Speech Text

Speech of Miss Watkins, (13 May 1857) New York, NY

[1] Could we trace the record of every human heart, the aspirations of every immortal soul, perhaps we would find no man so imbruted and degraded that we could not trace the word liberty either written in living characters upon the soul or hidden away in some nook or corner of the heart. The law of liberty is the law of God, and is antecedent to all human legislation. It existed in the mind of Deity when He hung the first world upon its orbit and gave it liberty to gather light from the central sun.

[2] Some people say, set the slaves free. Did you ever think, if the slaves were free, they would steal everything they could lay their hands on from now till the day of their death—that they would steal more than two thousand millions of dollars? Ask Maryland, with her tens of thousands of slaves, if she is not prepared for freedom, and hear her answer: "I help supply the coffle-gangs of the South." Ask Virginia, with her hundreds of thousands of slaves, if she is not weary with her merchandise of blood and anxious to shake the gory traffic from her hands, and hear her reply: "Though fertility has covered my soil, though a genial sky bends over my hills and vales, though I hold in my hand a wealth of water-power enough to turn the spindles to clothe the world, yet, with all these advantages, one of my chief staples has been the sons and daughters I send to the human market and human shambles." Ask the farther South, and all the cotton-growing States chime in, "We have need of fresh supplies to fill the ranks of those whose lives have gone out in unrequited toil on our distant plantations."

[3] A hundred thousand new-born babes are annually added to the victims of slavery; twenty thousand lives are annually sacrificed on the plantations of the South. Such a sight should send a thrill of horror through the nerves of civilization and impel the heart of humanity to lofty deeds. So it might, if men had not found out a fearful alchemy by which this blood can be transformed into gold. Instead of listening to the cry of agony, they listen to the ring of dollars and stoop down to pick up the coin.

[4] But a few months since a man escaped from bondage and found a temporary shelter almost beneath the shadow of Bunker Hill. Had that man stood upon the deck of an Austrian ship, beneath the shadow of the house of the Hapsburgs, he would have found protection. Had he been wrecked upon an island or colony of Great Britain, the waves of the tempest-lashed ocean would have washed him deliverance. Had he landed upon the territory of vine-encircled France and a Frenchman had reduced him to a thing and brought him here beneath the protection of our institutions and our laws, for such a nefarious deed that Frenchman would have lost his citizenship in France. Beneath the feebler light which glimmers from the Koran, the Bey of Tunis would have granted him freedom in his own dominions. Beside the ancient pyramids of Egypt he would have found liberty, for the soil laved by the glorious Nile is now consecrated to freedom. But from Boston harbour, made memorable by the infusion of three-penny taxed tea, Boston in its proximity to the plains of Lexington and Concord, Boston almost beneath the shadow of Bunker Hill and almost in sight of Plymouth Rock, he is thrust back from liberty and manhood and reconverted into a chattel. You have heard that, down South, they keep bloodhounds to hunt slaves. Ye bloodhounds, go back to your kennels; when you fail to catch the flying fugitive, when his stealthy tread is heard in the place where the bones of the revolutionary sires repose, the ready North is base enough to do your shameful service.

[5] Slavery is mean, because it tramples on the feeble and weak. A man comes with his affidavits from the South and hurries me before a commissioner; upon that evidence *ex parte* and alone he hitches me to the car of slavery and trails my womanhood in the dust. I stand at the threshold of the Supreme Court and ask for justice, simple justice. Upon my tortured heart is thrown the mocking words, "You are a negro; you have no rights which white men are bound to respect!" Had it been my lot to have lived beneath the Crescent instead of the Cross, had injustice and violence been heaped upon my head as a Mohammedan woman, as a member of a common faith, I might have demanded justice and been listened to by the Pasha, the Bey or the Vizier; but when I come here to ask for justice, men tell me, "We have no higher law than the Constitution."

[6] But I will not dwell on the dark side of the picture. God is on the side of freedom; and any cause that has God on its side, I care not how much it may be trampled upon, how much it may be trailed in the dust, is sure to triumph. The message of Jesus Christ is on the side of freedom, "I come to preach deliverance to the captives, the opening of the prison doors to them that are bound." The truest and noblest hearts in the land are on the side of freedom. They may be hissed at by slavery's minions, their names cast out as evil, their characters branded with fanaticism, but O,

[7] "To side with Truth is noble when we share her humble crust
Ere the cause bring fame and profit and it's prosperous to be just."

