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Elizabeth A. Petrino
Fairfield University, epetrino@fairfield.edu

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**"We Are Rising as a People":
Frances Harper's Radical Views on Class and Racial
Equality in *Sketches of Southern Life***

Elizabeth A. Petrino

After all whether they encourage or discourage me, I belong to this race,
and when it is down I belong to a down race; when it is up I belong to
a risen race.

Frances E. W. Harper, Letter to William Still, Greenville, Georgia, 29
March 1870 (Still 773)

These words of Frances Harper encapsulate the loyalty many African-American writers felt to their race during the social instability following the Civil War. As activists, they immediately set out a blueprint for the newly reconstructing nation, advocating the moral values, education, and suffrage that they felt were fundamental to attaining equality. As creative writers, their stories, poems, and novels represent the "trials and triumphs" of the emerging black middle class and affirm its upward social mobility to a white and black readership (Harper, *Trial and Triumph* [1888-89]). Between these roles, a crisis in political confidence arose among middle-class black and white reformers, who struggled to secure black suffrage while anxious about maintaining their own social level.

As a black woman, Harper would have been sensitive to charges that she was less genteel than her middle-class audiences, and, in a radical response, she sought to dismantle the class structure upon which discrimination against African Americans rests. Whereas, like Frederick Douglass and other African-American slave narrative writers, she could use Christian rhetoric and elevated diction to affirm arguments against slavery and to align with middle-class readers, Harper also aligned with former slaves and poor whites and envisioned a classless society. In her impressive sequence of poems, *Sketches of Southern Life* (1872), she promotes political solidarity among freedmen and the grass-roots workings of democracy. *Sketches* retells the history of reconstruction from the perspective of a freedwoman, Aunt

Chloe, but refrains from dialect, thus rejecting stereotyped black voices. In so doing, *Sketches* enacts the social elevation for African Americans its author espoused, and it also answers contemporary critics who take an apologetic tone toward the recovery of poets like Harper, who, despite their political importance and artistic contributions, have been deemed artistically inadequate.¹

As the most widely read African-American female poet since Phillis Wheatley, Harper's poetry has been unduly neglected.² The reason lies in the ambiguity of Harper's place in the modern literary canon, whose critics devalue the simple, vernacular phrasing and even rhythms of oral poetry—qualities that endeared her to a nineteenth-century audience. On the one hand, Harper's lyrics use the vocabulary of sentimentality that associates her with writers Mary Kelley calls "literary domestics" who press for political ideals—abolition, temperance, and Christian humanism. On the other hand, Harper's poems interrogate the very economic and class structure of society underlying racial oppression. Harper's talent emerged when she was only twenty. *Forest Leaves*, a manuscript of poems written in 1845 and now lost, places her within the context of nineteenth-century American women's nature poetry—spontaneous, untutored productions of a sensitive soul. Her commitment to politics became evident with *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects*, first published in 1854 when Harper was twenty-nine, and reissued with additions in 1857. It sold in the tens of thousands. Her most popular poems, such as "Bury Me in a Free Land" and "The Dying Fugitive," reflect her unparalleled success in speaking to her audience on political questions that were fiercely debated during Reconstruction. Their relevance alone should rescue her lyrics from obscurity for readers attentive to historical context and nuance.

Activism Vs "True Womanhood"

In order to appreciate fully the depth of Harper's literary response to the political situation for African Americans, consider her view of the Johnson administration's black suffrage policies in *Sketches*. In the period immediately preceding its publication, President Andrew Johnson rejected any attempt to extend suffrage to blacks. During Reconstruction, African Americans hoped Johnson would prove, as Aunt Chloe comments, "the Moses / Of all the colored race" (*Brighter* 202; 157-58), as he had cast himself in an 1864 speech. According to Civil War historian James McPherson, however, Johnson, named military governor of Tennessee by Lincoln in 1862, restructured the state as a test of correct management after the war and thereby misled both blacks and Northern abolitionists into believing that he would press for black suffrage: "Abolitionists had been impressed by Johnson's vigorous efforts to make Tennessee a free state in 1864-1865

and especially by his famous 'Moses' speech to the Negroes of Nashville in October 1864, in which he promised to be their Moses and lead them out of bondage" (316). Johnson's hatred of southern aristocrats, while informing his willingness to fight for equality among poor whites, did not extend to blacks. In his first annual message to Congress in December 1865, he asserted that he could not prescribe the franchise in southern states and declared that state governments provided ample protection of citizens' rights.

Universal suffrage became the breaking point for Johnson's political relations with even his most loyal supporters.³ Abolitionists argued that voting rights for African Americans were a minimum requirement for the readmission of formerly Confederate states into the Union. Adamantly opposed, President Johnson vetoed the Civil Rights Act of 1866, which established blacks as citizens and forbade discrimination, and the Freedmen's Bureau Bill, which would have extended the vote to former slaves. Even conservatives and members of his own Democratic Party were increasingly at odds with him. While Harper was living in Philadelphia, the Conservatives loyal to Johnson met at the National Union Convention to iron out a compromise with the Radical Republicans. Labor historian David Montgomery explains that their compromise—the Fourteenth Amendment—"affirmed the end of slavery and the supremacy of the national government" (70-71). In response, Johnson formulated another plan that argued in favor of a national government but claimed "Congress had no right to interfere with the franchise qualifications of the states" (70-71). When Johnson began visiting rich businessmen and political allies, his famous "swing 'round the circle" (71) during his 1866 congressional campaign, he had already lost much of his political support.

