Undergraduate Library Research

Seble Solomon - *Speech Recovery Project*

In the summer of 2024, I enrolled in Professor Alisa Hardy's Rhetoric of Black America (COMM360) course and had the opportunity to recover a speech from the Library of Congress and contextualize it. The assignment asked us to find a lesser-known speech, not readily accessible online, that was delivered by either a well-known or lesser-known African American speaker. Professor Hardy suggested looking at a text, titled, *Lift Every Voice: African American Oratory, 1787-1900*. I settled on Frances Harper's 1857 speech, titled, "Liberty for Slaves."

I chose "Liberty for Slaves" because it is one of the few remaining examples of Harper's anti-slavery speeches, which are often overshadowed by her later speeches addressing gender and race (together). Harper delivered this address following the Supreme Court's decision in *Dred Scott v. F. A. Sanford*, which denied citizenship to Black Americans. In such tumultuous and uncertain times, Harper's remarks were crucial. I wanted to highlight the significance of this speech by placing it in its proper historical, political, and cultural context. The assignment required three main parts: speech recovery, authentication, and contextualization. After the course concluded, Professor Hardy connected me with Dr. Shawn Parry-Giles, Chair of the Department of Communication. I collaborated with Dr. Parry-Giles, as part of an independent study, to further revise my context of the recovered speech and prepare it for publication in the Recovering Democracy Archives: *Speech Recovery Project*.

Speech Recovery

In the *Lift Every Voice* text, the authors noted that Harper's speech was originally delivered on the fourth anniversary of the New York Anti-Slavery Society on May 13, 1857. It was then printed in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* on May 23, 1857. To track down the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* vol. 18, no. 1, I contacted the Library of Congress (LOC). The librarian suggested visiting the LOC to view the microfilm because the online scans, accessed through the African American Newspapers, 1827-1998 database, were of poor quality. The librarian reserved reel no. 3335 for me at the Newspaper and Current Periodical Reading Room. In the reading room, the reference librarian showed me how to use the microfilm machine and save copies. Next time, I will bring a USB drive to avoid emailing the materials to myself.

While examining the microfilm, I noticed two defective lines in the second paragraph. Luckily, I was with a friend who had a New York Public Library card, so I could access the NYPL database. I located the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* published on May 23, 1857 (vol. 18, no.1) in the Slavery and Anti-Slavery: A Transnational Archive, provided by Gale Group.

Speech Authentication

I authenticated the speech by comparing different versions and noting any discrepancies or necessary corrections for clarity. In the text, *Lift Every Voice*, the authors altered the title to "Liberty for Slaves," when it was originally titled, "Speech of Miss Watkins" in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*. I also found an error in the second paragraph of the *Lift Every Voice* text where the editors wrote "*through* a genial sky" instead of "*though* a genial sky" (as originally published in 1857). Almost all other renditions of the speech contain this error except for a transcription published by the University of Detroit, Mercy, located in the Black Abolitionist Archive. I worked with Dr. Skye de

Saint Felix, a professor at the Department of Communication and co-editor of RDA, to edit and further polish my speech authentication.

Speech Contextualization

Originally, my contextual analysis of the speech discussed Harper's biography, educational background, the occasion of the speech, and its impact, providing insights into the racial and political climate of the time. After collaborating with Dr. Parry-Giles, I conducted additional archival research on Frances Harper, read about U.S. social movements from 1830 to 1890, and added a section about the development and evolution of moral suasion as a method of liberation. Throughout the process, Dr. Parry-Giles offered invaluable insights that improved the clarity and concision of my writing. She also shared readings on moral suasion that influenced my research direction, helping me situate Harper's activism within the broader context of U.S. social movements.

Additionally, Dr. Parry-Giles encouraged me to diversify my sources by incorporating other works related to Harper's biography. Using a mixture of primary and secondary sources enhanced the credibility and depth of my analysis. The UMD Interlibrary Loan Services are a fantastic resource; I used it to obtain six or seven of my secondary sources. Dr. Parry-Giles also suggested I cite Harper's words when possible, as primary sources help to strengthen historical sections. So, I included a quote from Harper's opinion piece, titled, "How to Stop Lynching," published in *The Woman's Era* in 1894, to explain why her trust for the U.S. federal government faded after the Civil War.

When asked to clarify the dynamics within the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), I searched for their periodical, *The Union Signal*. In the issue published on June 5, 1885, Harper discussed the racial discrimination and prejudice she and other Black women faced within the WCTU organization. Wheaton College had an archive of *The Union Signal*, but UMD's Hornbake Library staff helped me access it through the Proquest History Vault. I wish I knew about the UMD Libraries Course Guides because COMM360 has a page with resources for identifying and using primary sources. I would have also visited the UMD Special Collections section in the Maryland Room at Hornbake Library to check if they had any letters, diaries, or books related to Frances Harper.

The Rhetoric of Black America course gave me an in-depth exploration of public discourse by Black Americans from the colonial period to the present. Additionally, the Recovering Democracy Archives project for COMM360, followed by pursuing publication with RDA, improved my historical and rhetorical research skills. This process has been essential to my development as a researcher and scholar, preparing me for Graduate School in Fall 2025 at UMD.