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Frances Watkins Harper and the Search for Women's Interracial Alliances

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*Susan B. Anthony
and the Struggle for
Equal Rights*

Edited by
Christine L. Ridarsky and Mary M. Huth

With an introduction by Nancy A. Hewitt

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Chapter 5

Frances Watkins Harper and the Search for Women's Interracial Alliances

Alison M. Parker

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825–1911) was a prominent abolitionist and woman's rights activist whose career bridged the antebellum and post-Civil War eras. Harper's advocacy, during and after Reconstruction, of woman suffrage, prohibition of alcohol, federal funding for education, and civil rights protections for black Americans reflects her increasing insistence on federal intervention in social problems and suggests why she turned to the largest women's organization in the United States during the nineteenth century, the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), as an organizational base.¹ Founded in 1874, the WCTU's commitment to the expansion of federal power after the end of Reconstruction explains its value to black women like Harper, who joined the WCTU because she agreed with its strategy of calling upon the federal government to help solve the country's social and moral problems, especially through constitutional amendments for woman suffrage and the prohibition of alcohol. Harper also recognized its large membership base as a potentially powerful site for interracial cooperation and appreciated its focus on Christian reform and the protection of children. Her activism demonstrates a larger trend that emerged among politically active black women and men who were determined to hold the government to its commitment to civil rights in the years after Reconstruction. To do so, they involved themselves in issues and organizations that helped refocus attention on the positive possibilities of federal power.²

Although many of Frances Harper's writings have been collected in edited volumes, there has been relatively little scholarship on her, especially by historians. Some literary scholars have focused on her place in the canon, her strengths as a poet, and her status as the most popular African-American orator and poet in the nineteenth century. Other literary scholars have done interesting work on the politics of women's sentimental

writing in the nineteenth century, a category in which Harper's writing is placed.³ Historians of Harper have primarily focused on her role as an abolitionist and on her work during Reconstruction but have largely neglected her later activism, when she was a leader in the WCTU. Even scholars of the WCTU have ignored Harper's role in the organization.⁴ Particularly neglected is the decade of the 1880s, when Harper worked to create a viable interracial alliance as the WCTU's national superintendent of "Work among Colored People." Frances Harper's political thought, approaches to reform, and role as a leader in a predominantly white reform organization in the latter part of the nineteenth century merit further study.

Harper's experiences within the WCTU reveal the strengths and limitations of this crucial women's organization, her own political priorities and strategies, and the fraught nature of black/white alliances in the 1880s and 1890s. Harper's WCTU work came at a pivotal moment in American race relations and highlights the lost possibilities of interracial cooperation in the years between the demise of Reconstruction in 1877 and the proliferation of Jim Crow laws in the 1890s.⁵ Her demotion within the WCTU in 1890, when she lost her position as a national superintendent, reflects the wider trend of worsening race relations in the 1890s, as lynchings of African Americans reached their peak and Jim Crow segregation laws were given official federal approval by the US Supreme Court in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896).⁶ Harper's 1896 decision to join the new national black women's organization, the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), signals her disillusionment with the possibility for successful interracial alliances. Significantly, it also reveals her continued interest in finding an organizing space for black women to further their federal legislative and constitutional reform goals in this more hostile racial climate.

An educated free black woman who grew up in the slave state of Maryland, Frances Watkins Harper was raised in a strong abolitionist household in Baltimore under the care of her uncle, William Watkins, a prominent black educator. At age twenty-five, Harper moved north to teach in Ohio and Pennsylvania. A few years later, in 1853, she found that she could not return to Maryland even if she wanted to. The state had passed a law forbidding free blacks from entering its borders; those who did were threatened with enslavement. Harper was so outraged by this law that she decided to devote herself to antislavery activism.⁷ In the antebellum era, Harper criticized the federal government for its constitutional and legal support for the institution of slavery. She again lost faith in the federal government's commitment to African Americans during the 1890s, when the Supreme Court sanctioned Jim Crow segregation and when lynchings were at their peak in the US South.

In the 1850s, Harper's Christian abolitionist poetry, letters, and essays regularly appeared in newspapers such as the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, the *Liberator*, the *Weekly Anglo-African*, the *Christian Recorder*, and *Frederick Douglass'*

Paper.⁸ She gave her first speech in 1854 in Massachusetts under the auspices of the American Anti-Slavery Society and subsequently lectured alongside other Garrisonian abolitionists, including Lucy Stone, Lucretia Mott, William Lloyd Garrison, and Frederick Douglass.⁹ She married in 1860, at the start of the Civil War, and had a child. Although she continued to publish her antislavery writings, she lectured less frequently until her husband died in 1864 and she returned to the lecture circuit to support herself and her daughter.¹⁰

During the Civil War and Reconstruction, Harper saw true promise in a strong central government.¹¹ President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation gave her faith in the federal government and the authority of the president. Celebrating it, Harper commented, "Oh, it would have been so sad . . . had the arm of Executive power failed us in the nation's fearful crisis!"¹² Like other reformers, Harper moved toward greater advocacy of federal supremacy as she saw the potential of the federal government to improve black Americans' civil rights, especially with the passage of the crucial Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution. She called on the central government to take a strong stance against Southern states' abridgements of the civil rights of African Americans. When executive or governmental might was used to help oppressed people, Harper unequivocally celebrated that power. Her positive assessment of the reformatory and protective powers of the federal government began during the Civil War and continued as she worked for woman suffrage and the prohibition of alcohol as a member of the WCTU in the late 1870s and 1880s. Literary biographer Melba Boyd describes Harper as "ever suspicious of government," yet this characterization best fits Harper's earlier attitude, during the antebellum period.¹³

Seeking a Coalition

Immediately after the Civil War, Harper committed herself to collaborating with white women for women's rights because she perceived that women's collective protest would gain more attention from the white politicians who ran the federal government than would black women's separate activism. Harper had noted women's need for economic and political equality in her antebellum era writings, but her convictions were strengthened by the traumatic event of her husband's death, which proved to her that married women were powerless before the law. As early as 1859, Harper articulated an awareness of the specific inequalities facing all married women, white and black. "The Two Offers," a short story that appeared in the *Anglo-African Magazine*, highlighted problems with women's legal and economic dependency in marriage. Not only did good husbands sometimes die

untimely deaths, but bad husbands tyrannized and tormented their wives. Critiquing men's unrestrained power within marriage, Harper advocated a "redemptive womanhood" and rejected the notion that women should be weak or dependent:¹⁴ "You may paint [woman] in poetry or fiction, as a frail vine, clinging to her brother man for support, and dying when deprived of it. . . . But woman—the true woman—if you would render her happy, needs more. . . . Her conscience should be enlightened, her faith in the true and right established, and scope given to her Heaven-endowed and God-given faculties."¹⁵ If all women could be properly educated true women, Harper concluded, perhaps they could unite to work for reforms that affected them all.¹⁶

Harper's epiphany regarding the need for an organized women's rights movement came toward the end of the Civil War when she became a widow. At that point, she recognized the fundamental legal discrimination faced by all married women, black and white:

My husband had died suddenly, leaving me a widow, with four children, one my own, and the others step-children. I tried to keep my children together. But my husband died in debt; and before he had been in his grave three months, the administrator had swept the very milk-crocks and wash tubs from my hands. I was a farmer's wife and made butter for the Columbus market; but what could I do when they had swept all away? . . . Had I died instead of my husband, how different would have been the result! By this time he would have another wife . . . and no administrator would have gone into his house, broken up his home, and 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.¹⁷

Laws on marriage and women's property rights were biased against all women, black and white. Harper's own savings from royalties and lecture fees paid for the farm, but this investment was legally her husband's not hers, allowing his creditors to confiscate their marital property upon his death.¹⁸ Forced to leave her stepchildren with her husband's relations, she took her daughter and resumed public speaking and writing as a way to support them both.