At the National Women's Rights Convention in May 1866 in New York City, Harper aligned herself with entrepreneurial capitalism and gentility—values she realized her audience would share. She began by dismissing her substantial career as a lecturer: "I feel I am something of a novice upon this platform" (*Brighter* 217), although her high demand as an abolitionist lecturer made this claim unlikely: over a decade earlier, from 5 September to 20 October 1854, she gave at least thirty-three lectures against slavery in twenty-one New England towns (13). Speaking on behalf of her race, she argued that their subjection was a national injustice: "Born of a race whose inheritance has been outrage and wrong, most of my life had been spent in battling against those wrongs" (217). As a farmer's wife who "made butter for the Columbus market" (45), Harper used a personal aside to clarify her standing as a woman who, through hard work and perseverance, rose from her working-class origins. In 1864, after only four years of marriage, however, her husband died and left her with four children, one of them her own, and numerous debts. When the land administrator reclaimed

her possessions, including "the very milk-crocks and wash tubs" (217), her understanding of women's social subjection came through personal misfortune: "And I went back to Ohio with my orphan children in my arms, without a single feather bed in this wide world, that was not in the custody of the law. I say, then, that justice is not fulfilled so long as woman is unequal before the law" (217).

Moving from this anecdote about her personal suffering, she equated injustice against any individual with a failure of democracy:

We are all bound up 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. You tried that in the case of the Negro. You pressed him down for two centuries; and in so doing you crippled the moral strength and paralyzed the spiritual energies of the white men of the country. When the hands of the black were fettered, white men were deprived of the liberty of speech and the freedom of the press. Society cannot afford to neglect the enlightenment of any class of its members. (217)

What is striking about this passage is the solidarity she creates between freedmen and poor whites. Her use of direct address drives her argument. Shifting from the "we" that includes all humanity to "you," she quickly accuses her white listeners—even those sympathetic to abolitionism and black suffrage—of refusing to recognize that class struggle is at the root of black oppression. Both freedmen and the white working class are linked under the sanction of the government, and when one citizen is denied freedom, the civil liberties of all citizens are violated.

Harper attacks Johnson for preventing poor whites and blacks from attaining equality:

At the South, the legislation of the country was in behalf of the rich slaveholders, while the poor white man was neglected. What is the consequence today? From that very class of neglected poor white men, comes the man who stands to-day with his hand upon the helm of the nation. He fails to catch the watchword of the hour, and throws himself, the incarnation of meanness, across the pathway of the nation. My objection to Andrew Johnson is not that he has been a poor white man; my objection is that he keeps "poor whites" all the way through. (217-18)

Johnson might see himself as fighting the aristocratic plantation owners who had subjugated poor, white yeoman farmers, but, punning on "poor whites" for the poor whites that he counted among his constituents, Harper attacks his feeble intellect for opposing black suffrage and reviles the cronies who were part of his administration. The phrase "poor whites" also implies that Johnson's policies kept working-class whites in poverty, rather than advanc-

ing them to a higher social class. Harper might well have felt contempt for a man who betrayed the welfare of his constituents to maintain his class loyalty at all costs. In one telling anecdote, when asked if he believed in equality for African Americans, Johnson vehemently denied his support for blacks and explained, "I am fighting those traitorous aristocrats, their masters" (DuBois 246-47).

When Harper spoke on abolition in lecture rooms and lyceum halls before the war, she cultivated a genteel northern activist audience that would support her program for political equality. After the war, she crisscrossed the South, visiting every former Confederate state except Arkansas and Texas, lecturing to freedwomen about education and mustering them into a force for social change. In the 1870 letter to William Still from Greenville, Georgia, she explains: "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 try to lift up their heads and plant the roots of progress under the hearthstone" (Still 772). While her novels often portray middle-class black characters who lead their race, her essays single out freedwomen as a potential base of political power. In "The Colored People of America" (1857), she extols women who advocate education in their children's lives: "Public and private schools accommodate our children, and in my own southern home, I see women, whose lot is unremitted labor, saving a pittance from their scanty wages to defray the expense of learning to read" (*Brighter* 100).

