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**Seizing the Laurels: Nineteenth-Century African American Poetic
Performance**

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by

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Seizing the Laurels: Nineteenth-Century African American Poetic Performance

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The diverse voices of African American poets from the nineteenth century have yet to receive their due. The critical gap is regrettable, because the nineteenth-century phase of the African American poetic tradition, although sparser and less philosophically unified than some later phases, nevertheless constituted a true *tradition*, connecting writers to one another and to writers of the coming century. Nineteenth-century black poets laid the groundwork for their artistic descendants both stylistically (by “signifyin” on the tropes of their contemporaries) and thematically (by interrogating Euroamerican claims to exclusive political and moral authority), while building communal sites for literary and political activity such as the black press, the book club, the abolitionist circuit, and the university. In order to adequately theorize the nineteenth-century African American poetic tradition, we need a new critical narrative that would contextualize nineteenth-century African American poetry by emphasizing its interactions with various currents of literary and political enterprise in America and abroad. This study will gesture towards some of the possible outlines of such a narrative, while also suggesting a new set of hermeneutics for apprehending the achievements of early black poets, urging an examination of the early black poetic tradition in terms of performativity. A critical emphasis on performativity is particularly well-suited to the explication of nineteenth-

century African American poesis for several reasons. Firstly, because the poetry so often centers around acts of repetition and revision, the primary texts are vulnerable to being misunderstood as imitative. By insisting that poetry's meaning is generated through relationships between poets, texts, and various readers, the performative emphasis helps to spotlight the competitive and revisionary nature of much black poetry. Secondly, when African American poems are read as performances, their political dimensions come into sharp relief. This study examines the performances, personas, and prophecies of George Moses Horton, Frances Harper, Joshua McCarter Simpson, and Albery Allson Whitman in order to generate a deepened critical understanding of nineteenth-century African American poesis.

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Chapter 1: Towards a Narrative of Nineteenth-Century African American Poetry

The vibrant and diverse voices of African American poets from the nineteenth century have yet to receive their due. When included in general anthologies, black poetry from this era tends to be represented by the same handful of brief protest lyrics: Horton's "Of Liberty and Slavery," Harper's "The Slave Mother's Lament," Dunbar's "We Wear the Mask," and select others. Although these poems are significant and creatively vital works, they do not begin to indicate the scope and variety of the emerging tradition. Between the publication of Horton's first volume, *The Hope of Liberty*, in 1829, and the publication of Dunbar's final volume, *Lyrics of Love and Laughter*, in 1903, over thirty black writers published volumes of verse, and over a hundred more published individual poems in magazines and periodicals.¹ This body of work encompasses a broad range of poetic subjects and modes, and includes narrative verse, religious meditation, political protest, occasional verse, introspective lyrics, and dialect poetry.

Over the past fifteen years, increased attention has been paid to several individual writers, particularly Horton, Harper, and Dunbar. However, a number of the most original and exciting poets (James Monroe Whitfield, George Boyer Vashon, Albery Allson Whitman, and James Edwin Campbell come most forcefully to mind) have been neglected nearly altogether. And, perhaps more importantly, there has been no sustained effort, on the part of Americanists or African-Americanists, to theorize the early tradition as a *whole*. The most widely deployed critical narrative of African-American literature theorizes black poetry as a quintessentially modern phenomenon that begins to achieve coherence and authenticity with the appearance of Dunbar's dialect poetry, and comes

¹ See Sherman, *Invisible Poets*.

into full flower with the writers of the Harlem Renaissance. Poets such as Whitfield, Vashon, Simpson, Whitman, and Campbell, who lie outside the scope of such a narrative, are poorly understood and generally overlooked. The critical gap is regrettable, because the nineteenth-century phase of the African American poetic tradition, although sparser and less philosophically unified than some later phases, nevertheless constituted a *tradition* in the fullest sense, connecting writers to one another and to writers of the coming century. Nineteenth-century poets were laying the groundwork for their artistic descendants both stylistically (by “signifyin’” on the tropes of their contemporaries²) and thematically (by interrogating white Americans’ claims to exclusive political and moral authority), while building communal sites for literary and political activity such as the black press, the book club, the abolitionist circuit, and the university.

In order to begin theorizing the nineteenth-century African American poetic tradition, my project proposes a new literary narrative which would contextualize nineteenth-century African American poetry by emphasizing its interactions with various currents of literary and political enterprise in America and abroad. My project will also suggest a new set of hermeneutics for apprehending the achievements of early black poets, by urging an examination of the early black poetic tradition in terms of performativity. But before considering an alternative narrative of nineteenth-century black poetry, it is useful to understand how this body of work has been constructed and evaluated by previous generations of poets and scholars.

² See Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey*.

