

FRANCES E. W. HARPER, "WOMAN'S POLITICAL FUTURE"  
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Abstract: Frances Harper's speech "Woman's Political Future" demonstrates that as a black woman speaking to white women during a decade known as the lowest point in the history of the African American experience, Harper established community with her audience by reminding them that they shared common values and an interest in the protection of civil rights. Harper's speech models a rhetoric for establishing common ground to serve as a starting point for productive civic engagement.

Key Words: Frances E. W. Harper, Suffrage, Lynching, Value Hierarchies, Women's Influence

Frances Harper delivered the address "Woman's Political Future" at the 1893 World's Columbian Exhibition in Chicago, during the World's Congress of Representative Women. Meeting from May 15 to 21, it was the first in a series of congresses held in conjunction with the Exhibition and featured the progress of women. Preparations for the Exhibition itself generated a flurry of activity across the country. An international event, the Exhibition was to display to the world, within the pavilions of the "White City," the best that America had produced at the turn-of-the-century. The Exhibition, which President Grover Cleveland officially opened on May 1, ran through October, also celebrated the four-hundredth anniversary of Columbus's arrival in the Americas.

At the same time, the last decade of the nineteenth-century was developing into what has come to be called the nadir or lowest point in postbellum African American history, with an oppressive climate of national racial hostility. The Civil Rights Act of 1875 had been declared unconstitutional in 1883, spawning an epidemic of Jim Crow laws. Lynching and other forms of violence against African Americans reached staggering heights, with estimates that 1,544 blacks were lynched between 1882 and 1891.<sup>1</sup> Thus, some twenty-eight years after slavery had been abolished, African Americans were anticipating the opportunity to participate in organizing the Exposition and to display the achievements of the race since Emancipation. Yet, only after much protest and lobbying was one African American school principal from St. Louis appointed to serve as an alternate member of the Exposition's National Commission. Frederick Douglass presided over the Haitian pavilion and helped to plan the controversial August 25 Colored American Day at the Exhibition. Many viewed the Day as a token attempt to make up for the absence of a strong African American presence. Responding to the lack of representation, anti-lynching activist Ida B. Wells collaborated in the publication of an eighty-one-page pamphlet, *The Reason Why the Colored American Is Not in the World's Columbian Exposition*, and

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circulated over ten thousand copies during the fair.<sup>2</sup>

African American women lobbied for representation on the Exhibition's Board of Lady Managers, which supervised the Congress of Representative Women, but experienced limited success. Ultimately, one Chicagoan, Fannie Barrier Williams, was appointed to a clerical position on the Board and six black women were invited to speak: Williams; Frances Coppin; Sarah Early; Hallie Quinn Brown; Anna Julia Cooper; and sixty-eight year-old, established author, lecturer, and activist Frances Harper.

After providing a biographical sketch of Frances Harper and a description of the rhetorical context for "Woman's Political Future," this essay develops the claim that Harper bolsters her arguments on woman's political future and woman's suffrage by basing them on the concept of a common community of interests. These arguments are that 1) suffrage rights should be linked to character and education; 2) suffrage must also be understood in the context of woman's influence; and 3) suffrage carries with it the obligation to resist oppressive acts, such as mob violence, that deny the civil rights of their victims. Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrecht-Tyteca's theory of value hierarchies provides a rhetorical perspective for understanding how Harper resolves incompatible points of view on the future of women in politics through appeals to the superiority of these common interests.

### *Frances Harper's Biography*

Harper spent her entire life applying her skills as a writer and orator to the improvement of society. She lectured and wrote poetry, essays, and fiction on slavery, woman's rights, civil rights, blacks and the war effort, mob violence, temperance, racial uplift and self-help. Her personal and professional lives merged to create a model of the Ciceronian "citizen-orator," whose oratorical skills and good character were employed in service to enslaved and disenfranchised men and women North and South.<sup>3</sup> Although Harper was neither white nor male, as the citizen orator existed in Cicero's imagination, Harper demonstrated how one engages fully in participatory democracy. She was active in several abolitionist societies, earning her living as an anti-slavery lecturer, and supported the underground railroad. She was one of only two women to speak at the National Convention of Colored Men in 1864. She was a lifelong member of the Unitarian denomination. She was a founding member of the National Association of Colored Women and held leadership positions in the Women's Christian Temperance Union, the American Woman Suffrage Association, and the National Council of Women. She served as vice president of the Universal Peace Union. And, she lectured throughout the post-Reconstruction South on ways to improve living conditions for African Americans.<sup>4</sup>

Born on September 24, 1825, in Baltimore, Maryland, Harper was orphaned by the age of three. Her aunt and uncle, Henrietta and William Watkins, reared her. William Watkins, a minister, directed the Academy for Negro Youth, which he established in 1820. Harper attended the Academy, studying the Bible, classical literature, elocution, grammar, mathematics, music, philosophy, reading, and writing. According to another former student, William Watkins was a taskmaster who demanded "exact inflection of a pupil's voice" and was "so signally precise that every example in etymology, syntax and prosody had to be given as

correctly as a sound upon a keyboard."<sup>5</sup> In addition to this rigorous training, Harper attended abolitionist meetings with her cousins, who were already well known for their oratorical skills.