Harper's powerful oratory challenged the racial and gender stereotypes of her white middle-class listeners. Her effect on postbellum audiences can be gauged by newspaper reports and her own recollections of their comments. For example, speaking in 1870 before a mixed-race crowd at Columbiana, Alabama, she overheard, "She is a man," and "She is not colored, she is painted" (Still 772). Carolyn Sorisio contends that "an African-American woman who lectured was scrutinized for any signs of indelicacy and subjected to intense speculation regarding her racial identity" (57). In a report appearing in the *Philadelphia Independent*, Grace Greenwood praises the feminine qualities and genteel appearance that allowed Harper to serve as a crossover figure for black and white middle-class audiences. Calling her a "bronze muse" who is "about as colored as some of the Cuban belles I have met with at Saratoga," Greenwood extols her "strong face, with a shadowed glow upon it, indicative of thoughtful fervor, and of a nature most femininely sensitive, but not in the least morbid" (qtd. in Still 779). Harper's gentility and ability to "pass" as white explains Greenwood's shock at the thought that she might have been degraded under slavery: "As I listened to her, there swept over me a chill wave of horror, the realization

that this noble woman had she not been rescued from her mother's condition, might have been sold on the auction-block, to the highest bidder" (779-80). Like many free blacks, Harper's demeanor suggests she might have been born from a white master and his slave mistress, as Greenwood's comment that she needed to be "rescued from her mother's condition" implies. Harper's hybrid identity—male/female, genteel/working-class, white/black—suggests how white middle-class women deflected their anxiety about racial otherness by carefully editing out the actual facts of a public black woman's life and replacing them with qualities more acceptable to their sensibilities.

One way that Harper and her peers negotiated their identities for the public was to solidify their place in the emerging middle class and to manifest the conservative values of piety, domesticity, modesty, and sexual purity that were considered part of what Barbara Welter describes as "the cult of True Womanhood." Although these virtues were almost impossible for black women to achieve under slavery, they still set the terms by which freedwomen imagined they were guaranteed entry into the middle class during the Reconstruction era, and they used them to confirm their political alliance with white women to press for legal and social advancement. In *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870*, Karen Halttunen argues that the middle classes "erected barriers to define their own social status through the exclusion of others" (194). Sentimentalism—the expression of "right" feeling—shored up the class structure through the exclusion of others who were deemed insincere—confidence men and painted ladies. By vilifying these figures, white middle-class Americans buttressed their own genteel class status, while retaining the myth that class structure was fluid and permeable. Even Karl Marx commented that the social classes in America at mid-century were "'in a constant state of flux'" (Halttunen 195). According to Halttunen, "Sentimentalism offered an unconscious strategy for middle-class Americans to distinguish themselves as a class while still denying the class structure of their society, and to define themselves against the lower classes even as they insisted they were merely distinguishing themselves from vulgar hypocrites" (195).

The anxiety generated around genteel social performances and sentimental authenticity for the middle classes is apparent in Harper's own expressions of commitment to the abolitionist cause. In an 1859 letter to Still, reprinted in his monumental *The Underground Railroad*, she equates working for abolition with preserving integrity:

"This is a common cause; and if there is any burden to be borne in the Anti-Slavery cause—anything to be done to weaken our hateful chains

or assert our manhood and womanhood, I have a right to do my share of the work. The humblest and feeblest of us can do something; and though I may be deficient in many of the conventionalisms of city life, and be considered as a person of good impulses, but unfinished, yet if there is common rough work to be done, call on me." (761)

Here, Harper displays the transparent emotion that Halttunen considers a hallmark of genteel sentimental culture at a time of rapidly shifting class allegiances. She calls herself "unfinished," "deficient in many of the conventionalisms of city life"; at the same time, she assertively claims her "right" to join in abolitionist work. Referring twice to the abolitionist cause as "common," she imparts a dual meaning: she refuses to discriminate between people on the basis of race, instead asserting that "manhood" and "womanhood" will be served, and she underscores her willingness to serve the cause of democracy. "Common rough work" may also echo the hard, physical labor that her sisters in bondage performed. The delicate balance that Harper maintains between middle-class daintiness and her commitment to political activism suggests how vexed the performance of gentility was even for a woman of her public stature and ambition.

Wider Literary Venues

In order to reach beyond class and race lines to the widest possible audience, Harper depended on a well-developed infrastructure of editors and publishers of African-American literary works; a growing coterie of novelists, short story writers, journalists, playwrights, and poets; and a discriminating reading public. In fact, as Elizabeth McHenry explains, recent explorations into the reception of nineteenth-century African-American literature suggest that many levels of reading competency and venues for circulating literary works flourished outside the publishing houses. Far from existing within a wholly "oral culture," African Americans had begun to form literary societies in urban centers, including Philadelphia, New York, and Washington, D.C., as early as the 1820s. Well aware of such organizations, Harper published many of her early stories and articles in African-American periodicals, and newspapers circulated many of her early articles on racial uplift and the uses of literature to promote equality. From there, her works were widely disseminated by clubs, churches, schools, and literary societies. Writing to Francis Grimké, a black Presbyterian minister who became prominent among reform circles in the late 1870s, for example, she clearly recognized the potential impact of speeches on religious life, when she asked him to distribute his sermons to a wider audience: "Do these sermons have a circulation outside of our people? Could there not be some contrivance planned by which your sermons would reach larger audience than they do now. [sic] Could not the council plan for their circulation, and

the womens [sic] clubs be induced to scatter them among the white people in different localities?" (Grimké, Box 4-40).⁴