[8] May I not, in conclusion, ask every honest, noble heart, every seeker after truth and justice, if they will not also be on the side of freedom. Will you not resolve that you will abate neither heart nor hope till you hear the death-knell of human bondage sounded, and over the black ocean of slavery shall be heard a song, more exulting than the song of Miriam when it floated o'er Egypt's dark sea, the requiem of Egypt's ruined hosts and the anthem of the deliverance of Israel's captive people?

[We have not attempted to give a full report of Miss Watkins's speech.]

Speech Authentication

"Speech of Miss Watkins," delivered May 13, 1857, Harper, Frances E. W. (1825-1911)

A transcription of Harper's address, "Speech of Miss Watkins," was published in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard,* volume 18, number 1, on May 23, 1857. The Library of Congress (LOC) has a digitized transcript of the speech (=A) and also provides the same address on physical microfilm, reel number 3335.

Another version of this speech (=B) is available through the New York Public Library (NYPL) collection, "Slavery and Anti-Slavery: A Transnational Archive." Copy-text =B was used to fill in two lines in paragraph two that were indiscernible in copy-text =A.

Other versions of this speech exist, sometimes published under an alternate title, "Liberty for Slaves." The *National Anti-Slavery Standard* version was published shortly after Harper's address was delivered. Both copy-text =A and =B end with, "We have not attempted to give a full report of Miss Watkins's speech" in brackets. Even with this note, the speech text we provide appears to be the most complete version available.

There do not appear to be any audio or video recordings of Harper's speech.

Paragraph structure, spelling, italics, capitalization, and punctuation of the speech text have been retained from copy-text =A. Parenthetical mentions of "applause" were removed. Paragraph numbers were added in brackets.

We corrected two instances where a clear typographical error occurred for clarity and ease of reading. The number corresponds to the paragraph where the error occurred:

4: "Bnt from Boston harbour" became "But from Boston harbour"

6: "minion's" became "minions"

The speech text has been thoroughly checked and proofread for accuracy.

Speech Contextualization

"Speech of Miss Watkins," (13 May 1857) New York, NY

Frances Ellen Watkins (Harper) was born into a free family in Baltimore, Maryland on September 24, 1825. Orphaned at the age of three, Harper lived with her aunt, Henrietta Russell, and uncle, William Watkins, Sr. Her uncle, a devout abolitionist, minister, and writer, was Harper's "political mentor" in the early years of her development.[1] Driven by his strong belief in education, Watkins Sr. established Watkins' Academy for Negro Youth, which Harper attended until she was thirteen.[2] Despite his undeniable influence on Harper, Watkins Sr. did not shape her "womanist consciousness."[3] As highlighted by Margaret Washington, Harper's family held traditional views regarding "female aspirations beyond those sanctioned by black male patriarchy."[4] This sentiment reflected the socially conditioned gender roles in nineteenth-century America.

In the 1850s, Baltimore became increasingly hostile toward free African Americans. Maryland was one of many U.S. states intent on "reducing its free Black population" by encouraging emigration to Africa.[5] Harper's uncle opposed such colonization efforts, recognizing that most Black people could not trace their lineage to specific regions in Africa.[6] Due to these threats, Watkins was forced to close his school in Baltimore and move to Canada in 1852. Confronted with legal barriers, abolitionists began to shift from their reliance on "moral suasion" to electoral and legislative efforts as the Civil War neared.[7] Others supported militant resistance.[89] Moral suasion, which guided many early abolitionists, is described by Adam Chamberlain as a form of persuasion "intended to change a person's beliefs and/or actions through appeals to [their] sense of what is proper behavior or thinking."[10]

Frances Harper had already left Baltimore by 1850. She first moved to Ohio, where she attended Seminary School and became an instructor and later accepted a teaching position in Pennsylvania. According to LaRese Hubbard, Little York, Pennsylvania was where Harper had her political "coming of age" experience, as she encountered fugitive slaves passing through the Underground Railroad.[11]

In 1853, Maryland enacted a law allowing free Black Northerners to be sold into enslavement if captured.[12] Wendy Dasler Johnson notes how this law prevented Harper from returning home. Yet such unjust laws also strengthened her dedication to the abolitionist cause.[13]

