis Train, an eccentric Copperhead who opposed the vote for blacks while supporting it for pure, educated womanhood. As

²⁴ *Proceedings, Eleventh Woman's Rights Convention*, 46.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 47-48.

Lucretia Mott observed, "Elizabeth Cady Stanton's sympathy for Sambo is very questionable."²⁶

At the tumultuous Equal Rights meeting, Harper joined Frederick Douglass in arguing that there be no delay of black enfranchisement for the sake of woman suffrage because black men in the South needed political power to fend off their former masters' efforts to reduce them to a new kind of legalized slavery. Her speech to this end was paraphrased by a reporter:

When it was a question of race, she let the lesser question of sex go. But the white women all go for sex, letting race occupy a minor position . . . If the nation could handle one question, she would not have the black women put a single straw in the way, if only the men of the race could obtain what they wanted.²⁷

Fueling Harper's demand for immediate black suffrage was her recent experience in traveling in the South. In the spring of 1867 she had gone South to visit the Reconstruction states and lecture to the freedmen and their sympathizers. She returned to Philadelphia in October, but left again in February 1868, and continued to travel and lecture until February 1871. During this period other black women (e.g., Charlotte Forten, Emma Brown, Harriet Jacobs, and Edmonia Highgate) went South to teach in the freedmen schools. Sponsored by the various freedmen associations in the North, they were assigned to schools, first in South Carolina and the District of Columbia and later in other southern states, were paid expenses and a small salary, and also given some other support. Generally, they traveled in pairs. Harper went entirely alone, supporting herself by collecting donations at her lectures and selling her own poetry. She felt she had a mission to preach Christian morality and education to the newly freed slaves, so that they could take advantage of the opportunities of freedom. She wrote about her sense of mission to Still:

[Y]et I know that the colored man needs something more than a vote

²⁶ Elizabeth Griffiths, *In Her Own Right: The Life of Elizabeth Cady Stanton* (New York, 1985), 138; Lucretia Mott to Martha Wright, Jan. 21, 1868, Garrison Papers, Sophia Smith Collection (Smith College).

²⁷ Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Gage, *The History of Woman Suffrage, 1861-1876* (3 vols., New York, 1881), 2:391-92.

in his hand; he needs to know the value of a home life; to rightly appreciate and value the marriage relationship; to know how and to be incited to leave behind him the old shards and shells of slavery and to rise in the scale of character, wealth and influence. Like the Nautilus outgrowing his home to build for himself more 'stately temples' of social condition. A man landless, ignorant and poor may use his vote against his interests; but with intelligence and land he holds in his hand the basis of power and elements of strength.²⁸

This tour revealed her growing self-reliance and independence as well as her courage. Her travels took her through all the southern states except Texas and Arkansas. She spoke to audiences of former rebels and slaveholders, reconstructionists, and ex-slaves. Sometimes her life was threatened, and sometimes she stayed in the shacks of former slaves, sharing a single bedroom with the rest of the family. In one such shack, where Harper shared the room with the family, a baby was born in the course of the night. Everywhere she went, she attracted attention. Local newspapers reported on her speeches—many hostile, some laudatory.

She was hopeful about the gains in political power that blacks were making, and she believed that blacks and whites could build a new society, based on equality. But she was not blind to the continuing menace of the night riders, and her letters home were full of the reports of sporadic violence. Harper related how in one town in South Carolina a seventeen-year-old black girl was hung for announcing that she intended to marry a Yankee and in Alabama a black woman was beaten severely for refusing to open her house to some white fox hunters.

The more she traveled, the more her special concern came to be the situation of black women. She believed that they were thrice oppressed—as poor, as black, and as women—and that if they were made to feel pride in themselves they could make the difference in Reconstruction. She particularly was alarmed to find many black women accepting beatings and infidelity from their husbands. She wrote Still about holding special meetings for women:

Part of my lectures are given privately to women and from them I

²⁸ Still, *The Underground Rail Road*, 770.

never make any charge or take up any collection . . . I am now going to have a private meeting with the women of this place, if they will come out. I am going to talk with them about their daughters, and about things connected with the welfare of the race. Now is the time for our women to begin to plant the roots of progress under the hearthstone. . . .