At 26, Harper left Baltimore to teach, first in Ohio and later in Pennsylvania. In 1853, a free black man, upon entering Harper's home state of Maryland, was sold into slavery and died trying to escape. In one of her letters to William Still, leader of the underground railroad movement in Philadelphia, she recorded her reaction to this incident: "Upon that grave I pledge myself to the Anti-Slavery cause."<sup>6</sup> Largely because of this injustice, Harper gave up teaching to work for the abolitionist cause and was subsequently employed as a traveling lecturer by the Maine Anti-Slavery Society. In 1860, after marrying Fenton Harper, she moved to Grove City, Ohio, where their only child, Mary, was born. In 1864 when Fenton Harper died, Frances Harper returned to lecturing. With slavery abolished, she turned her attention to Reconstruction, temperance, education, moral reform and women's rights. Harper traveled throughout the South, speaking in churches, homes, and, on one occasion, in the South Carolina legislature, where blacks were seated, at the time.<sup>7</sup>

Harper revealed her motivation for tireless travel and speaking in another letter to William Still and outlined her belief in collective action:

I hold that between the white people and the colored there is a community of interests, and the sooner they find it out, the better it will be for both parties; but that community of interests does not consist in increasing the privileges of one class and curtailing the rights of the other, but in getting every citizen interested in the welfare, progress and durability of the state. I do not in lecturing confine myself to the political side of the question.<sup>8</sup>

"Community of interests" is a recurring theme in Harper's speeches. Harper articulated points of convergence and divergence between the rights of the slaveholder and the enslaved, between women's rights and the rights of newly-enfranchised black men; between white women and black women; between black men and black women; and between middle-class blacks and the masses of poor and enslaved blacks concentrated in the South. She confronted the tensions growing out of differences among class, race, and gender as they developed throughout the nineteenth century. Harper emphasized convergence, realizing that many in her audiences did not share her cultural experiences. She directed their attention to what they and those she represented did share in common, but, at the same time, she did not hesitate to identify points of disagreement, points where, because of allegiance to conflicting values, their interests collided.

A prolific writer, Harper published articles, poems, and short fiction in the *Christian Recorder*, the *Anglo-African Magazine*, the *AME Church Review*, and various abolitionist newspapers. Harper produced over eight volumes of poetry, which may well account for the decidedly poetic register of much of her prose. In addition to *Iola Leroy or Shadows Uplifted* (1892), she also published three serialized novels, *Minnie's Sacrifice* (1868), *Sowing and Reaping* (1876), and *Trial and Triumph* (1889), works in which characters frequently expressed opinions also found in her speeches. The 7,000 volumes in the Congress's Woman's Building Library highlighted the literary contributions of women around the world. Of these, 5,000 texts were submitted by women's clubs and state boards within the United States and included three

works by Frances Harper—her novel *Iola Leroy* and two collections of poetry, *Moses: A Story of the Nile* (1889) and *Sketches of Southern Life* (1886). Texts by five other African American women writers were also included, but Harper was the only one of them to speak at the Congress.<sup>9</sup>

In 1871, she established a permanent home in Philadelphia but continued to travel and speak. She helped to establish the National Association of Colored Women in 1896 and died in 1911.

### *Contextualizing the Speech "Woman's Political Future"*

Harper delivered her address during one of the Saturday morning General sessions, on May 20, the penultimate day of the Congress. Congress organizer and editor of the proceedings May Wright Sewall noted in her preface that the General sessions were designed to offset the less engaging aspects of the Report sessions and to attract a more general audience than the Department sessions, established for the various women's organizations. The General sessions would "give free play for wit, pathos, illustration, aspiration, and all the elements of oratory."<sup>10</sup> It is likely, then, that Harper was invited to speak at a General session due to her established reputation and broad ethical appeal. She had been a public speaker since 1854, when she began lecturing for the Maine Anti-Slavery Society; newspaper accounts of her antebellum podium demeanor consistently comment on her dignity, grace, and composure.

She had delivered the address "Duty to Dependent Races" at the 1891 meeting of the National Council of Women of the United States, which Sewall had also helped to organize. The topic, "woman's political future," may have been suggested by the organizers, given that the previous paper by French feminist Maria Deraismes, read by the delegate from France, was on the same topic.<sup>11</sup> The opening addresses of the General session during which Harper spoke, "Women's Dress from the Standpoint of Sociology," and "Dress Reform and its Necessity," seem an unlikely paring with the other two talks on women's political future, yet there may have been practical reasons for the grouping. In the published Congress proceedings, however, Sewall organized the addresses thematically; thus, the text of Harper's speech is included in the chapter titled "The Civil and Political Status of Women," along with talks on the Women's Franchise League of Great Britain and women as political leaders. In the chapter headnotes Sewall hailed the speeches as contradictions to the claim that "enlarged civil rights and the ballot are sought and advocated only by the poor, the eccentric, the miserable; by those who, having failed in their personal careers, seek a public arena for airing their private wrongs."<sup>12</sup> Her point here was that the women who spoke on suffrage and civil rights were successful, prominent leaders.