In one of her most powerful recorded speeches, Harper addressed the eleventh Woman's Rights Convention, held in New York City in May 1866, insisting that white women must work with black women on an equal footing.¹⁹ Accusing white women reformers of being directly complicit in white oppression, Harper challenged them to take responsibility for the unequal position of blacks in America and to rid themselves of their own prejudices: "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.”²⁰ Making the point that oppression denigrates the oppressors as well as the oppressed, Harper insisted that white women accept the common humanity of all women.

Because white women were as guilty as white men in perpetuating prejudice and hate, Harper rejected the idealized notions of white womanhood that were so prevalent in the dominant culture. Speaking with honesty and some apt sarcasm, Harper explained to her white audience, “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 dew drops 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 preju[d]ice or malice; and the indifferent will vote on the strongest side of the question, with the winning party.”²¹ Wary of claims of white women’s purity—claims that were implicitly based on black women’s contrasting impurity—Harper insisted that white women were fallible and as prone as white men to racism. In this context, Harper rejected a view that she herself sometimes espoused—that women would vote differently than men because their interests were inherently moral and pure. Instead, when thinking about white women, she voiced the pragmatic—and ultimately accurate—view that women would vote based on their class and race backgrounds, prejudices and interests, as well as sometimes from their sense of the common good.

Historian Nell Irvin Painter argues that in the strategic moment when the Fifteenth Amendment was being debated, Frances Harper concluded “that she must now choose between her identity as a woman and her identity as a Negro.” Painter claims that “she abandoned black women and rallied to the side of black men.”²² In fact, Harper viewed the passage of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments to the Constitution, which guaranteed blacks citizenship and men enfranchisement, as offering the prospect of real change.²³ She supported woman suffrage and accepted the temporary focus on black male suffrage. For this reason, she could not join with white activists Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton in the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA); they explicitly rejected the Fifteenth Amendment because it allowed suffrage only for males. Thus, although she favored federal constitutional reform, which could have led her to support the NWSA over the American Woman Suffrage Association’s (AWSA) state-by-state approach, Harper joined the AWSA, led by Lucy Stone, because it accepted black male suffrage first and then turned to working for woman suffrage next.²⁴ Harper’s support of black men’s right to vote should not be mistaken as a lack of support for woman suffrage or vice versa. As historian Rosalyn Terborg-Penn describes it, “African American woman suffrage strategies combined demands for Black women’s right to vote and civil rights for all Black people.”²⁵

Thus, Harper supported the Fifteenth Amendment, which was ratified in 1870, but also argued in favor of immediately extending the vote to women. Her 1869 book *Minnie's Sacrifice* emphasized black women's common humanity as the main reason for giving women the right to vote: "I think the nation makes one great mistake in settling this question of suffrage. . . . When they are reconstructing the government why not lay the whole foundation anew, and base the right of suffrage not on the claims of service or sex, but on the broader basis of our common humanity. . . . Is it not the negro woman's hour also? Has she not as many rights and claims as the negro man?"²⁶ Rejecting the claim of Radical Republicans and most male abolitionists, including Wendell Phillips and Frederick Douglass, that this was the "negro's hour," Harper's main character insisted: "I cannot recognize that the negro man is the only one who has pressing claims at this hour."²⁷

Harper linked the causes of suffrage and temperance to explain why women needed the right to vote. Highest among women's specific claims was the passage of laws limiting the sale of alcohol. "When I see intemperance send its floods of ruin and shame to the homes of men," Minnie said, "I long for the hour when woman's vote will be leveled against these harmful houses; and have, I hope, the power to close them throughout the length and breadth of the land."²⁸ When thinking of the difference that black women voters could make, Harper optimistically believed that they would vote for prohibition legislation in order to stop the destruction of their homes and families through men's drinking. Perceiving men as more likely to vote against the prohibition of alcohol, she suggested that morally superior women voters would pass temperance legislation that was stalled under men's control. Harper's 1869 heroine Minnie argued: "To-day our government needs woman's conscience as well as man's judgment. And while I would not throw a straw in the way of the colored man, even though I know that he would vote against me as soon as he gets his vote, yet I do think that woman should have some power to defend herself from oppression, as equal laws as if she were a man."²⁹ Portraying men and women as having fundamentally different and even opposing interests, Harper implied that women needed the vote for self-defense.

Harper's popular novels presented political debates such as women's voting rights and temperance to a wide audience of primarily African-American readers.³⁰ Her characters demanded women's political equality as well as real power for women—power which could not be realized if women remained disenfranchised. Harper's short novel *Sowing and Reaping* (1877) again connected woman suffrage and temperance. Through her fictional heroine, Harper rejected as inadequate women's indirect influence over male voters and instead staked a claim for something that respectable women were not necessarily supposed to want: "I want

women to possess power as well as influence, I want every Christian woman as she passes by a grog-shop or liquor saloon, to feel that she has on her heart a burden of responsibility for its existence. . . . On this liquor question there is room for woman's conscience . . . as an enlightened and aggressive power."³¹ Harper dismissed "persuasive influence" or the moral suasion advocated by reformers such as Angelina and Sarah Grimke, the abolitionist sisters from a slaveholding family in South Carolina, as weak and ineffective. Instead, she asserted that women wanted and needed real power to close the saloons and enact other reforms.³² In order to form a truly effective alliance, Harper explained, white women must understand the nature of black women's oppression and agree to their equal inclusion in reform projects.³³

The WCTU as a Site for Women's Interracial Cooperation

Frances Harper's deep involvement with the WCTU is significant for a number of reasons. It exemplifies a serious attempt on the part of black and white women at interracial cooperation in the 1880s and 1890s, a time of severe strains in race relations that came about with the end of Reconstruction, the rise of white supremacy, and a dramatic increase in lynchings. Furthermore, Harper and other black women joined white WCTU members in support of constitutional amendments for woman suffrage, prohibition of alcohol, national censorship legislation, national funding for education, and a range of other federal legislative reforms. Harper was joined in her WCTU work by Sarah Woodson Early, who served as the superintendent of "colored work of the South" starting in 1888; Mary Lynch of North Carolina; Emma Ray of Washington state; and Lucy Thurman and Mrs. Charles Kinney, both of Michigan.³⁴ What drew these and other black women to the WCTU was its commitment to national legislation and federal solutions to moral and social problems in the United States.

At the end of Reconstruction, Harper returned from her lecture tours and constant work in the South to settle in Philadelphia. At this point, Harper's alliance building with white women and her temperance work began in earnest. The latter part of Harper's career has been neglected by scholars, who have limited their focus to her antislavery and Reconstruction era work or to her literary career. Yet the story of Harper's desire for the power necessary to effect political change and of how her commitment to prohibition and women's voting rights motivated her to work with the largest women's organization of the nineteenth century is a fascinating one. Harper's antialcohol poems of the 1850s, as well as her protemperance and prosuffrage positions of the 1860s and 1870s, prepared her to sympathize with the goals of the WCTU.³⁵

Harper's commitment to alliance building was fostered by her observations of white women's comparative power and influence, the need for black women to build strong coalitions, and her optimistic assessment of the power of education—white women, she believed, could be educated to understand black women's plight and then work for improved conditions. In spite of the obvious problems that were involved in a collaboration of white and black women for temperance and equal rights, problems that Harper herself first addressed in her 1866 speech to the Woman's Rights Convention and later repeated, she deemed it necessary to try to forge that alliance.³⁶