By late 1854, the Maine Anti-Slavery Society hired Harper as a lecturer, and she traveled across New England delivering speeches about the moral abomination of enslavement. She wielded her eloquence and literary prowess to assist the antislavery mission. Harper, like many other abolitionists of her time, prioritized strategies of "moral suasion" that sought to abolish enslavement by changing the hearts and minds of Americans. Jen McDaneld, a feminist literary critic, highlighted that Harper "was one of the few black women of her time to go on the lecture circuit."[14]

Throughout the 1850s, the abolitionist movement faced significant legal challenges. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 allowed escaped enslaved people to be returned to their enslavers, even if they reached a free state. The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 created an avenue to legally circumvent the Missouri Compromise, that expanded enslavement practices into the western territories. And on March 6, 1857, the Supreme Court decision in *Dred Scott v. John F. A. Sanford*, successfully denied citizenship to Black Americans, upheld enslavement in U.S. territories, and declared the Missouri

Compromise unconstitutional.[15] These laws and rulings hindered and demoralized the abolitionist cause.

It was amidst this solemn, yet spirited, atmosphere that Frances Ellen Watkins Harper addressed the New York City Anti-Slavery Society on the evening of May 13, 1857. Ten days later, on May 23, 1857, a summary of Harper's speech, titled, "Speech of Miss Watkins," was published in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*.[1617] According to Philip S. Foner and Robert Branham, it remains one of the "few surviving examples of [Harper's] antislavery oratory."[18]

By many renderings, Harper relied on "moral suasion" in her speech delivered on May 13, 1857. Alison M. Parker argues that Harper crafted her "sentimental poetry and fiction" to galvanize the public's rejection of slavery.[19] Aided by biblical references, Harper makes emotional, ethical, and logical appeals to her audience. She uses the human heart as a metaphor to suggest that if we "trace the record of every human heart…we would find no man so…degraded that we could not trace the word liberty [written] upon the soul."[20] By emphasizing the importance of freedom, agency, and dignity, Harper equated the very concept of liberty to divinity, firmly declaring that "the law of liberty [was] the law of God."[21] Ultimately, Harper argued that God was always on the side of freedom and those who opposed freedom were, in essence, opposing God.

Frances Watkins Harper married Fenton Harper in 1860. She had one daughter, Mary, before her husband's death in 1864.[22] During this Civil War period, Harper wanted a central government to provide Black people with political and military protections. Her optimism swiftly faded as she witnessed the federal government protect white citizens, while neglecting "native-born colored American[s] murdered without provocation."[23] By the 1890s, Harper experienced the deterioration of race relations, with surges in lynching atrocities and Jim Crow injustices codified in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896)'s segregationist ruling ("separate but equal").[2425]

Harper's life and career never adhered to "conventional nineteenth-century [gender] norms."[26] As Parker notes, after the Civil War, Harper began to contemplate "women's legal subordination and dependency in marriage," pushing her toward women's rights activism and the temperance movement.[27] In 1874, Harper joined one of the largest women's organization that opposed the sale of alcohol and eventually supported suffrage, the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU).[2829] Despite their dedication, Harper and other Black women faced racial discrimination and prejudice within broader WCTU organization.[30]

Frances Harper remained committed to fighting for social justice until she died in Philadelphia on February 22, 1911. Harper rests in the John Brown section of Eden Cemetery, buried in the same plot as her daughter, Mary, who passed away three-years before her mother. The tombstone inscription is from the last line in Harper's poem, titled, *Bury Me in a Free Land*:

I ask no monument, proud and high,
To arrest the gaze of the passers-by;
All that my yearning spirit craves,
Is bury me not in a land of slaves.[31]

Notes

1. 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), 36.

2. LaRese Hubbard, "Frances Ellen Watkins Harper: A Proto-Africana Womanist," *Western Journal of Black Studies* 36, no. 1 (2012): 68–75. William Watkins introduced Harper to all types of literature, including the Bible, the classics, and anti-slavery writings.

3. Margaret Washington, "Frances Ellen Watkins Family Legacy and Antebellum Activism," *Journal of African American History* 100, no. 1 (2015): 69.