A BRIEF METAHISTORY OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY AFRICAN AMERICAN POETRY

By the mid-nineteenth century, several critics and editors had begun constructing a critical understanding of American poetic history. Samuel Kettell's *Specimens of American Poetry* (1829) and especially Rufus Griswold's *The Poets and Poetry of America* (1842) had begun to build the American canon, listing its major and minor figures, analyzing its trends and variations, appraising its native strengths and defects, and cataloguing its characteristic themes. A comparable understanding of black poetic history, on the other hand, did not begin to develop until the early twentieth century, with the publication of anthologies of black verse. The first such anthology was James Weldon Johnson's *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922). Johnson's collection was closely followed by three others – Robert T. Kerlin's *Negro Poets and Their Poems* (1923), White and Jackson's *An Anthology of American Negro Verse* (1924), and Countee Cullen's *Caroling Dusk* (1927). Although these anthologies contained scant material by the poets before Dunbar, the editorial introductions and prefaces constitute the first efforts to theorize the history of African American poetry. The editors of these volumes understood their projects differently, and were, to some degree, speaking to different audiences. Unsurprisingly, they articulate conflicting beliefs about the nature and significance of a black poetic canon.

James Weldon Johnson's introduction to *The Book of American Negro Poetry* is one the most far-reaching accounts, and amounts to a survey of the entire artistic output of blacks in the western hemisphere. Johnson believes that certain cultural productions – particularly ragtime, the cakewalk, and the spirituals – reveal a unique and uniquely African American spirit. He asserts that black poetry, while perhaps less fully realized than some black cultural forms, joins with these other artistic accomplishments to prove the greatness of the race. "The final measure of the greatness of all peoples," he argues,

“is the amount and standard of the literature and art they have produced. The world does not know that a people is great until that people produces great literature and art” (vii). Johnson’s project (like Kettell’s and Griswold’s) is somewhat essentialist in its intent, assuming the existence of an essential black character which gives shape to art. The poetry, in Johnson’s view, is valuable insofar as it testifies to African American greatness.

Johnson’s attitude contrasts sharply with that of Cullen, who denies the existence of a body of poetry which is distinctively black:

I have called this collection an anthology of verse by Negro poets rather than an anthology of Negro verse, since this latter designation would be more confusing than accurate . . . This country’s Negro writers may here and there turn some singular facet toward the literary sun, but in the main . . . their work will not present any serious aberration from the poetic tendencies of their times.” (xi)

Cullen anticipates that black verse, as a category, will eventually cease to exist: “there will be no reason for giving such selections the needless distinction of a separate section marked Negro verse” (xii). In accordance with this critical philosophy, Cullen favors poems written in the tradition of English and American poetry. (He includes none of Dunbar’s dialect poems, and no verses at all by James Edwin Campbell, another poet who wrote frequently in forms of black dialect.) Given his critical orientation, it seems curious that Cullen, like Johnson, begins his anthology with Dunbar, neglecting to include any other eighteenth- or nineteenth-century writers. This omission may to some extent be explained by the stated objective of *Caroling Dusk*, which was to present new work not available for previous anthologies.

Like *Caroling Dusk*, Kerlin's *Negro Poets and Their Poems* was intended primarily as a collection of contemporary verse. Not a strict anthology so much as a guided tour, *Negro Poets* intersperses poems, both complete and excerpted, with literary commentary and biographical information about the writers. Although most of the book deals with work published in the twentieth century, Kerlin thought it salutary to "cast a backward glance upon the poetic traditions of the Negro, to see what is the Negro poet's heritage of song." Consequently, the first chapter of the book comprises a survey of folk songs and nine studies of individual poets and their work. Kerlin's evaluation of the nineteenth-century tradition was ambivalent:

Notwithstanding [the strong influence of English and American verse tradition], something distinctive, and something uniquely significant, may be discerned in these verse productions to reward the perusal. But this may not be the reader's chief reward. That may be his discovery, that, after all, a wonderful likeness rather than unlikeness to the poetry of other races looks forth from this poetry of the children of Ham. (3)

Kerlin's equivocating tone here (three "may"s in as many sentences!) indicates an uncertainty about how to properly view the early tradition.

The other collection of black verse published in the 1920's, and the only collection to offer a wide selection of poetry from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, was White and Jackson's *An Anthology of American Negro Verse*. This anthology was apparently targeted towards a white audience: "the general public," observes James Hardy Dillard in his introductory note, "let us say the general white public, ought to know of such a body of poetry coming from the colored people of this country" (x). In their preface, White and Jackson express hope that the volume will contribute to interracial understanding: "we hope that this volume will help its white

readers more clearly to understand the Negro's feelings on certain questions that must be settled by the cooperation of the two races" (iii).