For Harper and her contemporaries, wider literary venues counteracted the oppressive legacy of slavery and served as the site for political action. At the same time, African-American women writers rejected black female stereotypes that shored up myths about white womanhood in the Old South. Barbara Christian contends that "the image in southern antebellum literature that developed as stereotypes of black women reveals much, not only about the southern attitude toward black people but also about their definition of woman" (18). While white women were idealized as virginal, pure, and ornamental, black women embodied the obverse qualities of labor and child-rearing, sexuality, and rage—the mammy, the loose woman, and the conjure woman. By the time Harper and her contemporaries were writing, they recognized the incompatibility of slavery's racist female stereotypes with the rise of black middle-class women and men, and they often contrasted the conventions of white middle-class gentility with the facts of African-American lives to question the basis of their sexual and socio-economic oppression. Claudia Tate argues that the typical novel by African-American women, idealizing genteel and domestic life, presents "a heroine who is an exemplar of feminine purity, piety, and the work ethic as well as outlines a plot that confirms bourgeois social objectives of domesticity and respectability" (8). Similarly, Ann duCille contends that black heroines manifest a "passionlessness" that conformed to the ideal of white womanhood, while it simultaneously elevated black women's moral standing in society and challenged the long-standing charge of "lewd" behavior (31-32). In *Iola Leroy or Shadows Uplifted* (1892), Harper revises the plantation myths of antebellum literature to create a new black elite that will transcend class and gender differences. Kevin K. Gaines asserts that, by evoking the fractured union of Iola's family, *Iola Leroy* implicitly contrasts the old plantation legends with Iola, who is remanded to slavery despite her education (37). To her credit, Harper did not stop with portrayals of middle-class black women, as did many of her female contemporaries, but explored the impact of such stereotypes on the freedwomen she had encountered during her lecture tours of the South. Indeed, in *Sketches*, she dramatizes the values of literacy, self-sufficiency, and responsible citizenship that she advocated to freedmen and women in her lectures. For Harper, according to Carby, "Education . . . would empower women so that they could shape an alternative course to a future society which would exercise sensitivity and sympathy toward the poor and oppressed" (102). In her *Sketches of Southern Life* (1872), Harper's regional and colloquial expressions veer away from dialect toward a broader, more inclusive representation of African-American speech.

The problem of how to represent the experience and voices of African Americans in literature, which would occupy writers and artists from before the publication of Paul Laurence Dunbar's lyrics in 1896 through the Harlem Renaissance, revolved, at least partly, around dialect. In her essay "The Negro in American Literature" from *A Voice from the South* (1892), Anna Julia Cooper criticizes the propagandistic bent of race portrayals by white writers who "have all, more or less, had a point to prove or a mission to accomplish, and thus their art has been almost uniformly perverted to serve their ends" (139). Foregoing the more general insight that "underneath the black man's form and behavior there is the great bedrock of humanity, the key to which is the same that unlocks every tribe and kindred of the nations of the earth" (139), these writers, Cooper asserts, have ignored the similarities between people of different races and, rather, "begin by telling you that all colored people look exactly alike and end by noting down every chance contortion or idiosyncrasy as a race characteristic" (140). Harper's decision to refrain from dialect was a political act that broke down divisions between reading communities, created political solidarity between middle-class and working-class readers, and sought to portray African Americans without reverting to racial stereotypes. As evidenced by a letter she wrote to her editor, Thomas Hamilton, in 1861, Henry Louis Gates argues that Harper moved away from black male authors' obsessive portrayal of white racism to depict the human condition, of "'feelings that are general'" (173).

In order to understand Harper's literary achievement in *Sketches*, we might compare it with Mark Twain's "A True Story: Repeated Word for Word as I Heard It." Written in 1874, two years after the publication of Harper's poems, Twain's story provides an apt analogy for several reasons. It uses several literary techniques—a narrative frame, markers of authenticity, direct asides to the listener, and dialect—that Harper scrupulously avoids to educate her reader in the complexities of life for African Americans. First, Twain's title provides a veneer of authenticity that prompts the reader to assume that, like many slave stories, this one recounts actual events. Second, in beginning with a white, middle-class narrator's comments and quickly turning to the former slave's perspective with only occasional additions by the narrator, Twain experiments with a technique he uses in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885). Like the chapter in which the slave, Jim, tells a story about realizing for the first time that his daughter is deaf, this story ends not with the narrator's return but with the former slave's words at center stage. Also like *Huckleberry Finn*, "A True Story" contrasts the fake feeling of the white characters—Pap, the judge, his wife, Tom, and the poetaster, Emmeline Grangerford—with the real feeling of the slaves, demonstrating their fully developed moral human qualities. Third, in writing several asides in which the protagonist speaks directly to the narrator, Twain implies that

the telling is being enacted, another device to encourage the reader's belief in the tale's verisimilitude. This literary technique also blurs the identities of narrator and reader, allowing Twain to expunge his guilt as a member of the dominant white culture for his role in the systematic oppression of African Americans. Fourth, Twain's use of dialect aligns his story with the works of writers like Joel Chandler Harris, George Washington Cable, and Paul Laurence Dunbar, who imitate black speech, and questions implicitly the stereotypes that white readers might have assumed about the purely comic uses of such language. Published in the *Atlantic Monthly* by William Dean Howells, who considered the story a "simple, dramatic report of reality which we have seen equaled in no other American writer" (qtd. in Fishkin 99), Twain's story was one of his first experiments in representing African-American speech, but certainly not, as Howells contended, the first of any writer, since Harper had published *Sketches of Southern Life* two years earlier.