Harper's article "The Woman's Christian Temperance Union and the Colored Woman" (1888) reviewed her own history with the WCTU and its potential as a site for interracial activism. Writing in the *African Methodist Episcopal Church Review*, she explained to her black readership her decision to focus on temperance and interracial reform after Reconstruction: "After the storm cloud of battle had rolled away, it was found that an enemy . . . to all races . . . had entrenched itself. . . . To dislodge this enemy, to put prohibition not simply on the statute book, but in the heart and conscience of a nation, embracing within itself such heterogeneous [*sic*] masses, is no child's play."³⁷ Just as white and black women had worked together as abolitionists to confront the evil of slavery, after the end of the Civil War and Reconstruction they confronted a second evil—intemperance. This time, however, Harper pointed out that the two races were on a more equal footing since they were fighting to solve a problem that equally affected black and white families. Problems like slavery and intemperance needed more than political or legislative solutions, Harper claimed, since they were products of customs and social forces, as well as moral, cultural, and class differences. Fashion and custom, she charged, reinforced and sanctioned the racial discrimination that defined the black experience in American society.³⁸

Harper recognized that any alliance of protemperance women would be difficult to achieve because all women lacked the right to vote and so had inadequate political power.³⁹ Because only men voted, they had to be convinced not only to pass appropriate reform legislation but also to fully uphold existing laws. Characterizing the temperance movement as another struggle for the conscience of the nation, Harper emphasized the commonality among women who desired to protect children. To her, the answer was clear: "God gave the word, and woman heard / . . . On statute books she laid her hand, / To save the children of the land."⁴⁰ Harper found the WCTU's politicized Christian motherhood compelling, particularly in its focus on legislative reform, especially the prohibition of alcohol.⁴¹ Harper was not alone in her decision to work in the WCTU. As historian Glenda Gilmore explains, "black women saw in the WCTU

a chance to build a Christian community that could serve as a model of interracial cooperation on other fronts."⁴² If black and white women could unite around temperance and suffrage, perhaps they could unite around other issues central to black civil rights, such as an interracial antilynching campaign or a national education bill.

In her 1888 article in the *AME Church Review*, Harper outlined the history of her deepening involvement with the WCTU: "For years I knew very little of its proceedings, and was not sure that colored comradeship was very desirable, but having attended a local Union in Philadelphia, I was asked to join and acceded to the request, and was made city and afterwards State Superintendent of work among colored people."⁴³ Concern about whether she would be accepted as a black woman initially inhibited her from joining the WCTU. Harper seems to have begun her affiliation with the Philadelphia WCTU in the late 1870s.⁴⁴ In 1883, she was appointed as the national superintendent for "Work Among the Colored People of the North."⁴⁵

WCTU president Frances Willard wrote in the group's main organ, the *Union Signal*, to inform members of Harper's appointment. She described Harper as "probably the most gifted and cultured woman of her race [note the qualifier] in the United States. She has a fervid and eloquent tongue and desires no better portion than to work among 'her very own.' Mrs. Harper's daughter is a gifted young woman and recites with great acceptability in her mother's meetings."⁴⁶ Willard did not directly mention Harper's literary accomplishments and focused instead on her public speaking and status as a mother with a protemperance daughter, at that point, a young adult. To reassure members who might be uncomfortable with an interracial WCTU, Willard emphasized Harper's willingness to stay within racial boundaries—she would work among "her very own." Willard continued, "Write to her, dear sisters, and see if she can come and help influence your colored population for the right. And when she comes, remember, as you have always done, so far as my experience goes, 'The laborer is worthy of his hire.'"⁴⁷ This last comment alluded to the problem of racial discrimination and asked that WCTU members rise above prejudice to work in Christian communion with Harper. From the outset, both Harper and Willard recognized the challenges of trying to incorporate black women into this predominantly white organization.

Harper employed a range of strategies—at times invoking sympathy and charity and then increasingly demanding equal partnership based on Christian values and shared goals—to win the support of white and often racist WCTU women. In her first annual report of 1884, as in each subsequent report, Harper described her own extensive travels and speeches. Without any funding from the national WCTU, she organized various local and state departments of colored work. She also quoted extensively from

the reports submitted to her by state superintendents of colored work. In her first annual report, Harper appealed to the white women of the WCTU to "help a race who have behind them the barbarism of heathendom, and ages of the weakness, ignorance and poverty of slavery." Centuries of oppression left African Americans in need of assistance, she suggested, from white women who needed to reconceptualize their own role in reform to include work for those who were more disadvantaged: "For years we have been hearing the word *rights*, but there is a higher, holier and grander word than that, it is the word *duty*. . . . Into the hands of the sisters of this Union, God has placed one of the grandest opportunities that was ever put before the womanhood of any age or nation. May God grant that they may find a broadening of their lives, and influx of divine love in helping in this department."⁴⁸ To appeal to the consciences of white women, Harper replaced a rights language with a language of Christian duty. Duty must be prioritized over rights, Harper argued, because duty included work for those more disadvantaged than they. Rights, in contrast, could lead to narrow and selfish work for personal gains at the expense of black women and men. Like most WCTU members, Harper was a strong Christian who hoped that white women's Christianity would help them develop a benevolent commitment to her department.

Confronted by the seeming indifference of white WCTU members, Harper's annual report of 1885 mused, "I do not think that some of the existing Unions are fully awake to the vast importance of this department of work. It may be that to some the Northern Negro is not very attractive. That in many cases he is too near to be charming and not far enough off to be enchanting; but the weaker and feebler he is, should not I, as one of the race, cling the closer to him?"⁴⁹ Harper's own gender, class, and race position within this "work among colored people" was a complicated one. Acknowledging herself as superior in culture and education to most blacks, she then suggested that she must not disassociate herself from them. Although Harper arguably had more to gain by distancing herself from uneducated and poor rural blacks and positioning herself as the cultured exception, she joined most other middle-class black club women in rejecting this position in favor of working for overall racial uplift.⁵⁰ White women, she argued, should not distance themselves either. Bluntly pointing to their racism, Harper suggested that it was easier for them to call for reforms or assistance for Southern blacks, the majority of whom were former slaves and who were literally farther away than the generally more educated, middle-class, and urban northern black WCTU members they had to interact with. The very proximity of Northern black women made white women uncomfortable, Harper charged, because they could not romanticize them as helpless but disembodied others. Harper concluded her 1885 report by asking, "What shall be your influence upon the future

of this people? shall it be the influence of an extended Christly sympathy which will look with anointed vision through the darkened skin . . . and see their souls all written over with the hand-marks of divinity . . . which will try to draw them nearer to you in active co-operation? . . . To some, this work may not be congenial . . . it takes moral and spiritual stamina to do the hard, dry, and unpleasant tasks for the Master's sake."⁵¹ Harper's insistence on "the common claims of humanity" of blacks and whites was critical. For her department to be successful, white women would have to be willing not only to acknowledge that common humanity but to cooperate actively with black women for reform. In spite of her utopian Christian vision, Harper admitted that the reality was less encouraging. White women often regarded interracial cooperation as "hard, dry, and unpleasant."

In a *Union Signal* article, also from 1885, Harper continued to try to persuade white WCTU members to value her department's work: "may I not entreat you to . . . enlist the co-operation of the colored women of your locality to affiliate with you; not as objects of charity, but as helpers and auxiliaries in a great and glorious cause."⁵² White women must truly cooperate on an equal basis with black women, she declared, rather than treat them as inferior, pitiable, "objects of charity." Harper herself had initially and briefly endorsed a more benevolent approach to disadvantaged African Americans, but she now wanted white women to see themselves as coworkers with black women for the "great and glorious cause" of temperance. United together, black and white women could achieve more than either race could alone.