In the 1930s and 1940s, an increasing number of anthologists began to assemble collections that would more fully represent the tradition as a whole, and to include poems (and poets) not previously included in book form. Benjamin Brawley's *Early Negro American Writers* (1935), at the time of its publication, offered the fullest representation of early writing by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writers, and attempted to strike a balance between historical and literary interest. "It is hoped," noted Brawley, "that the book may be of service to the student of the history of the Negro as well as to one concerned with literary values only" (v). Sterling Brown's monumental anthology *The Negro Caravan* (1941) attempted "to collect in one volume certain key literary works that have greatly influenced the thinking of American Negroes, and to a lesser degree, that of Americans as a whole" (v). Brown's volume covered the entire period from Phillis Wheatley through to the time of publication, and moreover contained fiction, poetry, folklore, drama, speeches, pamphlets, letters, and essays. In comprehensiveness, *The Negro Caravan* was unmatched for decades. In 1949, Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps published *The Poetry of the Negro*. The titular "of" is multivalent, if not slippery; the volume is the only anthology of black verse to include poems by non-black writers whose work pertains to "the Negro's experience in the western world" (vii).

Not until the 1990s was there a publication that focused exclusively on recovering and collecting nineteenth-century black poetry in all of its diversity: Joan Sherman's *African American Poetry of the Nineteenth Century* (1992), a volume that has been invaluable to this study. Between Sherman's anthology and Chadwyck-Healey's online database *African-American Poetry (1750-1900)*, black poetry of the period is more accessible than ever before.

Taken all together, these anthologies provide a kind of narrative of the continually shifting critical conversation regarding the study and interpretation of nineteenth-century black verse. Johnson wants to construct a narrative of poetic progress which will foster racial pride; White and Jackson think that black poetry can speak to white audiences and thereby promote interracial understanding. Hughes and Bontemps define “Negro poetry” as a particular mode of modern intercultural experience; Cullen denies that the category has any meaning. Kerlin and Sherman are the least critically sweeping of the anthologists, and approach the poetry by means of historical context, discussing each writer in terms of his/her sociocultural situation without erecting any overall scheme for evaluating or comparing them with one another.

In addition to the anthologies, there are the literary historical overviews of black writing. The literary histories which treat nineteenth-century poetry are fewer in number and, on the whole, more similar to one another than are the various anthologies. In fact, there are only four book-length studies relevant to this project. Two of these studies discuss writings in a number of genres: Vernon Loggins’s *The Negro Author in America* (1931) and J. Saunders Redding’s *To Make a Poet Black* (1939). The other two focus solely on poetry: Eugene Redmond’s *Drumvoices* (1976), which attempts to survey all of black poetry from its beginnings to the time of the book’s publication, and Joan R. Sherman’s *Invisible Poets* (1974) which deals exclusively with the nineteenth century.

The strength of these surveys lies in their breadth of coverage and their ability to offer insight about the tradition as a whole. The weaknesses of these surveys are inescapable, considering their breadth: they have neither space nor time to theorize individual poems in any depth, and as a result, they are unable to formulate critical commentary which moves much beyond broad assertion. As Redmond explains in the first chapter, he can make “no overriding effort to explain the works in a poem-by-poem

breakdown,” and intends only “to build on a historical ‘running’ analysis of several poems” (43). Generally, this comment holds true for all four of the studies mentioned.

Over the past few decades, a number of other publications have contributed to the availability and understanding of nineteenth-century black poetry. Within the last two years, excellent new scholarly editions of Whitfield’s and Whitman’s work – *Works of James M. Whitfield* (2011) and *At the Dusk of Dawn* (2009), respectively – have appeared. Additionally, numerous critical articles have been written about Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, and several have treated her poetry³. The recent scholarship – and especially *At the Dusk of Dawn* and *Works of James M. Whitfield* – seems to indicate a growing recognition of the importance of preserving and contextualizing the writings of individual black poets. None of these publications, however, provides a flexible interpretive model for reading the poetry itself, and none offers a framework that can place a range of poets and texts in relationship to one another. One of the defining features of nineteenth-century black poetry is its contextual responsiveness, its strategic interactions with various communities and discourses. In order to understand what African American writers of the 1800s were *doing* with poetry, we need to approach their work with an eye on performativity.