If we extrapolate from Halttunen's argument that the middle classes were increasingly self-conscious about the genteel social performances that distinguished them from the working classes, then we can see Twain absorbed the conventions of class representations even while he travesties them. In a parody of class loyalty, Twain exposes the logic by which Aunt Rachel separates herself from other blacks and erects herself as a member of a higher class, a pattern of thinking that prevents her from recognizing her own son until late in the story. Like Harper, Twain employs many of the common *topoi* of the slave narrative—the auction, the search for, and identification of, family members, the reunion of the family—but he emphatically aligns Aunt Rachel with a class-consciousness that Harper's figures in *Sketches* rarely show. Like her mother, who called herself one of "Blue Hen's Chickens" (95)—a popular phrase for someone born in Maryland—Rachel tells the narrator she repeated the same words to keep others away, when her son was hurt as a child: "An' when dey talk' back at her, she up an' says, 'Look-a-heah!' she says, 'I want you niggers to understan' dat I wa'n't bawn in de mash to be fool' by trash! I's one o' de ole Blue Hen's Chickens, I is!' an' den she clar' dat kitchen an' bandage' up de chile herse' f. So I says dat word, too, when I's riled" (95). Drawing a distinction between her pedigree and the background of the other slaves, whom she compares to pigs born in the "mash," she imitates the class status that divides her from both the whites she parodies and other blacks. In the phrase "Blue Hen's Chickens," Aunt Rachel unwittingly emphasizes the ownership to which she is subject under slavery, yet the reference is so close to blueblood that it might imply a critique of white aristocratic attitudes. Such multivalent phrases are typical of what Eric Lott calls "blackface antiracism" (36) and instill the reader with a tragicomic recognition that

Aunt Rachel's lack of awareness about her son's identity comes from her self-parodic class allegiances. While Twain immerses the reader in the class divisions that existed within the black community and holds up a mirror to white society, Harper avoids the potential divisiveness of class warfare and seeks to unite African Americans.

Sketches of a Southern Landscape

Outside of the dominant culture, Harper maintains a precarious foothold in a culture that asserted middle-class values and distanced itself from threats to its status from below. Although we might at first assume that in "A True Story" Twain accepts the separation and persistence of hierarchy between the races, this reading drastically simplifies the expression of class in both writers. Rather, Twain's and Harper's texts reflect the differing degrees to which African-American writers were at liberty to question the inequity of the class structure without sustaining charges of indelicacy. Twain can afford to critique, even savagely, the deluded white narrator's misperceptions of Aunt Rachel's life; Harper cannot. In *Sketches*, she stakes out the future for African Americans and encourages the reader to pursue education and civic duty through the voice of her freedwoman, Aunt Chloe.

The order and selection of poems in the two editions of *Sketches*—from 1872 and 1886—reflect Harper's desire to highlight the voices of non-elite African Americans. Although the 1872 volume begins and ends with poems that reflect Harper's political intentions—"Our English Friends," the dedicatory poem, praises English abolitionists for divesting slavery of its "royal" power and promoting democracy—the 1886 edition omits the dedicatory poem and begins immediately with the Aunt Chloe poems. According to Francis Smith Foster, Harper's other lyrics in *Sketches* describe "those lost or abandoned, those reunited, or those committed to rescuing and reuniting, but all continue the theme of 'The Jewish Grandfather' and the Aunt Chloe series,—that freedom requires unified, continuous struggle" (*Brighter* 236).

As in her lectures, Harper moves from personal suffering to universal tragedy to create reader empathy for African Americans. *Sketches* marks a turning point in Harper's career in several ways. First, she appealed to readers from every class, prompting Carla Peterson to claim that she "stroved to deconstruct the distinctions of high, middle, and low cultures as she appropriated the 'high-cultural' form of poetry for democratic purposes" ("Reconstructing" 308). Second, she refrains here and elsewhere from using a frame narrative and thereby "deconstructs the binary opposition of white literary frame and black dialect and invents a black idiom that exists on its own terms, unframed by the language of the dominant culture"

("Doers" 213). By allowing black speakers to assume linguistic authority and speak openly without the aid of a third-person narrator, Harper frees her characters from their constraint within Anglo-American standard speech, allowing them to narrate their own histories—communal, racial, and national. Harper evokes the pain and trauma of slavery through Aunt Chloe's experiences, and contrasts her open emotional expression with the repressed, private emotion of white women.

Third, invoking the figure of Moses as an explicit critique of the Johnson administration's policies, she extends to the modern, political plight of African Americans a sacred, prophetic tradition that predicts their freedom. One of her most popular lecture pieces, a long epic poem, "Moses" from *Moses: A Story of the Nile* (1869), similarly subverted an antiquated class system. As the Old Testament prophet who led the Hebrew slaves to freedom, Moses personifies the archetypal revolutionary hero. As Foster comments, after escaping enslavement to be adopted by royalty and educated, Moses turns away from his class privilege and identifies with his race (*Brighter* 236). Unlike "Moses," as Maryemma Graham observes, however, *Sketches* turns away from "a focus on leadership to a focus on the rank and file" (xliii)—a shift in class allegiance marked linguistically by colloquial language. As Harper comments in "Our Greatest Want," an essay written in 1859, "I like the character of Moses. He is the first disunionist we read of in the Jewish scriptures. . . . He would have no union with the slave power of Egypt" (*Brighter* 103-04).