Regardless of her placement on the Congress program or the title of the other speeches, Harper would have been quite comfortable with the topic of woman's political future and this audience. She had addressed white women on the convergence of race, gender, and the protection of civil rights many times during her speaking career, most notably in 1866 at the Eleventh National Woman's Rights Convention. It was at this convention that the American Equal Rights Association was formed and charged with the task of "burying the black man and the woman in the citizen" by fighting for universal suffrage.<sup>13</sup> In other words, the Association

pledged to work for voting rights for both African American men and all women. They hoped to collapse the distinction between black male versus woman suffrage and to argue that as both were citizens, both were entitled to the rights and privileges of citizenship. In that 1866 speech Harper identified many of the common interests of black and white women, especially those associated with property rights and suffrage, but, at the same time, she confronted areas of conflict where class privilege seemed to take precedence over gender. These conflicted areas led her to withhold her support for universal suffrage, calling instead for more intentional protection of African American civil rights.

Unlike her younger contemporary Ida B. Wells or her abolitionist colleague Frederick Douglass, Harper left no autobiography and rarely wrote or spoke about herself or her composing process. Her letters to William Still do reveal some of her reactions to the reception she received while traveling and speaking in the Reconstruction South, well before the speech under consideration here. Harper's practice of placing into the mouths of fictional characters many of the ideas expressed in her speeches is especially evident in her novel *Iola Leroy*, published a year before she delivered "Woman's Political Future." It anticipates many of the arguments on racial uplift, civil rights, and the ability of women to effect change advanced in the speech. Compare, for example, these two passages. The first, from the novel, was spoken at a parlor gathering in response to concern about the high number of African Americans in Southern prisons; and the second, from "Woman's Political Future," I discuss in the next section:

- 1) "I think," answered Professor Langhorne, of Georgia, "that this is owing to a partial administration of law in meting out punishment to colored offenders. I know red-handed murderers who walk in this Republic unwhipped of justice, and I have seen a colored woman sentenced to prison for weeks for stealing twenty-five cents."<sup>14</sup>
- 2) "Today there are red-handed men in our republic, who walk unwhipped of justice, who richly deserve to exchange the ballot of the freeman for the wristlets of the felon; brutal and cowardly men, who torture, burn, and lynch their fellow-men, men whose defenselessness should be their best defense and their weakness an ensign of protection." (4) <sup>15</sup>

In both quotes we recognize not only the repeated expression "unwhipped of justice" but also the non-fictional reality that justice in America is not handed out equally, a prominent feature of the context for this speech.

#### *Interpreting the Speech "Woman's Political Future"*

In this speech, Harper invoked the concept of a community of interests to establish common ground with the members of her audience, moving them from points of agreement to points of disagreement, gradually dissociating herself from the point of view that, first and foremost, women needed to be able to exercise their civil right to vote. Harper accomplished this transition by ranking conflicting claims in a system of values, a tactic rhetorical theorists Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca place under the heading of hierarchies. They

observed that "a particular audience is characterized less by which values it accepts than by the way it grades them."<sup>16</sup> They added that 1) values are adhered to with varying degrees of intensity, 2) audiences usually have established principles by which values are graded, 3) rhetors should pay more attention to the ways in which hierarchical ranking of values resolves conflicts among them, and 4) hierarchies are not fixed. They concluded that "the reason why one feels obliged to order values in a hierarchy, regardless of result, is that the simultaneous pursuit of these values leads to incompatibles, obliges one to make choices."<sup>17</sup>

Harper knew the importance of ranking the conflicting values associated with women's rights, civil rights, and the pressing needs of a disenfranchised race. Placing the needs of black people over those of black and white women reflects this hierarchical principle of competing values. For example, at the 1869 meeting of the American Equal Rights Association, she claimed that giving the vote to black men took precedence over insisting that women be included as well, since the first would benefit those with the greatest immediate need. Her paraphrased remark that "[w]hen it was a question of race, she let the lesser question of sex go" appeals to a hierarchy that places race above sex, which in her view was "the lesser question."<sup>18</sup> Yet, according to Harper's suffrage hierarchy in "Woman's Political Future," the character of the voter is more important than the sex of the voter or the political power of the voter, a ranking that makes neither race nor sex but righteousness the chief criterion. Harper applied this system of ranking especially in her discussion of suffrage, character, and education tests; suffrage and woman's influence; and suffrage and mob violence.

#### Suffrage, Character, and Educational Tests

In "Woman's Political Future," Harper spoke specifically of educational tests and the problem of mob violence, being much more concerned with the harm that was being done by the men and women who were currently abusing political power than with increasing the potential for abuse. The subtext here is that while increasing the political power of women through suffrage is certainly important, it is less important than working to improve the material conditions of those who suffer the consequences of intemperance, prostitution ("the social evil"), and mob violence or lynching.