Part of the time I am preaching against men ill-treating their wives. I have heard though that often during the war the men hired out their wives and drew their pay. . . .

The condition of the women is not very enviable in some cases. They have had some of them a terribly hard time in slavery, and their subjection has not ceased in freedom . . . One man said of some women, that a man must leave them or whip them.²⁹

Some of the southern black Reconstruction leaders were displeased with her emphasis on women's rights. In the *Lousianian*, a black publication, one editor was "struck dumb with consternation after listening to her spirited defense of women's rights." Reporting on a later speech, the paper said, "She has dropped the woman's rights question, and that very wisely."³⁰

Often she found cause for delight in the role many black women were playing in the work of Reconstruction, and she reported on it in letters and lectures. Visiting the former plantation of a brother of Jefferson Davis, the plantation then being operated successfully by one of its former slaves, William Thornton Montgomery, Harper was impressed by the women of the family:

Last year his wife took on her hands about 130 acres of land, and with her force she raised some 107 bales of cotton. She had a number of orphan children employed, and not only does she supervise their labor, but works herself. One daughter, an intelligent young lady, is post-mistress and assistant bookkeeper.³¹

Sometime in 1870, while she was still traveling in the South, Harper purchased a house at 1006 Bainbridge Street, in Philadelphia, for herself and her small daughter, Mary. In an undated letter to her,

²⁹ Ibid., 772-73, 777.

³⁰ Sterling, ed., *We Are Your Sisters*, 414.

³¹ Still, *The Underground Rail Road*, 774.

William Still tells of paying her taxes (\$65.80) and collecting her rent from her tenants.³² In February 1871 she took up permanent residence on Bainbridge Street and lived there for most of the rest of her life, sharing her home with Mary, who never married. Mary assisted her mother in many of her works of charity in Philadelphia. She was regarded as brilliant, but erratic. She died in the early 1900s, with Frances surviving her by several years.³³

After her return to Philadelphia, Harper wrote a book, *Sketches of Southern Life*, based on her travels in the South. The book was regarded by black critics then and for many years as the most accurate description of black life in the South. Altogether, four editions of *Sketches* were published. Harper's interest in the role of women came to the fore in *Sketches*. She noted how often it had been the black women who had insisted on their men exercising the franchise:

You'd laugh to see Lucinda Grange
Upon her husband's track
When he sold his vote for rations
She made him take 'em back.

Day after day did Milly Green
Just follow after Joe,
And told him if he voted wrong
To take his rags and go.

I think that Curnel Johnson said
His side had won the day,
Had not we women radicals
Just got right in the way.³⁴

Harper's unique role as a black feminist author was now beginning to receive special recognition. Following the split in the women's

³² William Still to Frances Harper, n.d. [ca. 1870], Leon Gardiner Collection.

³³ Mary was for many years the center of Frances Harper's emotional life. Although Frances was often separated from her, her thoughts revolved around the child. In a poem, "The Mother's Blessing," published in 1869 in the *Woman's Advocate*, she spoke of her joy in the birth of her daughter when she, Frances, was in her late thirties. *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, July 17, 1869.

³⁴ Frances E. Harper, *Sketches of Southern Life* (Philadelphia, 1887), 15-16.

rights movement into the militant National Woman's Suffrage Association, excluding men, and the more moderate American Woman's Suffrage Association (AWSA), Harper had chosen to affiliate with the latter. This group had supported the Fifteenth Amendment and pledged itself to work for a Sixteenth Amendment granting suffrage for women. As the only well-known black woman to work with the AWSA, Frances Harper was in demand as a speaker at their conventions; she lectured in 1873, 1875, and 1887. In 1873 she made the closing speech at a meeting held in Cooper Union, New York, there arguing that however much white women needed the ballot, colored women needed it more because "they are subjected to the legal authority of ignorant and often degraded men."³⁵

Despite some continuing reservations about universal suffrage, she lobbied in black circles for suffrage for women.³⁶ But she could never devote all her energies to the cause of women while the needs of her own people were unmet. She was deeply disturbed by the bad news coming from the South, where the gains of Reconstruction were being rapidly lost and the White Leagues were terrorizing former slaves into submission. Sensing the growing indifference of northerners to events in the South, in 1875 she asked derisively and passionately, "Who cares?"³⁷ She cared, and she hoped to stir others to renew the struggle against oppression.