"Pained" by Their Indifference

By 1886, Harper was more distressed by WCTU members' lack of support for her department. Sounding defeated and frustrated, she suggested, "Perhaps, another year, a new Superintendent of this Department will elicit . . . a degree of interest and co-operation which I have failed to obtain."⁵³ Even worse, Harper now imagined that for white women, work with African Americans must be as "repulsive" as Christ's work with lepers! In an article in the *Union Signal*, she wrote, "Into your hands God gives the opportunity of helping a race . . . in the spirit of Him who would come near enough to the leper to touch him, and send healing through loathsome skin and tainted blood. . . . You cannot fail to help yourselves, in working on the same line with Him."⁵⁴ White women would benefit morally from their pious reaching out to African Americans whose skin, like that of lepers, inspired hatred and fear but who were also, Harper stated, blessed by God. White women's interracial work was daring precisely because it crossed color lines and challenged the social hierarchy. She challenged white women: "In the white light of God's truth, examine your

hearts and see if you are prepared to do this work, if you have learned to subordinate the spirit of caste to the spirit of Christ."⁵⁵ That Harper feared the response might be negative was suggested in her plea, "I ask for . . . the respect which is due from one human being to another."⁵⁶ The difficulty of fighting against white women's prejudice was clearly wearing on Harper. That same year, she referred to herself as "pained" by their indifference.⁵⁷

In 1887, when the national WCTU began to gather petitions in favor of the National Education Bill, also called the Blair Education Bill after its sponsor Republican Senator Henry W. Blair of New Hampshire, Harper was newly optimistic. Senator Blair, the chair of the Senate Education and Labor Committee from 1881 to 1891, proposed using federal taxes to help fund public schools in those states that had the highest levels of illiteracy, most of them in the South.⁵⁸ If the bill passed, millions of dollars would be distributed over a ten-year period equally to black and white segregated schools throughout the South.⁵⁹ The proposed legislation would benefit Southern blacks who were severely disadvantaged financially and faced poor facilities and a lack of books in their state education systems. Recognizing persistent white prejudice within the WCTU as well as blacks' suspicions of the group, Harper welcomed its new line of work. She hoped that it would increase the credibility of the organization in the eyes of black male voters, who resented the way that they were negatively caricatured by WCTU members as corrupt, easily manipulated antitemperance voters, as well as of black women who might then join the group.⁶⁰

Thus, it must have disturbed Harper to hear the debate over the WCTU's support of the bill during the group's annual convention in Nashville, Tennessee, later that year. Some white members took a states' rights stance and began to question whether the organization should officially endorse and lobby for the bill, wondering whether it "put federal control over the local schools." A Mrs. Snell spoke to the delegates and reminded them of their earlier antislavery sympathies: "When I look into your faces I know that I am looking into the faces of women who were abolitionists, in favor of the freedom of the slave. You have not finished your work. The colored people of the South to-day are in slavery, the slavery of ignorance."⁶¹ Harper then rose to remind the women that their commitment to national white reconciliation should not leave blacks behind. Referring to the symbolic significance of holding their convention in a Southern state, she declared: "In this meeting you have been clasping hands over the bloody chasm, but when Mrs. Snell gets up here and asks for education in the South, I can reach out my hands and clasp hands with Mrs. Snell. I belong to a race having suffered ages of oppression, you belong to a race having ages of education, domination, civilization, and I simply ask this body to really indorse the aims of this educational bill for the people of my race."⁶² After listening to the debate for some time, WCTU president Frances Willard personally

intervened to remind the delegates why they had already been petitioning for the bill. She persuaded them to approve a resolution in favor of the bill, arguing: "I shall go home with my head bowed if a society which has repeatedly indorsed the Blair bill now say they never understood it. . . . I should think, what an aspersion on our intelligence! . . . Let us show to our Southern allies we want to help them educate [the black vote] up beyond the being bought."⁶³ Although the WCTU did go on record in favor of the bill, Harper had reason to be concerned about the depth of its members' commitment to working for issues of concern to black Americans.⁶⁴

In an 1888 letter "to the colored people of the U.S.," published in the *Union Signal*, WCTU president Willard spoke directly to black men, reminding them of all women's subordinate political status and asking them to represent women's interests. They could do so by joining in the fight for prohibition and by supporting WCTU-sponsored legislation:

As women who are disfranchised we most earnestly and solemnly call upon the colored men of our beloved land to cast their ballots for protection of our homes and children, as well as of their own. Strong drink crazes the white and black man alike, changes the industry of both to idleness, and transforms plenty into poverty. It is for the sake of your children that our society has worked hard for the Blair Educational Bill; which would devote seventy millions of dollars from the United States treasury to the public schools, most of them in the South. It is for your homes that we have toiled as much as for any in the great Republic, and we call upon you . . . to vote the dry ticket and so represent the women of the North and South alike, who have no power to represent themselves.⁶⁵

White and black women alike were dependent on male voters to pass their reform agendas. In this context, Willard emphasized women's political powerlessness, whereas at other times she insisted that they were significant political actors. Given the debate it had generated at the recent WCTU convention, she somewhat disingenuously pointed to her group's support of the National Education Bill as proof of its commitment to equality for African Americans.

Willard's 1888 letter also highlighted some policies that offered Harper her last real hope for black women's work within the WCTU. In order to prove her group's commitment to organizing black unions, for instance, Frances Willard announced the appointment of another black woman, Sarah Jane Woodson Early, to be the national superintendent of "work among colored people in the South."⁶⁶ The WCTU gave Early a budget from the national fund—something that Harper ruefully noted that she had never received.⁶⁷ Perhaps Willard intended this appointment as a slight against Harper, who had worked in the South as well as the North and who was interested in founding integrated local unions as well as segregated ones. In her letter, Willard announced that "Alabama and Tennessee have

already organized [parallel, segregated] state Woman's Christian Temperance Unions of colored women."⁶⁸ These separate black state unions were the result of grassroots efforts by black women who wanted to avoid having to work under the control of racist white women in their states. Historian Glenda Gilmore explains that black women also seceded from the white state union in North Carolina in 1889 in order to protest their subordinate position under white control. They formed instead an independent state union that they termed "WCTU No. 2," which received official national WCTU recognition as a state union. Black women in other Southern states, including Georgia, tried to do the same thing throughout the 1890s.⁶⁹ Instead of rejecting the first of these Southern black unions, Willard strategically accepted them. She explained that the Alabama and Tennessee black state superintendents, along with Harper and Sarah Early, had been invited to attend the 1887 national convention. Willard noted that "they with several others of your race were cordially received as members, and the four mentioned addressed the Convention most acceptably."⁷⁰ At the same time, however, the national WCTU allowed white unions in the South to maintain strict segregation if they wished to.

Harper herself felt ambivalent about the issue of segregation and separate unions in the WCTU. On the one hand, she did not approve of WCTU national policy that allowed white Unions in the South to exclude blacks, but she did see a rationale for parallel, separate black state unions where racism still blocked interracial cooperation. Black women should be the ones to choose whether they wanted to organize into integrated versus separate WCTU local and state level unions, Harper asserted. They should join predominantly white unions when they wanted to and be able to form separate unions if that suited them better.⁷¹ Harper acknowledged that integrated unions were not necessarily the best answer. In the racist South, for instance, a separate union under a black superintendent was not simply a concession to white prejudice but could be a way for black women to have more autonomy and authority over their reform work and agendas. A *Union Signal* report of the annual convention of 1886 provides a sense of how Harper tried to negotiate these issues in the white-dominated WCTU. It described Superintendent Harper as answering questions from the white delegates about how to organize black women: "She thinks as a general rule the colored women work better in unions of their own."⁷² For the sake of autonomy and to facilitate a focus on issues of importance to them in a safer, less racially charged environment, Harper was comfortable with separate unions. On the other hand, she also praised successful attempts to integrate some Northern unions: "In Monmouth . . . instead of forming a separate union there was liberality enough of sentiment in the white union to open its doors and admit the colored sisters."⁷³ Either way, she insisted that black women should be able to choose for themselves. This tension

illustrates the nature of the political battle in which Harper engaged and the precariousness of her position in a racially divided organization. She argued simultaneously for the autonomy of black Americans and for their inclusion within the predominantly white establishment.