Lauren Berlant's term "Diva Citizenship" characterizes Harper's rhetorical stance on this occasion and reinforces the idea mentioned above of Harper as citizen-orator. Berlant writes that "Diva Citizenship occurs when a person stages a dramatic coup in a public sphere in which she does not have privilege. Flashing up and startling the public, she puts the dominant story into suspended animation . . . ; and she challenges her audience to identify with the enormity of the suffering she has narrated and the courage she has had to produce, calling on people to change the social and institutional practices of citizenship to which they currently consent."<sup>19</sup> Now Harper had practiced Diva Citizenship long enough that courage was no doubt available to her; nonetheless, she consistently contradicts the "dominant story." She contradicted it in this speech in the way she appropriated the rhetoric of Atlanta Constitution editor Henry Grady. In her 1891 address to the National Council of Women, Harper had challenged the assumptions of the recently deceased editor, who had expressed concern about black voters representing a "vast swarm, ignorant, [and] purchasable."<sup>20</sup> Turning the tables in "Woman's Political Future," Harper adapted the tactics Grady used to argue against black suffrage to voice her own

reservations about woman's suffrage. Harper implies that women, not blacks, could potentially become the ignorant voting mass. She complicates the call for qualified voters by pointing to an even wider range of disqualifications, not one of which was skin color:

I do not believe in unrestricted and universal suffrage for either men or women. I believe in moral and educational tests. I do not believe that the most ignorant and brutal man is better prepared to add value to the strength and durability of the government than the most cultured, upright, and intelligent woman. (8)

Harper here is arguing for voting educational tests, an argument that may seem out of character, coming from an advocate for those from whom literacy had been withheld during much of their former enslavement. Yet this claim asserts a belief in a strong connection between character and education rather than a dismissal of the rights of certain categories of people. In her hierarchy of values, character always trumped material wealth, status, or education. Outspoken suffragist Elizabeth Cady Stanton, also a speaker at the Congress, argued for literacy tests in this passage from a letter to Susan B. Anthony: "Whilst we all agree that every child born under our flag has a right to representation, yet as we require that every man who goes to the polls must have reached 21 years of age, so we should require that every one who votes should read and write the English language intelligently."<sup>21</sup> Stanton's emphasis on the ability to speak English reflects her dismay that many immigrant men, not yet citizens, voted in local elections. Harper, on the other hand, aimed to exclude those who, out of ignorance, would vote to deny civil rights to all.

By proposing such tests for women and other potential voters, Harper broadens the argument used to oppose an unmonitored black vote. Voter screening had, of course, been proposed by others, but usually as a means of screening out black voters, never women and never to test morality. For example, during an 1890 interview staged to refute Ida Wells's charge that she had done little to oppose mob violence in America, Frances Willard, president of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union and one of the Congress organizers, also articulated her version of the "voter test" proposal: "It is not fair that they ["alien illiterates"] should vote, nor is it fair that a plantation Negro who can neither read nor write, whose ideas are bounded by the fence of his own field and the price of his own mule should be entrusted with the ballot. We ought to have put an educational test upon that ballot from the first."<sup>22</sup> Articulated by the head of one of the major women's organizations represented at the Congress, this opinion would certainly have been held by many of those in Harper's audience; it was the kind of opinion Harper was pushing against. To turn mainstream anti-black suffrage discourse on its side, she countered with a proposal that would leave a range of undesirable people out of the voting process, dissociating lack of qualification from race.

### Suffrage and Woman's Influence

Harper had attributed the phrase "woman's era" to Victor Hugo in her 1888 essay "The Woman's Christian Temperance Union and the Colored Woman."<sup>23</sup> By employing the term in her 1893 speech, she extended the reach of women's activism from abolition and temperance to the acquisition of their own civil rights. Harper was never opposed to women working for

suffrage, but she believed that there was much women could do even as they worked to gain the vote and that every right and opportunity comes with responsibility. Hazel Carby points out that "what shaped her work was an assertion of what she saw to be female virtues, values, and actions to counteract rampant commercial and mechanistic interests."<sup>24</sup> In Harper's domestic hierarchy of values, good homes and good mothers were more valuable than standing armies and expansive wealth. This idea of women having power and influence distinct from their right to vote did not sit well with many of those in her audience. An immediate response came from discussant Margaret Windeyer, a representative of the Womanhood Suffrage League of New South Wales, who objected to Harper's privileging of woman's influence over suffrage. This excerpt from her brief remarks refuted many of the claims Harper had just made:

I would like to point out that women have no political present when they do not exercise the franchise. . . . I can not conceive that the underhanded, secret influence which women try to have upon politicians is politics. It is not politics in the best sense; and it is an influence which we ought to do all in our power to remove. It is not politics for a clever woman to be able to get from men who are engaged in politics that which a woman who is not tactful, who has not a pleasant appearance, can not get.<sup>25</sup>