A sixty-stanza poem and the longest in the *Sketches's* sequence, "The Deliverance" displays the inversion of class that occurs after the Civil War and during Reconstruction. After his father dies and leaves his family in debt, Mister Thomas takes over the farm and eventually enlists in the Confederate army. Like the cast of characters in plantation literature, "Mister Thomas," the master's son; "Old Mistus," his mother (a combination of "Mister" and mistress); Aunt Chloe, the mammy and cook; and Uncle Jacob, the prophetic preacher, fulfill classic roles, yet Harper's version refutes a nostalgic view of plantation life to reveal the socio-economic oppression of the slave system. Although Mister Thomas evokes the benevolent master who sympathetically takes the part of the "young folkes" who "got in scrapes" (*Brighter* 198; 7), once he became master, "he made them understand"—presumably, the difference in power between them. His mother's scolding, as if he were a schoolboy—"old Mistus used to chide him, / And say he'd spile us all" (*Brighter* 198; 11-12)—is a nostalgic rendering of the painful realities of slavery, in which folksy language and memories of "mischief" cover the actual corporal punishment of the slaves.

In contrast to plantation myths, which allowed slave owners to feel less guilt over their treatment of slaves, Harper places another moral grid

that inverts the relationship between slave owner and slave. Indeed, Aunt Chloe's moral righteousness, her innate understanding that the southern side is "wrong," persists, while "right," a common intensifier in southern speech, is used to underscore the slaves' morality. Driven by moral insight, Uncle Jacob believes that the immoral and unlawful nature of slavery, while inexplicable, should not continue: "And some thing reasoned right inside, / Such should not always be; / And you could not beat it out my head, / The Spirit spoke to me" (*Brighter* 200; 73-76). "Just wait and watch and pray," Uncle Jacob assures Aunt Chloe. "For I feel right sure and certain, / Slavery's bound to pass away" (200; 66-68).

Through juxtaposition, Harper contrasts the slaves' open expression of emotion with the psychological and sexual repression of their mistresses, a difference that charts in larger terms their growing independence. Before the war ends, "Mistus prayed up in the parlor / That the Secesh all might win; / We were praying in the cabins, / Wanting freedom to begin" (200; 81-84), says Chloe. When her mistress hears of the Union victory, "she groaned and hardly spoke" (201; 126), but the former slaves are publicly jubilant. Similarly, whereas her mistress mourns in her house after hearing of her son's death, barely able to speak, Chloe and the other freedwomen lament the death of Lincoln publicly: "'Twas a dreadful solemn morning, / I just staggered on my feet; / And the women they were crying / And screaming in the street" (202; 145-48). Along with their wish to enjoy freedom, the slaves express their pain and joy freely after the war ends and thereby reinforce their communal bonds.

When Yankee troops finally arrive, and the slaves are free, they celebrate in their cabins and the kitchens where they worked and hold a "jubilee" (201; 116). During the jubilees traditionally held in ancient Egypt every fifty years, slaves were set free; alienated property was restored; and lands were left untouched. Linking the slaves to the Israelites, Harper dramatizes the treatment of African Americans who had long been denied their freedom:

After years of pain and parting,
Our chains was broke in two,
And we was so mighty happy,
We didn't know what to do.

But we soon got used to freedom,
Though the way at first was rough;
But we weathered through the tempest,
For slavery made us tough. (*Brighter* 201; 133-40)

This jubilation quickly gives way to the heavy responsibility of freedom for people who lacked the skills to advance themselves in society: "We didn't

know what to do" (201; 136). Harper praises the independence and self-reliance of African Americans like Elizabeth Keckley, who explains: "I had been raised in a hardy school—had been taught to rely on myself, and to prepare myself to render assistance to others" (10). If Keckley's narrative secures a place for her protagonist in white culture, assuring the reader that blacks aspired to be like whites, Harper invokes the strength of character that allowed blacks to overcome the legacy of slavery.

Moving from the personal, individual plight to the national, political struggle for equal rights, Chloe reveals how the same fate can affect the lowest and the highest. She criticizes corrupt politicians who cheat African Americans out of their votes, especially President Johnson:

Then we had another President—
 What do you call his name?
 Well, if the colored folks forget him
 They wouldn't be much to blame.

We thought he'd be the Moses
 Of all the colored race;
 But when the rebels pressed us hard
 He never showed his face.

But something must have happened him,
 Right curi's I'll be bound,
 'Cause I heard 'em talking 'bout a circle
 That he was swinging round.

But everything will pass away—
 He went like time and tide—
 And when the next election came
 They let poor Andy slide. (202; 153-68)

Aunt Chloe's attitude toward his political demise signals that President Johnson has come full circle—a self-styled "Moses" who fails "to deliver" and becomes nameless and forgettable.