Yet, while bitterly blaming the white public for its indifference to the suffering of her people, she spent most of her time lecturing her black audiences on their need to improve themselves, to aspire to a higher degree of morality, to be worthy of full citizenship. In a poem, "We Are Rising," written for the dedication of a statue of Bishop Richard Allen at the time of the 1876 Centennial, she prayed for divine aid for her people to battle against "the hosts of vice and sin." She organized and became assistant superintendent of a YMCA Sabbath school, and helped to develop Sunday schools for black churches, especially Mother Bethel A.M.E. Church (this even though her own lifelong affiliation was with the largely white Unitarian church). She

³⁵ Stanton, et al., *The History of Woman Suffrage*, 2:833.

³⁶ See, for example, her remarkable "Dialogue on Woman's Rights," in *New York Freeman*, Nov. 28, 1885.

³⁷ *Centennial Anniversary of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society* (Philadelphia, 1876), 9-31.

and her daughter Mary aided the Reverend Henry Phillips of the Episcopal Church of the Crucifixion in South Philadelphia in an outreach program to delinquent black youth, and she organized the American Association of Colored Youth, eventually becoming its director.³⁸

One aspect of her concern for morality, typical of many nineteenth-century woman reformers, was her involvement in the temperance crusade. She had come to believe that liquor was one of the chief problems of the black family, especially in the South. In 1876, at the Women's International Temperance Conference meeting in Philadelphia, she was made vice president of the Conference when it was pointed out from the floor that there were no colored officers. In 1881 she was the only black delegate to a convention of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). By 1886 she had been named the Pennsylvania State Superintendent of Work among the Colored People for the WCTU, and, by 1888, she had become the first Superintendent of the Negro Section of the national organization. Despite the racism of the WCTU, Harper found that it exactly suited her own view that social and moral issues were of primary concern in the reform movements. Although she fought vigorously against the segregation of the Negro Section, she continued to be a national officer until 1893, the only prominent black woman on the board.

Her role in the WCTU and her eloquent pleas for the rights of women in general and black women in particular had made her a sought-after speaker for women's clubs, now emerging everywhere. In 1888 she addressed the International Council of Women in Washington, in 1891 the National Council of Women, and in 1893 the Congress of Representative Women held at the Columbian Exhibition in Chicago. In her 1893 Chicago speech on "Women's Political Future," she expressed her own brand of feminism:

[T]he world has need of all the spiritual aid that woman can give for the social advancement and moral development of the human race. The tendency of the present age, with its restlessness, religious upheavals,

³⁸ Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, "We Are Rising," in *Christian Recorder*, Nov. 9, 1876. For details on Harper's Philadelphia philanthropies, see Theodora Daniels, "The Poems of Frances Harper" (M.A. thesis, Howard University, 1937). Daniels was able to interview several Philadelphians who remembered Frances Harper.

failures, blunders and crimes, is toward broader freedom, an increase of knowledge, the emancipation of thought, and a recognition of the brotherhood of man. In this movement, woman, as the companion of man, must be a sharer . . . The world can not move without woman's sharing in the movement, and to help give a right impetus to that movement is woman's highest privilege.

If the fifteenth century discovered America to the Old World, the nineteenth century is discovering woman to herself . . . Today we stand in the threshold of woman's era, and woman's work is grandly constructive.³⁹

At this meeting Harper declared that she did not believe that the extension of suffrage would cure all ills. "What we need today is not simply more voters, but better voters," she said, adding that the lynchers of the South ought to be imprisoned, rather than allowed to vote. Nor did she believe that women were by nature better than men. "It is not through sex but through character that the best influence of women upon the life of the nation must be exerted," she urged.

I do not believe in unrestricted and universal suffrage for either men or women. I believe in moral and educational tests. I do not believe that the most ignorant and brutal man is better prepared to add value to the strength and durability of the government than the most cultured, upright, and intelligent woman. . . . The unsteady hands of the drunkard can not cast the ballot of a freeman. The hands of lynchers are too red with blood to determine the political character of government for even four short years.⁴⁰

At the end of the speech she made an impassioned plea for women to join in a battle against lynching and for justice for all races.