Windeyer understood influence to mean a form of suggestive discursive power deriving from a close relationship or from physical attractiveness. Harper meant much more. She used the word "influence" six times in her speech and in four instances, she links the term to other sources of authority: "influence and opportunity" for participation in other venues, such as politics and labor (6, 3); "influence, tongue, and pen to oppose the practice of lynching " (11); and "power added to influence" to augment the impact women already had (8). The remaining two refer to general influence on the future and through character building in children. Thus, Harper does not argue against other forms of participation in society but reminds the women of the kinds of authority they already had which they could use more effectively. With respect to black women, her use of influence might also refer more exclusively to the collective enfranchisement that many black women felt entitled them to a voice in the voting decisions of black men, especially during Reconstruction.<sup>26</sup> They and Harper understood this influence as a precursor to their own enfranchisement, not as a substitute for it.

### Suffrage and Mob Violence

Harper was speaking during a period when lynching and murders had reached staggering heights. Earlier that same year, in a speech to the Boston Monday Lectureship, Ida Wells reported 52 African Americans lynched in 1892.<sup>27</sup> In that same speech, Wells also recounts the gruesome details surrounding the widely publicized February 1, 1893, lynching of Henry Smith in Paris, Texas.<sup>28</sup> Another source sets the number of lynchings at 113 in 1891; 161 in 1892; and 118 in 1893.<sup>29</sup>

It is no surprise, then, that unchecked mob violence against African Americans was on Harper's mind as she prepared this speech. Throughout, she tempers her excitement about being "on the threshold of woman's era" with the reality of lynching; it's another way in which she reorders values in this political hierarchy. She refers to mob violence as the problem



women needed to confront before they could freely address other political issues. Harper labels the perpetrators "red-handed men" and "cowardly men, who torture, burn, and lynch their fellow-men" (4); with "hands . . . too red with blood to determine the political character of the government" (8); and as "lawlessness enacting in our republic deeds over which angels might weep" (10); men . . . making bonfires of the bodies of real or supposed criminals" (11). This state of affairs clouds her predictions about woman's political future, leading her to challenge the women "to brand with everlasting infamy the lawless and brutal cowardice that lynches, burns, and tortures your own countrymen" (12).

Harper urged the use of all available means to stop lynching, whether through influence or political power. In this case, Harper's social feminism is the form, according to Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, which accepted traditional roles for women and argued that their "distinctive influence should be extended to areas outside the home."<sup>30</sup> This form of feminism attracted conservative women because it allowed them to move beyond the domestic sphere without tainting the image of themselves as proper women.

Harper advised the women to "create a healthy public sentiment; to demand justice, simple justice, as the right of every race" (12). Within her hierarchy of values, advocacy for woman's suffrage was subsumed under a larger concern for woman's activism in its many forms. Outranking advocacy for the vote was advocacy against mob violence.

### Weighty Substance in Grand Style

Harper's prose style contrasts sharply with the substance of her arguments. Although she described violent crimes of mutilation and violated civil rights, she spoke in a language at least once removed from the details. Unlike her colleague Ida Wells, who, in a direct style, described the specifics of mob violence concretely and often as reported in the white Southern press, Harper appealed to her audiences with abstract metaphors and concepts in a more indirect style. For example, she blames the "social evil," a term used commonly in the nineteenth century to refer to prostitution, for "sending to our streets women whose laughter is sadder than their tears, who slide from the paths of sin and shame to the friendly shelter of the grave" (10). Harper characterized lynching as "lawlessness enacting . . . deeds over which angels might weep," and intemperance as "sending its flood of shame, and death, and sorrow to the homes of men" (10). To describe the unpunished perpetrators of lynching, Harper borrowed a phrase from *King Lear*, "unwhipped of justice," an expression also in common use across the nineteenth century (4). Her audience would have understood the full extent of lawlessness it conveyed. It is the term Frederick Douglass used in his *Narrative* to characterize the unpunished crime of a slave plantation overseer.<sup>31</sup> It appears in Minnesotan Julia B. Nelson's remarks at the 1896 congressional hearing before the Committee on Woman Suffrage, in which she argued that those who deny women the right to vote and go "unwhipped of justice" will be punished.<sup>32</sup> As with her ideas, Harper often employed the same phrases, e.g., "whose laughter is sadder than their tears," in her speeches and fiction, a practice suggesting that after a thirty-nine year speaking career, she had developed a storehouse of expressions available to her as needed.

In describing ways in which women could bring about change, she also engages abstract metaphors. Women must take their places especially now, Harper claimed, that the "shadows

have deepened" and "sorrow ha[s] distilled its bitterest tears" (1). While metaphors often serve to make the abstract concrete, Harper reverses the movement, frequently describing concrete concepts like mob violence abstractly so that while they remain grounded in the specific, they also encompass broader associations. Known as much for her poetry as her prose, Harper figured woman's grasping of new political power as a dawning in this sustained image: "As the saffron tints and crimson flushes of morn herald the coming day, so the social and political advancement which woman has already gained bears the promise of the rising of the full-orbed sun of emancipation" (4). This engagement with abstract or allusive metaphors may also have reinforced Harper's ethos in the presence of these society women.