Throughout "The Deliverance," Harper posits women as moral exemplars and centers of political power within the home. Aunt Chloe's interjections berate politicians and humorously hold untrustworthy men up to public scorn, thereby enlisting the reader's support for women's voting rights. If Chloe could vote, she would cast her ballot for Ulysses S. Grant, the next president, because she credits him with breaking up the Ku Klux Klan: "And if any man should ask me / If I would sell my vote, / I'd tell him I was not the one / To change and turn my coat" (202-03; 169-76). While she does not deny most men's ability to choose wisely, she redefines political activists as women—housewives, mothers, and sisters—who were

previously discounted. Read in the context of the debates about women's suffrage, the individual stories Aunt Chloe tells about men imply that women would not have succumbed, like them, to the many acts of bribery after the war. When John Thomas Reeder returns to his wife with some flour and meat, purchased with the money used to bribe him, Aunt Kitty "gave the meat and flour a toss, / And said they should not stay" (203; 191-92). On the other hand, when Aunt Kitty begins to "raise," we might expect her husband to sit down and lament, but he "just stood up and cried" (203; 189, 196). "Standing up" conveys the democratic act of being counted in the workings of the government as well as evoking the promise of spiritual redemption. And although David Rand sells his vote for a sack of sand that he believes to be sugar, his public humiliation, as his wife is serving tea to guests, makes him "mad enough to fight" (203; 208). As a subtle political allegory, Harper might be pointing to the untrustworthiness of white politicians who bribed black men to vote. Against stereotype, the men's bravery and the promise that they will stand up and defend their rights imply that the same righteous indignation that led black soldiers into war to defeat the Confederate army will sustain them in their struggle for equal rights. Yet women within the home are the catalysts for political rebellion.

In portraying the slaves' early attempts to read and the resistance their northern teachers faced after the war, Harper relates education to the social upheaval that was inevitable in a growing democracy. "Learning to Read" advocates literacy in securing legal citizenship for African Americans:

Very soon the Yankee teachers
 Came down and set up school;
 But, oh! How the Rebs did hate it,—
 It was agin' their rule.

Our masters always tried to hide
 Book learning from our eyes;
 Knowledge did'nt agree with slavery—
 'Twould make us all too wise. (205; 1-8)

Harper indicts the methods employed by slave owners to prevent literacy among slaves. Chloe explains how southerners justified illiteracy—"Knowledge didn't agree with slavery"—and implies that slaves had to resort to dissimulation and trickery to learn to read. Like Frederick Douglass, who recounts copying his master's son's copybook to learn to read and write, "Mr. Turner's Ben" (the proprietorship of the white man is implied in the slave's name) listened closely to children spelling out words and learned from them how to read. Chloe's Uncle Caldwell also greased the pages of a book to make them look like worthless papers and kept them under his

hat. Her stories recall Benjamin Franklin's account of his forebears in the *Autobiography*, who, during the reign of the Catholic Queen Mary, hid a copy of the English Bible "fastened open with tapes under and within the cover of a joint stool" (5). Like Franklin, Harper links democracy to literacy and to religious freedom. Also typical of *Sketches*, Harper minimizes the actual punishment meted out to slaves who learned to read—death—by claiming it was against white "rule," contrasting the slaves' democracy to an anti-democratic southern "royalty."

While most of the anecdotes concern black men who shrewdly covered up their attempts to learn to read before the war, Harper turns the discussion to women's literacy. Chloe herself "longed to read my Bible," despite the opinions of people who thought it was too late, as she is "rising sixty":

And, I longed to read my Bible,
For precious words it said;
But when I begun to learn it,
Folks just shook their heads,

And said there is no use trying,
Oh! Chloe, you're too late;
But as I was rising sixty,
I had no time to wait.

So I got a pair of glasses,
And straight to work I went,
And never stopped till I could read
The hymns and Testament.

Then I got a little cabin—
A place to call my own—
And I felt as independent
As a queen upon her throne. (206; 29-44)

Her diligence and determination enable her to press for legal equality. Figuratively, she "rises" both spiritually and democratically. As a model for a newly freed citizen, Chloe assumes the duties of citizenship and democracy, symbolized by the Jacksonian log cabin, when she gets "a little cabin— / A place to call [her] own— / And [she] felt as independent / As a queen upon her throne" (206; 41-44).

"The Reunion" redresses class differences and metaphorically repairs the fractured state of the national union through reuniting the family. As Aunt Chloe is walking down the street, she hears a man address her as "Missis Chloe Fleet" (207; 4). He is Jakey, her son, who has been searching for her ever since he was sold off the plantation and has brought news of her other son, Ben, who has married and started a family in Tennessee. Like

many blacks, poverty or legal restrictions might have prevented him from leaving the South. In portraying Ben as a resident of Tennessee, however, Harper implies that he has withstood the oppressive policies of Johnson's administration and still flourished. Chloe, who has occupied a low place economically and socially, also rises. She is "richer now than Mistus," who "got no power now / To tear us both apart" (208; 27-28). The gathering of the entire family fulfills Uncle Jacob's prediction and inverts the power hierarchy established during slavery:

"I'm richer now than Mistus,
Because I have got my son;
And Mister Thomas he is dead,
And she's got nary one.

"You must write to brother Benny
That he must come this fall,
And we'll make the cabin bigger,
And that will hold us all.