Harper acknowledged to the black readership of the *African Methodist Episcopal Church Review* the difficulties of her work within the WCTU: "When I became National Superintendent there were no colored women on the Executive Committee or Board of Superintendents." She was proud, however, that within five years and through intense negotiations with Frances Willard and the white Southern WCTU affiliates, she managed to improve the situation: "Now there are two colored women on the Executive Committee and two on the Board of Superintendents."⁷⁴ Harper did not deny, however, that there were significant difficulties to a cross-racial alliance. She told her readers that "some of the members of different Unions have met the question [of united work with black women] in a liberal and Christian manner; others have not seemed to have so fully outgrown the old shards and shells of the past . . . but still the leaven of more liberal sentiments has been at work in the Union and produced some hopeful results."⁷⁵ In the face of resistance, especially from white unions in the South, Harper insisted that "believing, as I do, in human solidarity, I hold that the Woman's Christian Temperance Union has in its hands one of the grandest opportunities that God ever pressed into the hands of the womanhood of any country. Its conflict is not the contest of a social club, but a moral warfare for an imperiled civilization." The WCTU was not a mere "social club" but was divinely chosen to do God's work. She had to admit, however, that "whether or not the members of the farther South will subordinate the spirit of caste to the spirit of Christ, time will show."⁷⁶

Distinguishing between "social equality" and "Christian affiliation," Harper explained what black women were and were not striving for. She outlined two types of connections that could be developed between the white and black races: "Southern white women . . . fail to make in their minds the discrimination between social equality and Christian affiliation. Social equality . . . is the outgrowth of social affinities and social conditions, and may be based on talent, ability or wealth." In contrast, she explained that "Christian affiliation is the union of Christians to do Christly work."⁷⁷ Social equality was clearly more radical because it was based on the notion that blacks and whites could interact and even marry as equals. But social equality could not be forced, Harper suggested. Instead, it represented a natural affiliation that would develop mutually between people of different races who shared similarities in education or wealth. Educated and refined blacks and whites might naturally end up working and socializing together based on these similarities. In contrast, Christian affiliation was a more limited connection that might be more acceptable to prejudiced

white women. Christian affiliation recognized all people as protected by Christ. Even those who might be of different economic classes or races could unite together as Christians to work for reform without having to accept each other as social equals. Christian affiliation, Harper implied, would not automatically or undeservedly lead to social equality.

Wishing at least for Christian affiliation, Harper lamented that political and legal improvements in the status of African Americans did not translate into comparable social changes or what she called "social contact." Describing many white women, especially in the South, as scornful, haughty, and elitist, she condemned those who maintained their racism in the face of progress. After the Civil War, she explained, "the civil law blotted out the difference between disfranchisement and manhood suffrage." Thus, only "one relic remains from the dead past, 'Our social customs.'" Writing for a black female audience, Harper declared: "let [white women] remember that the most ignorant, vicious and degraded voter outranks, politically, the purest, best and most cultured woman in the South. . . . Though scorn may curl her haughty lip, and fashion gather up her dainty robes from social contact, if [black women's] lives are in harmony with God and Christly sympathy with man, you belong to the highest nobility in God's universe."⁷⁸ Reminding her readers of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution, Harper affirmed that blacks were citizens with full citizenship rights. White women's insistence on enforcing racist "social customs" undermined black advancement and progress in reform work. Harper struggled amidst the racist obstructionism she encountered in her work with the WCTU. Her annual report of 1888 tried to find some hopeful signs as she noted, for instance, that the white leaders of the Missouri WCTU had welcomed her into the state and their homes, declaring publicly "that the color-line was eliminated."⁷⁹ But open-minded white women were exceptions to the rule.

"Christless Prejudices" and a Missed Opportunity

Frances Harper filed her last annual report as national superintendent in 1890. Its tone is different from her earlier reports, in which her interjected comments before or after the reports from the various state superintendents usually detailed her own organizing activities and additional work for the department that had been done in that state. Her previous comments were generally encouraging, outlining even more activity in that particular state than the state superintendent detailed. In contrast, in her last report she more frequently interjected comments disagreeing with or challenging Southern white women and their racism. For example, a "colored sister" in Atlanta wrote requesting "national recognition" for a separate state-level

black WCTU in Georgia (like those already granted in other southern states) and said "we are still outside. . . . Must we stay out?"⁸⁰ Harper responded: "I will simply say to the inquirer: Make application to the National, and I do not think the majority of the W.C.T.U. will say to you: 'Stand by thyself, come not near me; I am either holier or whiter than thou.' Am I right?"⁸¹ The question suggests some anxiety on Harper's part about whether WCTU members could see "colored women" as sufficiently pious and pure to share in a common humanity.

Elsewhere in the report, Harper challenged white Southern WCTU members to relinquish their racism. For instance, she quoted a white Texas superintendent who said, "You know [Southern blacks] will always take a back seat when whites are around."⁸² Harper followed this comment with her own parenthetical remark: "(I don't know that in the north, superintendent)," suggesting just how impatient she had become with the racism of Southern whites within the WCTU. When the Texas superintendent addressed Harper personally in her report, saying, "God knows your people need education along this line; not that they drink more, but their vote was bought by the liquor men, and defeated prohibition in Texas." Harper responded with a pointed critique of the Texas superintendent's logic of blame: "As prohibition was defeated in several northern states last year, where there was not, I think, a very large number of colored people, perhaps it would have been a more accurate way of stating it to have said helped defeat the measure, and if it was shabby for an ignorant black man to sell his vote, was it not a shabbier thing if an intelligent white man bought it?"⁸³ Whites must take responsibility for election-related corruption, she insisted.

Historian Bettye Collier-Thomas suggests that by the 1890s, some younger black women activists had moved beyond the strategies and approach of Frances Harper because they "favored a more direct frontal attack on racism in the woman's movement." In fact, Harper had launched "direct frontal" attacks on white women's racism for decades, consistently refusing to mince words with white audiences. Ever since her 1866 speech at the Woman's Rights Convention, she had tried to spark a sense of conscience and change in white women.⁸⁴ Harper concluded her 1890 annual report with the following: "In closing this which may be my last report, permit me to thank the sisters who have helped in this department and sent me words of hope and cheer. . . . May it never be said to any of us: 'I was afraid and hid thy talent in the earth.' Afraid of the world's 'dread laugh,' afraid of Christless prejudices and hid thy talent in the dust of selfishness and worldly prudence."⁸⁵ "Christless prejudices," she charged, had kept the majority of the white membership and leadership of the WCTU from giving Harper and other black women the support, time, and respect they deserved. In the process, white WCTU members had missed the opportunity to form a truly powerful interracial women's organization.

In addition to her frustrations over working with prejudiced white WCTU members, Harper was in direct conflict with the organization's leadership by 1890. Collier-Thomas concludes that differing strategies and priorities for women's suffrage led to a rift between Harper and Willard: "It appeared to Harper that for the sake of expediency the WCTU was capitulating to southern racism. After 1890 her role in the WCTU was effectively diminished through a series of reorganizations that removed Harper from the Executive Committee and the Board of Superintendents."⁸⁶ As Harper and Willard clashed over the WCTU's Southern strategy, Harper's department was, not coincidentally, reorganized. Harper feared that the WCTU might try to gain white Southern support for suffrage by accepting a Constitutional amendment offering women only limited access to voting by including restrictions such as literacy requirements. The WCTU's willingness to even discuss a restricted amendment for woman suffrage—a plan that was never officially endorsed by the organization—was an obvious blow to Harper and her fight for universal suffrage. Such a move might disfranchise precisely those poor, uneducated black women whom Harper believed needed a full voice in their government.