Harper's manner of the pairing ideas in balanced parallel phrases reinforces the notion of common interests, yoked together for mutual benefit. When these phrases are connected with "and," the ideas therein co-exist in what one rhetorical critic calls a kind of "syntactic democracy."<sup>33</sup> Consider, for example, this 109-word sentence on the political future of the nation, in which parallel phrases and clauses suspend and develop her main point:

Men may boast of the aristocracy of blood, may glory in the aristocracy of talent, *and* be proud of the aristocracy of wealth, but there is one aristocracy which must ever outrank them all, *and* that is the aristocracy of character; *and* it is the women of a country who help to mold its character, *and* to influence if not determine its destiny; *and* in the political future of our nation woman will not have done what she could if she does not endeavor to have our republic stand foremost among the nations of the earth, wearing sobriety as a crown *and* righteousness as a garment *and* a girdle. (4; emphasis mine)

With the use of "crown," "garment," and "girdle," the closing phrase characterizes woman as a protector of values. The "ands" reinforce the idea that the first three aristocracies are not more important than the "aristocracy of character." In addition, molding character and determining destiny are equated. We should also remember that in a text prepared for oral delivery, the "ands" might have been inserted to allow for pauses and to enhance rhetorical effect as well.<sup>34</sup>

She met the challenge of balancing interests during interactions with woman's rights activists, who, when a choice had to be made, were on numerous occasions unwilling to privilege civil rights over women's rights and, in the process, often resorted to a language filled with racist innuendo. Harper, in contrast, found it difficult to give priority to women's issues when, in her opinion, the needs of the disadvantaged were more pressing. Her value hierarchy subjugated all else to these needs.

#### *The Legacy of the Speech "Woman's Political Future"*

The kinds of issues Harper addressed in "Woman's Political Future" persisted in public discourse into the twentieth century. Women did not gain full suffrage for another twenty-seven years and during that period debates on women's civil rights continued. In 1894, black Boston journalist and socialite Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin launched *The Woman's Era*, the first periodical published by and for African-American women. Through this publication, members of the Woman's Era Club of Boston enacted Harper's declaration that they were "on the

threshold of woman's era," called to engage in "grandly constructive" work, and they organized the First National Conference of the Colored Women of America in 1895. This conference led to the creation of the National Association of Colored Women the following year in Washington, D.C. With over half-a-century of activism behind her, Harper served as an officer and an inspiration during the organization's formative years. The tensions Harper alluded to in "Woman's Political Future," created by mob violence, racial intimidation at the polls, women's suffrage, and black male suffrage, also continued to mount. They were dramatized in the 1913 Washington Suffrage Procession when Ida Wells and members of the Chicago Alpha Suffrage Club she organized were asked to march at the back of the parade in a less visible section so as not to offend Southern legislators already concerned that women's suffrage would add more black voters to the rolls. Wells declined to participate under those conditions, emerging from the sidelines instead to join the ranks of the Illinois delegation as it passed.<sup>35</sup>

In his 1963 "Letter from Birmingham Jail," Martin Luther King echoed Harper's commitment to promoting a common community of interests when he wrote, "I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states . . . . Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny."<sup>36</sup> These words recall Harper's statement to the women at the 1866 Eleventh National Women's Rights Convention: "We are all bound up together in one great bundle of humanity, and society cannot trample on the weakest and feeblest of its members without receiving the curse in its own soul."<sup>37</sup> Harper argued for cooperative effort among women to protect civil rights and alleviate corruption. King argued for cooperative effort among the Alabama clergymen, concerned about his disruptive presence in the city, to work against racial injustice and protect civil rights.

Harper exemplified the public intellectual, arguing for social action. Contemporary black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins points out that nineteenth-century black women intellectuals like Ida B. Wells, Anna Cooper, and Frances Harper, "both produced analyses of Black women's oppression and worked to eliminate that oppression."<sup>38</sup> In this speech Harper identified specific kinds of actions the women could take to promote civil rights, continuing an activist tradition among black women speakers begun by Maria Stewart in 1832. Perhaps the most significant legacy of this speech and of Frances Harper is the way in which they both are emblematic of the invisible line early black women activists had to straddle especially as they addressed audiences of white women, like the one Harper faced at the World's Congress of Representative Women. These speakers were called upon to represent the members of disenfranchised, brutalized, oppressed race in language that would make clear the full extent to which their civil rights were being denied; yet they had to present themselves as respectable, articulate women who contradicted all the stereotypes upon which this treatment was founded. Harper performed this challenging rhetorical act longer and better than any of them. Biographer Melba Joyce Boyd summarized two aspects of the dilemma Harper faced:

Together, the work and writings of black feminists constructively criticized the reserve of those white feminists who refused to identify white male terrorism as a feminist issue. Likewise, the black feminist reproached black men for their regressive patriarchal tendencies. But despite their ideological and programmatic efforts, these basic contradictions, which divided and defined the American social reality by race and

gender, further diminished the possibility of a unified vanguard movement ["a community of interests"] and the fulfillment of Harper's radical vision.<sup>39</sup>

Still Harper believed that woman's political future was bright. Today as we seek to find ways to build communities among people divided over so many contentious issues, Harper's application of value hierarchies reminds us that we can start by identifying our common values. There are few important issues today which do not invoke strong opposing opinions in light of the controversies surrounding such issues as free speech on campus, the best way to counter terrorism, performance enhancing drugs, immigration and refugees, the harmful effects of racism, the aftermath of hurricane Katrina. Community building requires committed civic engagement in response to such issues.<sup>40</sup> Invited to speak at a gathering of women on their political future, Harper recast this future in terms of responsible political activism for "uplifting the human race."

Let the hearts of the women of the world respond to the song of the herald angels of peace on earth and good will to men. Let them throb as one heart unified by the grand and holy purpose of uplifting the human race, and humanity will breathe freer, and the world grow brighter. With such a purpose Eden would spring up in our path, and Paradise be around our way. (14) <sup>41</sup>

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#### Notes

1 Rayford W. Logan, *The Negro in American Life and Thought: The Nadir, 1877-1901* (New York: Dial, 1954), 76.

2 Rayford Logan's account of this period in African American history, cited above, is one of the most detailed. See also Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: Bantam, 1984) for a history of black women's activism during this same period. See also Gail Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

3 Citizen-orator is the term often used to describe ancient Romans who served as voices of the community or representatives of the city-state, applying their well-honed oratorical abilities to civic matters, and who thus occupied a central place in political life. Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 BCE), a Roman lawyer, politician, philosopher, and powerful orator trained in rhetoric, not only embodied this ideal, but also wrote rhetorical treatises outlining the process by which the citizen-orator should be prepared for this important role. In his *De Oratore* (55 BCE) the character Crassus describes this orator: "Great indeed are the burden and task that he undertakes, who puts himself forward, when all are silent, as the one man to be heard

concerning the weightiest matters, before a vast assembly of his fellows." Cicero, from *De Oratore, The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2001), 305.

4 For a comprehensive yet condensed narrative of Harper's life, see Frances Smith Foster, introduction to *A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1990). William Still's biographical sketch of Harper in *The Underground Rail Road* (Philadelphia, PA: Porter and Coates, 1872, 755-779) includes excerpts from letters Harper sent to Still through 1872. These excerpts offer rare personal insight into Harper in her own words. A sketch by Hallie Quinn Brown, one of her contemporaries, can be found in Brown's collection of biographies: *Homespun Heroines and Other Women of Distinction* (1926; repr., New York: Oxford, 1988), 96-103.

5 James H. A. Johnson, "William Watkins," *African Methodist Episcopal Church Review* 3 (1886-87): 11-12.

6 Still, *Underground Rail Road*, 758.

7 Still, *Underground Rail Road*, 769. Still does not provide a date for this event but does mention Harper's meeting during the same period with South Carolina Secretary of State Francis L. Cardoza, who served between 1868 and 1872.

8 Still, *Underground Rail Road*, 770.

9 The five identified African American writers were Eleanor Eldridge (*Memoirs and Eleanor's Second Book*), Julia A. J. Foote (*A Brand Plucked from the Fire*), Victoria Earle Matthews ("Aunt Lindy"), H. Cordelia Ray (*Sonnets and Sketch of the Life of the Reverend Charles B. Ray*), and T. T. Purvis (*Hagar the Singing Maiden: With Other Stories and Rhymes and Abi Meredith*). See Amina Gautier, "African American Women's Writings in the Woman's Building Library," *Libraries & Culture* 41 (Winter 2006): 55-81.

10 May Wright Sewall, ed. *The World's Congress of Representative Women* (Chicago, IL: Rand, McNally & Company, 1894), 64.

11 Maria Deraismes (1828-1894), author, lecturer, and a founder of the French feminist movement, did not attend the Congress. In the Appendix of the published Congress proceedings, Sewall includes a letter from Deraismes, expressing her regrets and stating that she will send a paper on women and politics (*le pouvoir de la femme dans la politique*) to be read by the delegate from France. See Sewall, *World's Congress*, 942.

12 Sewall, *World's Congress*, 415.

13 Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joselyn Gage, *History of Woman Suffrage*. Vol. 2. 1881 (New York: Source, 1970), 174.

14 Frances Harper, Chapter XXX, "Friends in Council" (p. 255), *Iola Leroy, or, Shadows Uplifted*. New York: The Digital Schomburg, The New York Public Library. File number 1997wwm97248.sgm. 1997. <http://digilib.nypl.org/dynaweb/digs/wwm97248/> (Date accessed, August 18, 2006).