"Tell him I want to see 'em all
Before my life do cease:
And then, like good old Simeon,
I hope to die in peace." (208; 29-40)

"The Reunion" predicts the binding together of the nation's wounds after the Civil War. Erlene Stetson has suggested that, for African-American women, the cabin symbolizes the domestic sphere as well as their cultural and national roots: "the house is a symbol for place—heaven, haven, home, the heart, women's estate, the earthly tenement, the hearth—and for region—Africa, the West Indies, America, Asia, the North, and the South" (xxii). Not only has the home been restored and the family reunited, but Aunt Chloe and Uncle Jacob, as their names indicate, revise plantation myths and assume the role of prophets. Claiming that "Chloe compares her spirit to Simeon, who helped Jesus bear the burden of the cross on the road to Mount Calvary" (166), Melba Joyce Boyd contends that "the poem ends with a final request to collect her entire family before she dies, thus the encircling of children, a necessary ritual before the passage through death into heaven" (166). But Harper may also allude to another Simeon, who was promised in a vision that he would see Christ before his death. After Christ has been presented in the Temple following His circumcision, Simeon liberates himself from self-imposed slavery and asserts that he can die in peace, while he predicts the future for Israel: "Simeon blessed them, and said unto Mary his mother, 'Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against (and a

sword will pierce through your own soul also), that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed" (Luke 2:34-35). If Aunt Chloe represents fidelity to democratic ideals, then she also predicts the self-liberation that would come to African Americans who cultivated domesticity, literacy, and responsible citizenship.

In reading *Sketches* today, we must acknowledge that Harper was a poet who employed the vocabulary of her age. Nevertheless, *Sketches* strikes into new territory, moving beyond dialect, liberating her characters from class-based restraints, and overturning the hierarchies of gender and race. Poetry served a political agenda for racial equality that was shared by her contemporaries and prefigured the theories of black social elevation addressed by, among others, W. E. B. DuBois, Anna Julia Cooper, and Ida Barnett-Wells. More radically than her contemporaries, Harper saw literature as a means to transcend differences of class and gender and to encourage all her people to rise.

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Notes

¹ While her nineteenth-century audience clearly enjoyed her poetry, Harper's verse has found few contemporary advocates. J. Saunders Redding recognizes her talent but condemns her sentimentality and derides her as a "trail blazer, hacking, however ineffectually, at the dense forest of propaganda" (40). If Harper treats a wider range of topics than most African-American poets, he comments that, "practically all the social evils from the double standard of sex morality to corruption in politics were lashed with the scourge of her resentment" (42). Similarly, William Stanley Braithwaite acknowledges that, despite her lack of talent, "she deserves even more credit [than other nineteenth-century female poets], for with an adequacy of craftsmanship comparable to theirs, the compulsion of race restricted her moods and subjects to that special kind of pleading we call propaganda" (4).

² Several literary critics, including Frances Smith Foster, Hazel Carby, Carla Peterson, Barbara Christian, and Paul Lauter, have applied much-needed historical scrutiny to her writing. Still, most contemporary critics emphasize her post-Reconstruction novel *Iola Leroy*; or, *Shadows Uplifted*, rather than her poetry, as a political platform for theories about social and legal advancement for African Americans. See Foster, "Doers of the Word: The Reconstruction Poetry of Frances Harper," *Written by Herself*, 131-53; Carby; Peterson, "Doers," 130-31, 209-13; Christian; and Lauter. For an extraordinary recent assessment of *Iola Leroy*, see Ann duCille.

³ In nineteenth-century discussions of black suffrage, several phrases were employed that require some clarifying today. "Impartial" or "equal" suffrage extended the vote to both races but might have used literacy tests or property ownership to restrict voting rights. On the other hand, "universal" suffrage extended the right to vote regardless of race, except for age and residence requirements. "Negro suffrage," the most common phrase, meant either universal or impartial suffrage. It was sometimes, though infrequently, used to mean suffrage for blacks that was limited by special restrictions that did not apply to whites. See James M. McPherson 327.

⁴ In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the black women's clubs to which Harper refers organized political action and supported education. Promoting temperance and a strong home life as a cure for many social ills and embracing middle-class respectability, they echoed the themes of Harper's essays, including her belief that education was central to African-American social and legal advancement. *A History of the Club Movement Among the Colored Women of the United States of America* (1902) reports that many clubs honored famous black female writers and activists, such as Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Ida B. Wells, Phillis Wheatley, and Harper, by assuming their names. For example, with its purpose explicitly "to work more earnestly for the purity of our homes and the general advancement of colored women" (*History* 15), the Frances E. W. Harper Woman's Club of Jefferson City, Missouri, took as its mission "to better the condition of the colored people of the community by a gradual training of the mind to the higher aims and purposes of life." Harper turned to black women's clubs, in part, as a response to the endemic racism of feminist organizations and the overbearing behavior of white women who showed little concern for the fates of their black sisters. For her discussion of the Columbian Exposition as the "White City," a symbol of American Progress, and black women's rejection of such symbolism, see Carby, "'Women's Era': Rethinking Black Feminist Theory," *Reconstructing Womanhood*, 3-19.

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