Harper's former department was dismantled and subsumed into a new division called "Home and Foreign Missionary Work to Colored People" in 1891.⁸⁷ Blacks were now explicitly objects of white women's missionary work. The implications of this change were twofold. The National WCTU admitted that "work among colored people" was not a priority for the organization and did not deserve separate departmental status. It was also a way to fulfill a different WCTU goal of recruiting African-American Christian women to proselytize in Africa as part of its worldwide program of missionary work. Harper's position as national superintendent with the WCTU was eliminated. She was marginalized and unhappy with the lack of progress toward interracial cooperation. In spite of this, Harper remained active in the WCTU because she was committed to making the organization truly inclusive for the significant number of black women she had recruited as members through her tours across the country.⁸⁸

Harper's next significant political affiliation represents both a form of empowerment for black women and a sign of the separatism and racism of the time.⁸⁹ In 1896, Harper participated in the National Conference of the Colored Women of America, which formed the new National Association of Colored Women (NACW). At age seventy-one, Frances Harper was made a vice president of the NACW. The younger activist, Mary Church Terrell, became its first president. Fifty-five black women's clubs joined together as dues-paying members of the NACW in 1896. Throughout the decade, Frances Harper's name and reform legacy remained strong.⁹⁰ Out of the fifty-five clubs that formed the NACW, nine were explicitly protemperance or WCTU local unions, of which four were named after Harper.⁹¹ In its

annual report to the NACW, a Pennsylvania black women's group named after Harper wrote of her glowingly as an activist and a writer: "We have no need to explain the meaning of this name, for the person who does not know of the grand and noble woman who has done so much for the good cause of Temperance and who has contributed so largely to the literature of the race, must indeed be obscure."⁹² The NACW adopted protemperance resolutions and officially recognized the influence of the WCTU in black women's organized reform work. Frances Harper, Lucy Thurman, and the other black women who were still WCTU members were now also in the NACW. They successfully encouraged the NACW to pass the following resolution: "Resolved, That we do heartily endorse the W.C.T.U. as an absolute necessity to the best and spiritual uplifting of all people."⁹³ Harper's 1896 talk at the NACW convention, entitled "The Ideal Home," reflected the self-help approach that this federation of black women's groups initially adopted in the increasingly hostile racial climate of the last decade of the nineteenth century.⁹⁴

Harper's writings and speeches of the 1890s reflect a renewal of her antebellum-era distrust of the central government with less counterbalancing optimism. The failure of Harper's work for constitutional and legislative change within a nominally integrated women's organization and the rise of lynchings and of Jim Crow segregation made it harder, but not impossible, for Harper to maintain her Reconstruction-era hopes for a productive alliance between the federal government and African Americans.

In 1891, for instance, Harper again emphasized themes of patriotism and the vital role of the federal government in reform in an important speech before the new predominantly white women's organization, the National Council of Women, organized by Susan B. Anthony, May Wright Sewell, and Frances Willard. Although the Council chose her topic, "Duty to Dependent Races," Harper asserted her independence by rejecting the narrowly conscribed and even racist topic by stating that she would be discussing "the negro not as a mere dependent" but as "a member of the body politic who has a claim upon the nation" for—at minimum—justice and protection from violence. Insisting that blacks had been good patriots who had even fought in the American Revolution and subsequent wars for the United States, she demanded that whites fully recognize and accept their legitimate claims to citizenship. Harper made a clear distinction between the necessary strength of the federal government in contrast to the role of state governments: "When parents are too poor or selfish to spare the labor of their children from the factories, and the State too indifferent or short-sighted to enforce their education by law, then let the Government save its future citizens from the results of cupidity in the parents or short-sightedness in the State." Referring to reformers' attempts to pass national child labor laws and to the languishing Blair Education Bill (which never

passed), Harper persisted in identifying the federal government as the most important agent for significant social change. Beyond their concerted attempts at self-help and self-improvement, the overall condition of African Americans as citizens of the US would not truly improve without the guarantee that a strong central state would be their ally.⁹⁵ Harper clearly never backed away from thinking that a strong federal government could and should best support blacks' rights even as she recognized that it would not do so at that point.

In 1894, the same year as a major debate about Frances Willard and the WCTU's stance on lynching generated by antilynching advocate Ida B. Wells, Harper published an editorial in the *Women's Era* entitled "How to Stop Lynching." Supporting Wells, Harper again insisted on the absolute necessity of a strong federal government committed to protecting its black citizens: "No, the truth is this, nothing is to be expected from the South. The colored people must look to the general government. It had a right to their services and lives in time of war. They have a right to its protection certainly in a time of peace. It is idle to say that it must leave to state governments the protection of the lives of its citizens." In this political statement against states' rights, Harper listed all of the responsibilities that the federal government willingly shouldered, including punishment of counterfeiters and moonshiners, prohibition of the sale of tobacco without a revenue tax, and war abroad to protect Americans. Given its broad claims to authority, she argued that it was inconceivable that the government "cannot spend a cent to protect a loyal, native-born colored American murdered without provocation by native or alien in Alabama." The refusal of the federal government to stop lynchings inspired her to exclaim: "Shame on such a government!" Just as Harper had earlier asserted that Northerners and the federal government bore responsibility for perpetuating the institution of slavery, she now targeted the Democratic administration of President Grover Cleveland. Harper concluded her editorial with the indictment: "The administration in power is *particeps criminis* with the murders. It can stop lynching, and until it does, it has on its hands the innocent blood of its murdered citizens."⁹⁶ From slavery to lynching, all white Americans were responsible—and culpable—for failing to condemn or ignoring unjust acts against black Americans.

Frances Harper's political thought and attempts at interracial alliance illustrate the ways in which race affected the possibility of women's coalitions for effective political activism as well as of black women's participation in political reform. Black Americans placed high hopes in a strong federal government that could protect and empower them by guaranteeing their full rights as citizens, reformers, political actors, and as human beings with valuable contributions to offer their country. But by the 1890s, they also faced heightened uncertainties about whether their expectations

of the federal government were unrealistic, utopian, or even wrong. Faced with a government that sanctioned first slavery and then lynchings, the convict lease system, and segregation of public transportation, what could African Americans expect from the central government? These tensions are revealed in Frances Watkins Harper's writings from the 1850s to the 1890s. During Reconstruction, when the federal government offered the most hope in terms of political and military protection for African Americans, Harper was optimistic and demanded more. As the white supremacist "Redeemers" reclaimed the South and actively suppressed blacks' hopes for political, economic, and social equality and respect, Harper remained resolute but discouraged. Her own strenuous efforts to work within the largest women's organization of the nineteenth century ultimately highlight a lost opportunity for a true interracial alliance, as well as the power and persistence of racism among white Americans. In 1896, when Harper and other prominent black women reformers and clubwomen created the new NACW, however, they took affirmative steps by building a strong national organization of black women's clubs that advocated for civil rights for all African Americans.

Notes

1. For a different version of this essay, see "Francis Watkins Harper: Civil Rights and the Role of the State" in Alison M. Parker, *Articulating Rights: Nineteenth-Century American Women on Race, Reform, and the State* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010), 97–138. In 1881, the national WCTU officially endorsed the woman suffrage, or Home Protection Ballot, thereby bringing more women into the fight for the right to vote than any other organization. The National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) had only thirteen thousand members in the mid-1890s, whereas the Woman's Christian Temperance Union had more than a hundred and fifty thousand members by that time. See Ruth Bordin, *Woman and Temperance: The Quest for Power and Liberty, 1873–1900* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981), 3; and Joseph Gusfield, *Symbolic Crusade: Status, Politics, and the American Temperance Movement* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1963), 162. See Carol Mattingly, *Well-Tempered Women: Nineteenth-Century Temperance Rhetoric* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1998), 176, 188.

2. Jane Dailey, *Before Jim Crow: The Politics of Race in Postemancipation Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 3–4, 47.