15 Here and elsewhere passages from "Woman's Political Future" are cited with reference to paragraph numbers in the text of the speech that accompanies this essay.

16 Chaim Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*. trans. John Wilkinson and Purcell Weaver (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), 81.

17 Chaim Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric*, 81-82.

18 Stanton, et al., *History of Women*, 391.

19 Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 223.

20 Henry Grady, qtd. in Frances Harper, "Duty to Dependent Races," *With Pen and Voice: A Critical Anthology of Nineteenth-Century African-American Women*, ed. Shirley Wilson Logan (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1995), 37. In Edwin DuBois Shurter's edition of Grady's 1889 speech, "The Race Problem in the South," the passage reads, "Here is this vast ignorant and purchasable vote—clannish, credulous, impulsive and passionate—tempting every art of the demagogue, but insensible to the appeal of the statesman." See *Masterpieces of Oratory* (New York: Ginn, 1906), 225.

21 Elizabeth Stanton to Susan B. Anthony, 15 February 1902, in *The Elizabeth Cady Stanton Susan B. Anthony Reader: Correspondence, Writings, Speeches*, ed. Ellen Carol DuBois (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1992), 296.

22 "The Race Problem: Miss Willard on the Political Puzzle of the South," *The Voice* (28 October 1890), 8. See also <http://dig.lib.niu.edu/teachers/lesson1wctu-group1.html>. (Date accessed, August 10, 2006).

23 Harper wrote: "Victor Hugo has spoken of the nineteenth century as being the woman's era, and among the most noticeable epochs in this era is the uprising of women against the twin evils of slavery and intemperance, which had foisted themselves like leeches upon the civilization of the present age." "The Woman's Christian Temperance Union and the Colored Woman," *African Methodist Episcopal Church Review* 4 (1888): 313.

24 Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 93-94.

25 Sewall, *World's Congress*, 437-38.

26 For an analysis of this kind of indirect political participation and influence among postbellum Richmond, Virginia black women, see Elsa Barkley Brown, "Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere: African American Political Life in the Transition from Slavery to Freedom," in *The Black Public Sphere: A Public Culture Book*, ed. The Black Public Sphere Collective, 111-150 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

27 "Lynch Law in All Its Phases," *With Pen and Voice: A Critical Anthology of Nineteenth-Century African-American Women*, ed. Shirley Wilson Logan (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1995), 93.

28 See, for example, the account of this event in the *New York Sun*, 2 February 1893. Reprinted in Gilbert Osofsky, *The Burden of Race: A Documentary History of Negro-White Relations in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 181-184. Also posted at "History Matters: The U. S. Survey Course on the Web," Center for History and New Media, George Mason University, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5487/> (accessed July 15, 2006).

29 Lerone Bennett, Jr., *Before the Mayflower: A History of Black America*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), 505-506.

30 Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, *Man Cannot Speak for Her*, Vol. 1 (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), 121.

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31 In the passage, Douglass comments on the killing of a slave by a plantation overseer: "It was committed in the presence of slaves, and they of course could neither institute a suit, nor testify against him; and thus the guilty perpetrator of one of the bloodiest and most foul murders goes unwhipped of justice, and uncensured by the community in which he lives." *Frederick Douglass: The Narrative and Selected Writings*, ed. Michael Meyer (New York: Modern Library, 1984), 38.

32 "Remarks of Mrs. Julia B. Nelson, of Minnesota," *Report of Hearing before the Committee on Woman Suffrage*, January 28, 1896. Votes for Women: Selections from the National American Woman Suffrage Association Collection, 1848-1921, [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/naw:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(rbnawsan8343div10\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/naw:@field(DOCID+@lit(rbnawsan8343div10))).

33 Richard A. Lanham, *Analyzing Prose* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1983), 33. In a chapter titled, "Parataxis and Hypotaxis," Lanham identifies prose features that signal various kinds of relationship among ideas. He points out that when no relationship is signaled through connecting words (parataxis), the reader is left to make certain assumptions about these relationships. In hypotaxis, the relationship is given through various kinds of connectors. He goes on to add that the neutral "and" can have the same rhetorical effect as the absence of a verbal link.

34 See Lanham, *Analyzing Prose*, p. 39, for a discussion of the effect of certain kinds of connectives on silent reading as opposed to oral delivery.

35 Patricia A. Schechter, *Ida B. Wells Barnett & American Reform 1880-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 200.

36 Martin Luther King, "Letter from Birmingham Jail, April 16, 1963," *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 65.

37 Frances E. W. Harper, "We Are All Bound up Together," in *A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader*, ed. Frances Smith Foster (New York: The Feminist Press, 1990), 217.

38 Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 29.

39 Melba Joyce Boyd, *Discarded Legacy: Politics and Poetics in the Life of Frances Harper 1825-1911* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1994), 225.

40 See "Teaching Strategies" accompanying this unit for a variety of ways to pursue civic engagement through establishing "communities of interest."

41 Boyd also closed her biography of Harper with this quote from the speech.