4. Ibid., 67.

5. Donald Yacovone, "Sacred Land Regained: Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and 'The Massachusetts Fifty-Fourth,' A Lost Poem," *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 62, no. 1 (1995): 94.

6. Leroy Graham, *Baltimore: The Nineteenth Century Black Capital* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1982), 103.

7. Robinson Woodward-Burns, "Solitude before Society: Emerson on Self-Reliance, Abolitionism, and Moral Suasion," *Polity* 48, no. 1 (2016): 29–54.

8. James Brewer Stewart, *Abolitionist Politics and the Coming of the Civil War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008), 4.

9. Lawrence J. Friedman, "Antebellum American Abolitionism and the Problem of Violent Means," *Psychohistory Review* 9, no. 1 (1980): 29. Lawrence Friedman applies a psychohistorical lens to interrogate the narrative that moral suasionists or "abolition immediatists" were against using violence to end slavery. He argues that some of the "abolition immediatists" had "destructive and combative propensities" because they claimed to be committed to moral suasion over violence, while simultaneously "accommodating" violence.

10. Adam Chamberlain, "Moral Suasion and Political Action," *American Political Thought* 7, no. 1 (2018): 57-58. Chamberlain contends that political movements from the 1830s to Reconstruction did not share a monolithic interpretation or application of moral suasion. By examining two perspectives from that period, he discussed how some movements viewed moral suasion "as an end in itself," to transform society on an *individual* level. While others viewed it as "a political act" and hoped to create *collective* change through political action and shape behavior through legal measures.

11. Hubbard, "Frances Ellen Watkins Harper," 72.

12. Yacovone, "Sacred Land Regained," 94. Yacovone notes that in 1853, Harper realized she was essentially exiled from her home state of Maryland after learning that a free Black person "was sold away as a slave to Georgia." Harper likely referred to stories about the Israelites and Moses in her work because of such enslavement practices.

13. Wendy Dasler Johnson, *Antebellum American Women's Poetry: A Rhetoric of Sentiment* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2016), 55.

14. Jen McDaneld, "Harper, Historiography, and the Race/Gender Opposition in Feminism," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture & Society* 40, no. 2 (2015): 394.

15. *Dred Scott v. John F. A. Sanford*, 60 U.S. 393 (1857)

16. "Black Abolitionist Archive: Frances Ellen Watkins [Harper]," *Black Abolitionist Archive*, University of Detroit Mercy Libraries, https://libraries.udmercy.edu/archives/special-collections/index.php?record_id=1285&collectionCode=baa.

17. Frances Ellen Watkins, “Speech of Miss Watkins,” *National Anti-Slavery Standard* 18, no. 1 (May 23, 1857): 3.

18. Philip S. Foner and Robert Branham, “Liberty for Slaves,” in *Lift Every Voice: African American Oratory, 1787-1901* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1998), 305–306.

19. Alison M. Parker, *Articulating Rights: Nineteenth-Century American Women on Race, Reform, and the State* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010), 103.

20. Watkins, “Speech of Miss Watkins,” 3.

21. Ibid.

22. Eric Gardner, "Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's Civil War and Militant Intersectionality.” *Mississippi Quarterly* 70, no. 4 (2017): 506.

23. Frances Harper, "How to Stop Lynching," *The Woman’s Era* 1, no. 2 (May 1, 1894): 8-9.

24. *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (1896).

25. Parker, *Articulating Rights,* 132.

26. Johnson, *Antebellum American Women’s Poetry*, 46.

27. Parker, *Articulating Rights,* 116.

28. Boyd, *Discarded Legacy*, 226.

29. Reel 2, June 5, 1884 - October 29, 1885, Reel 2. Union Signal Series Microfilm, CN 067. Evangelism & Missions Archives.

30. Alison M. Parker, “Frances Watkins Harper and the Search for Women's Interracial Alliances,” in *Susan B. Anthony and the Struggle for Equal Rights*, ed. Christine L. Ridarsky and Mary M. Huth (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2012), 153-154. Parker highlights the racial discrimination within the WCTU. In Harper’s 1884 annual report, she told her readers that she received no funding from the national WCTU organization even though she was traveling and delivering speeches as part of the WCTU.

31. Frances Ellen Watkins, “Bury Me in a Free Land,” *The Liberator* 28, no. 52 (December 24, 1858): 208.