3. As a popular poet and novelist who appealed to a broad audience, her political thought and cultural production—the politics of the sentimental—are closely interrelated. See, for example, Dickson D. Bruce Jr., "Print Culture and the Antislavery Community: The Poetry of Abolitionism, 1831–1860," in *Prophets of Protest: Reconsidering the History of American Abolitionism*, ed. Timothy Patrick McCarthy and John Stauffer (New York: The New Press, 2006), 220–34; Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford

University Press, 1987); Barbara Christian, *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892–1976* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1980); and Maryemma Graham, “Frances Ellen Watkins Harper,” in *Afro-American Women Writers Before the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Trudier Harris and Thadious M. Davis (Detroit: Gale, 1986).

4. See, for instance, Bordin, *Woman and Temperance*, 82–83.

5. Historian Jane Dailey focuses on the Readjusters, a black and white coalition that “governed Virginia from 1879 to 1883.” Jane Dailey, “The Limits of Liberalism in the New South: The Politics of Race, Sex, and Patronage in Virginia, 1879–1883,” in *Jumpin’ Jim Crow: Southern Politics from Civil War to Civil Rights*, ed. Jane Dailey, Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, and Bryant Simon (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 88–114.

6. For discussions of the turn of the century as the peak of lynchings in the US, see Stewart E. Tolnay and E. M. Beck, *A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1892–1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 38; W. Fitzhugh Brundage, ed., *Under Sentence of Death: Lynching in the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 4; and William D. Carrigan and Clive Webb, “Muerto por Unos Desconocidos (Killed by Persons Unknown): Mob Violence against Blacks and Mexicans,” in *Beyond Black and White: Race, Ethnicity, and Gender in the U.S. South and Southwest*, ed. Stephanie Cole and Alison M. Parker (College Station: Texas A&M, 2004), 35–74. For discussions of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, see Charles Lofgren, *The “Plessy” Case: A Legal-Historical Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); and Thomas J. Davis, “Race, Identity, and the Law: *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896),” in *Race on Trial: Law and Justice in American History*, ed. Annette Gordon-Reed (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 61–76.

7. William Still, *The Underground Railroad* (New York: Arno Press, 1872; repr., 1968), 758.

8. Although an earlier volume may have been published, the first extant book by Harper is her 1854 *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects*. According to her friend, biographer, and fellow abolitionist William Still, by 1872, “fifty thousand copies at least of her four small books have been sold to those who have listened to her eloquent lectures.” Still, *The Underground Railroad*, 779.

9. After a fierce battle and a split in 1840, the American Anti-Slavery Society formally sanctioned an equal role for women in abolition. Still, *Underground Railroad*, 758–59.

10. Still, *Underground Railroad*, 764.

11. Melba Joyce Boyd, *Discarded Legacy: Politics and Poetics in the Life of Frances E. W. Harper, 1825–1911* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1994), 29.

12. Frances Watkins Harper to William Still from Grove City, Ohio, undated (1863?), *Underground Railroad*, 766.

13. Boyd, *Discarded Legacy*, 29.

14. Frances Watkins Harper, “The Two Offers,” *Anglo-African Magazine* 1 (1859), in *A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader*, ed. Frances Smith Foster (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1990) (hereafter cited as *BCD*), 109. The respectability and purity of all women that is implied by the notion of true womanhood gave black women a way to fashion a more positive public image by claiming true womanhood for themselves. Shirley J. Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists: A Study in Activism, 1828–1860* (Knoxville: University

of Tennessee Press, 1992), 44. Barbara Cutter argues that "if gender ideology did not demand submissiveness and domesticity, then it could suit the lives of African American women . . . [who] embraced a belief in women's redemptive nature and mission." Barbara Cutter, *Domestic Devils and Battlefield Angels: The Radicalism of American Womanhood, 1830-1865* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2003), 15.

15. Harper, "The Two Offers," *BCD*, 109.

16. Cutter, *Domestic Devils, Battlefield Angels*, 14-16, 67.

17. Frances Watkins Harper, "We Are All Bound Up Together," *Proceedings of the Eleventh Woman's Rights Convention*, New York, May 1866, *BCD*, 217-19.

18. Still, *Underground Railroad*, 764.

19. Harper, "We Are All Bound Up Together," *BCD*, 217-19. See Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, *African American Women in the Struggle for the Vote, 1850-1920* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 33, 48.

20. Harper, "We Are All Bound Up Together," *BCD*, 217-19.

21. *Ibid.*, 217-19.

22. Nell Irvin Painter, "Voices of Suffrage: Sojourner Truth, Frances Watkins Harper, and the Struggle for Woman Suffrage," in *Votes for Women*, ed. Jean H. Baker (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 51.

23. See, for instance, her poem "Fifteenth Amendment" in Still, *Underground Railroad*, 769. See Frances Watkins Harper, "I Am in the Sunny South," *Darlington, South Carolina*, May 13, 1867, *BCD*, 122-23.

24. Shirley Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists*, 149. Also see Dorothy Sterling, ed., *We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984), 416.

25. Terborg-Penn, *African American Women*, 36.

26. Harper, *Minnie's Sacrifice*, in *Christian Recorder* (1869), reprinted in Frances Smith Foster, ed., *Minnie's Sacrifice, Sowing and Reaping, Trial and Triumph: Three Rediscovered Novels by Frances E. W. Harper* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1994), 78-79.

27. *Ibid.*, 78-79.

28. Harper, *Minnie's Sacrifice*, 78-79. See Frances Watkins Harper, "John and Jacob—A Dialogue on Woman's Rights," *New York Freeman*, November 28, 1885, *BCD*, 240-42.

29. Harper, *Minnie's Sacrifice*, 78-79.

30. Harper, *Sowing and Reaping: A Temperance Story*, in *Christian Recorder* (1876), reprinted in Frances Smith Foster, ed., *Minnie's Sacrifice, Sowing and Reaping, Trial and Triumph: Three Rediscovered Novels by Frances E. W. Harper* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1994), 160-61.

31. *Ibid.*, 160-61.

32. *Ibid.*, 163.

33. Harper, "We Are All Bound Up Together," *BCD*, 217-19. See also Terborg-Penn, *African American Women*, 18.

34. Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 45-59.

35. See, for instance, her poem "The Drunkard's Child," published in *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects* (1854), reprinted in *Complete Poems of Frances E. W. Harper*, ed. Maryemma Graham (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 8; and in *Poems*

on *Miscellaneous Subjects*, 1854, in *BCD*, 63–64. Historian Ruth Bordin's still-definitive study of the WCTU barely covers its work with African Americans and does not reference Harper by name. Instead, Bordin focuses on the white Southern women who broke with tradition to join this relatively "radical" prosuffrage group. She notes that the "WCTU had much to do with putting southern women into the mainstream of American life," with helping to forge national reconciliation between whites after Reconstruction, and with working with blacks, sometimes in integrated settings. Ruth Bordin, *Woman and Temperance*, 82–83.

36. Harper, "We Are All Bound Up Together," *BCD*, 217–19.

37. Frances Watkins Harper, "The Woman's Christian Temperance Union and the Colored Woman," *African Methodist Episcopal Church Review* 4, 1888, *BCD*, 281–82.

38. Whereas other reformers railed against the "twin relics of barbarism," slavery and polygamy, Harper's two evils were slavery and intemperance. Sarah Barringer Gordon, *The Mormon Question: Polygamy and Constitutional Conflict in Nineteenth Century America* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press: 2002).

39. Harper, "WCTU and the Colored Woman," *BCD*, 281–82.

40. Frances Watkins Harper, "Woman's Work," *Christian Recorder*, February 7, 1889, *BCD*, 260–61.

41. Harper's protemperance position was clearly informed by her strong Christian beliefs. In an 1857 article in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, she argued that "the law of liberty is the law of God, and is antecedent to all human legislation." Harper, "Could We Trace the Record of Every Human Heart," *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, May 23, 1857, in *BCD*, 100–101.