As the only black woman at some of these conferences, as well as at the meetings of the Universal Peace Union, she must have been reminded of her early days, traveling as an antislavery lecturer in Maine, where she was frequently the only black person for many miles. To participate in the largely white reform movements of the

³⁹ Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, "Woman's Political Future," in May Wright Sewell, ed., *World's Congress of Representative Women* (Chicago, 1893), 433-37.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

day meant a degree of isolation from blacks, with whom she was strongly identified. This same two-way pull was a problem for other middle-class, reform-minded blacks of the period, feeling the "two-ness of the Afro American experience," about which W.E.B. Du Bois was to write so eloquently in *The Souls of Black Folk*. As one solution to this conflict, black women began to form clubs of their own during the last decade of the nineteenth century. In these clubs middle-class black women could advocate the advancement of young black women, without having to deal with the racism of white feminists. In 1896 a number of the pioneer black feminists gathered in Washington with some younger women to found the National Association of Colored Women (NACW). Sojourner Truth and Mary Ann Shadd were dead, but Harriet Tubman was there as well Charlotte Forten Grimké and a handful of others. But there were new recruits—Mary Church Terrell, Ida Wells Barnett, Alice Moore (Dunbar) to name a few. Harper played a leading role in the organizational meeting and the next year became its vice president. She had retired from the WCTU by this time, and was able to use the NACW as a platform to speak on civil rights for both blacks and women. It must have seemed like the end of a journey she had been making over many years.⁴¹

While she worked on various crusades, Harper continued to support herself by writing and lecturing. She sometimes published her own poems and sold them at her lectures. Her articles appeared frequently in the *A.M.E. Review*, the *New York Independent*, and the *Philadelphia Tribune*. In 1890 she published privately a small volume of poetry, *The Sparrow's Fall and Other Poems*, in which she reiterated several of her feminist themes, as in the poem, "Double Standard."⁴² She also had been working for several years on a novel. In 1892 Garrigues Brothers, a Philadelphia publisher, brought out *Iola LeRoy, or the Shadows Uplifted*. The story is of a beautiful mulatto unaware of her black identity. Iola becomes a Civil War nurse and is wooed by a white physician, but after reunion with her black mother, she identifies herself as a black and finally marries a black physician. The novel

⁴¹ Sterling, ed., *We Are Your Sisters*, 398.

⁴² Frances E.W. Harper, "Double Standard," from *The Sparrow's Fall and Other Poems*, as in Maryemma Graham, "Frances Ellen Watkins Harper" in *Afro-American Writers Before the Harlem Renaissance*, Vol. 50 of *The Dictionary of Literary Biography* (Detroit, 1986), 171.

offers a moving argument for the black woman to identify herself with and devote herself to the welfare of her own people. Iola is a fiercely independent woman, who insists that women must be self-reliant and are entitled to the same education as men. She is able to function as a wife, while remaining true to her profession in social activism.⁴³ The novel bespoke Harper's own convictions on black women's need to join the domestic sphere with social reform. After *Iola*, Frances Harper published three additional small volumes of poetry, and continued to play an active role in the community until her death in 1911.

The themes of Frances Watkins Harper's life—morality, education, protection of women, an educated suffrage, temperance—were shared by many other women of her period. Indeed, her belief in the virtues of true womanhood was in many ways a reflection of the late Victorian era. But her own life as an independent, self-supporting woman who argued for women's rights without abandoning her impassioned advocacy for civil rights and advancement for blacks was more radical than the positions she espoused and made her a prototype for later black feminists. Though she was never more than a minor poet, the gifts of her pen made her a spokesperson for the concept of human liberation she had enunciated so many years ago, that "we are all bound together in one great bundle of humanity, and society cannot trample on the weakest and feeblest of its members without receiving the curse in its own soul."

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⁴³ Frances E. Harper, *Iola LeRoy, or the Shadows Uplifted* (Philadelphia, 1892). The discovery that *Our Nig*, a novel thought to have been written by a white person, was in fact written by Harriet E. Wilson, a black woman, in 1859, was recently confirmed by scholars.