42. See Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow*, 49.

43. Harper, "WCTU and the Colored Woman," *BCD*, 281–82.

44. Harper scholars do not agree upon the dates of her affiliation with the local WCTU and do not provide citations for their claims. See James William Clark Jr., "Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, 1825–1911: A Literary Biography" (master's thesis, Duke University, 1967), 107, for a date of 1875. See Bettye Collier-Thomas "Frances Ellen Watkins Harper: Abolitionist and Feminist Reformer, 1825–1911," in *African American Women and the Vote, 1837–1965* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), 55, which suggests that her affiliation began in the early 1880s. Also see Theodora Williams Daniel, "The Poems of Frances E. W. Harper" (master's thesis, Howard University, 1937), 32.

45. "Mrs. F. E. W. Harper, a colored woman from Philadelphia, who is in charge of the work among the colored people there, gave a brief review of the labors in Maryland to secure local option, stating that out of twenty-four counties, fourteen were now under the operation of local option laws. Mrs. Harper is the new superintendent of work among the colored people of the North." "Report of NWCTU Annual Convention," November 8, 1883, *Union Signal*, 12. Melba Boyd mistakenly suggests that Harper was appointed to head the Department of Colored Work of the WCTU in 1869, before the WCTU even existed as an organization. Melba Boyd, *Discarded Legacy*, 134. Terborg-Penn mistakenly dates her appointment as superintendent to 1887. See, Terborg-Penn, *African American Women*, 85–86. Some historians of Harper place her superintendency in 1888. See Margaret Hope Bacon,

“‘One Great Bundle of Humanity’: Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825–1911)” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 113, no. 1 (January 1989), 40.

46. Frances E. Willard, “Work among Colored People of the North,” *Union Signal*, June 5, 1884. A later biographical sketch for the *Union Signal* also focused on Harper’s work as a public speaker and a teacher rather than as a writer. “Pen Pictures of Prominent White Ribboners: Mrs. Frances E. Harper,” November 21, 1887, *Union Signal*, 6.

47. Willard, “Work among Colored People of the North.”

48. Frances Watkins Harper, “Work among Colored People,” 1884, *Minutes of the National Woman’s Christian Temperance Union at the Eleventh Annual Meeting in St. Louis, Missouri, October 22–25, 1884*, lxxviii–lxxxiii.

49. Frances Watkins Harper, “Work among Colored People,” *Minutes of the NWCTU at the Twelfth Annual Meeting in Philadelphia, PA, October 30th, 31st, and November 2nd and 3rd, 1885*, cx–cxv.

50. See Dorothy Salem, *To Better Our World: Black Women in Organized Reform, 1890–1920* (Brooklyn, NY: Carlson, 1990), 7–29.

51. Harper, “Work among Colored People,” *Minutes of the Twelfth Annual Meeting*, cx–cxv. See “Reports of Superintendents—Twelfth Annual Session of the National WCTU,” November 19, 1885, *Union Signal*, 17–18.

52. Frances Watkins Harper, “Work Among the Colored People of the North,” May 28, 1885, *Union Signal*, 1.

53. Harper, “Colored Work,” *Minutes of the NWCTU at the Thirteenth Annual Meeting in Minneapolis, Minn., October 22–27, 1886*, clviii–cxi.

54. Harper, “Department of Work for Colored People,” January 28, 1886, *Union Signal*, 18.

55. *Ibid.*

56. *Ibid.*

57. Harper, “Department of Work for Colored People,” October 7, 1886, *Union Signal*, 12.

58. See Daniel W. Crofts, “The Black Response to the Blair Education Bill,” *Journal of Southern History* 37 (February 1971), 41–65.

59. Crofts, “The Black Response to the Blair Education Bill,” 43.

60. Frances Watkins Harper, “News from the Field: Words of Encouragement from Mrs. Harper,” January 13, 1887, *Union Signal*, 10.

61. “Report of the Annual Meeting of the N.W.C.T.U.,” November 21, 1887, *Union Signal*, 3–4.

62. *Ibid.* The WCTU’s first national convention in the South was held in Louisville, Kentucky, in 1882.

63. *Ibid.*

64. Crofts, “The Black Response to the Blair Education Bill,” 55–59. According to Crofts, the bill was finally defeated in the Senate in 1890.

65. Frances E. Willard and Caroline B. Buell, “Letter from the National W.C.T.U. to the Colored People of the United States,” January 12, 1888, *Union Signal*, 12.

66. *Ibid.*

67. Harper, “Colored Work in the North,” *Minutes of the NWCTU, Fourteenth Annual Meeting, in Nashville, Tenn., November 16–21, 1887*, ccxiv–ccxvii.

68. Frances E. Willard and Caroline B. Buell, "Letter to the Colored People of the United States," 12.

69. Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow*, 52, 252n113.

70. Frances E. Willard and Caroline B. Buell, "Letter to the Colored People of the United States," 12.

71. Although historian Margaret Bacon asserts that Harper "fought vigorously against the segregation of the Negro Section" of the WCTU, this is not entirely accurate. Bacon, "One Great Bundle," 40.

72. "Third Section Meeting, Report of Annual NWCTU Convention of 1886," November 11, 1886, *Union Signal*, 16.

73. Harper, "News from the Field," 10.

74. Harper, "WCTU and the Colored Woman," 281–82.

75. *Ibid.*

76. *Ibid.*, 283–85.

77. *Ibid.*

78. *Ibid.*

79. *Ibid.*, 282–83.

80. Harper, "Work among Colored People," *Minutes of the NWCTU at the Seventeenth Annual Meeting, Atlanta, Georgia, November 14–18, 1890*, 213–21.

81. *Ibid.*, 213–21.

82. *Ibid.*, 213–21.

83. *Ibid.* 213–21.

84. Collier-Thomas, "Frances Ellen Watkins Harper," 54, 60.

85. Harper, "Work among Colored People," *Minutes of the Seventeenth Annual Meeting*, 213–21.

86. Collier-Thomas, "Frances Ellen Watkins Harper," 58.

87. Perhaps not surprisingly, in no incarnation was it called the department of work of or by colored people. "Home and Foreign Missionary Work to Colored People," Mrs. J. E. Ray, National Committee, Asheville, NC, 1891, *Minutes of the NWCTU at the Eighteenth Annual Meeting, Boston, Mass., November 13–18, 1891*, 555.

88. Frances Watkins Harper, "Temperance," *A.M.E. Church Review* 7 (1891): 372–75.

89. Patricia A. Schechter, *Ida B. Wells-Barnett and American Reform, 1880–1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 94–95.

90. Several local black WCTUs and black women's clubs throughout the country were named after her. "Report of the Frances Harper W.C.T.U. of St. Paul, Minn.," 1896, *Annual Report of the Second National Conference of the Colored Women of America*, 94–95. Darlene Clark Hine and Kathleen Thompson, *A Shining Thread of Hope: The History of Black Women in America* (New York: Broadway Books, 1998), see caption, illustration 5.

91. Among those sending in reports (and possibly delegates) was the "Harper WCTU, St. Louis, Mo." See "Treasurer's Report: Receipts," *First Annual Report of the National Conference of the Colored Women of America (National Association of Colored Women)*, 1896, 58–59.

92. R. Aldridge and Gertrude Brooks, "The Frances E. W. Harper League of Pittsburg and Allegheny," *Annual Report of the Second National Conference of the Colored Women of America*, 1896, 104–5.

93. "Evening Session," *Annual Report of the Second National Conference of the Colored Women of America*, 1896, 46-47.

94. *Ibid.*, 46.

95. All quotations in this paragraph are from Harper, "Duty to Dependent Races," *Transactions from the National Council of Women in the United States* (1891), reprinted in Bert Loewenberg and Ruth Bogin, ed., *Black Women in Nineteenth-Century American Life: Their Words, Their Thoughts, Their Feelings* (University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 1976).

96. All quotations in this paragraph are from Harper, "How to Stop Lynching," *Women's Era* 1, no. 2 (1894): 8-9.