PERFORMATIVITY AND NINETEENTH-CENTURY AFRICAN AMERICAN POETRY

The concept of “performativity,” now widely used in literary and cultural criticism, has its philosophical roots in linguistics and deconstructive philosophy. In his 1952 work *How to Do Things with Words*, language philosopher J. L. Austin first used

³ See Foster and Ruffin’s article “Teaching African American Poetry of the Reconstruction Era” for a discussion of *Moses: A Story of the Nile* in the Reconstruction context, or Petrino’s “We are Rising as a People” for an analysis of Harper’s radical egalitarianism in *Sketches of Southern Life*.

the term “performative” to describe those linguistic utterances which have no meaningful external referent, and which are therefore important for what they do rather than for what they signify. Unlike “constative” utterances, which are evaluated according to their truth or falsity, “performative” utterances are evaluated by their success in performing an intended action, and cannot be said to possess any truth value. (A bride’s wedding-day “I do” would be a textbook example of a performative speech act, as conceived by Austin.) Twenty years later, Jacques Derrida further analyzed linguistic performativity in the essay “Signature Event Context,” in which he claimed that Austin had failed to realize the full implications of his own insight. Derrida praises Austin’s identification of a category which ruptures the connection between language and referentiality. However, contrary to Austin, Derrida proceeds to argue that *no* purely successful performative utterance can be said to exist, insofar as the “iterability” of language guarantees that any given speech act can be reiterated in a context that would disrupt the intention of the original utterance. “Performativity,” rather than being a specialized category of speech, is the condition of possibility for language itself.

The migration of “performativity” into the realm of literary and cultural criticism can be largely credited to Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Butler, drawing on Derrida’s theorization of performative linguistic acts, argues that gender exists only to the extent that it is performed. Much like performative utterances, which do not correspond to any external truths but rather function within a linguistic network and a given context, gender does not correspond to any external truth, but rather takes its reality from repeated performances within a given discursive context. Therefore, normative constructions of gender draw power not from ontological truths or even physical materialities, but solely from the repeated performance of those constructions by acting subjects. Because gender only exists when it is being done,

ideologies of gender are actually reliant upon those same performances they purport to control through description. Consequently, although many performances of gender will reinscribe existing power relations and rigid gender formations, other performances may trouble existing ideologies by resisting or disrupting dominant discourses.

The concept of “performativity” has become useful in cultural criticism because of its potential to expose the constructed, discursive nature of identity formations and to theorize the possibility of reordering those formations. More specifically, “performativity” may help provide a theoretical entry point into a discussion of racial identities, particularly as they are deployed, assimilated, or challenged by racialized subjects. Because race is a construct rather than a biological reality, racial identities are usefully understood as performances, situated within the social context of oppressive power relations and within the discursive context of a tradition of hierarchical racial thinking stretching back to the Enlightenment.

A consideration of racial identity through the lens of performativity tends to foreground the importance of sociohistorical context in the production of meaning, precluding the critic from viewing archived texts as static objects. In the performance model, historically constituted subjects speak *to* particular audiences, *out of* particular discursive traditions, and *within* the constraints of institutionalized power. All of the archived texts available for critical analysis, whatever their generic classification, are the traces of past performances; that is to say, they are discursively and temporally situated constructions of a speaking “I” which represents itself to specific bodies of listeners, while responding to ongoing conversations.

Eric Lott’s *Love and Theft* and Sadiyah Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection*, two important convergences of performance theory and African American studies, center around particular historical “scenes” of racialized performance. Lott, in his examination

of blackface minstrel show performances, describes the process by which white Americans' simultaneous attraction to black cultural practices and rejection of black subjects resulted in the creation of a performance tradition which co-opted African American music and dance while ridiculing black characters and excluding actual African American bodies from the stage. Crucial to Lott's study is the fact that white minstrels in blackface were perceived as authentic performers of black culture; the performance of a black identity was, in some sense, considered to truly represent that identity within the context of the minstrel show. Hartman's book surveys other public stages for the performance of racial identity, particularly the coffle and the auction block. *Scenes of Subjection* interrogates the ways in which the limited autonomy and freedom offered to slaves were actually turned against them. Both studies investigate the discursive formations surrounding racial identity by highlighting "spectacles" of blackness. Like most performance-inflected critical studies of nineteenth-century African American literature and culture, Lott and Hartman focus on those embodied events that are most readily described as literal "performances," events involving display and the public exposure of black bodies. As Butler's work argues, however, the category of "performativity" is not exclusively applicable to actions performed in and through subjects' bodies in physical space. Insofar as identities are constituted through repeated iteration, any discursively embedded utterance that serves to contest, reconfigure, or reify received constructions of race, gender, or class should be considered performative in nature. To invoke Austin's original formulation, words "do things," and therefore linguistic productions are themselves performative. It is questionable whether poems, books, letters, and articles are "performances" in quite the same sense as minstrel shows, slave auctions, and public lectures. It is certain, however, that all of these events and artifacts partake of the same quality of "performativity." Therefore, in discussing the

intersections between culture and performance, it becomes necessary to make a distinction between performance and performativity.

“Performativity” refers both to a condition and to a process. “Performativity,” as a condition, refers to the constructedness of identity categories such as race. Since modern racial categories have no foundation in biology or material reality, these categories exist only to the extent that they are acted out – in other words, they are performative in nature. In this sense, performativity is a state defined by the *absence* of any essential identity categories existent beyond their playing out. Given this definition alone, the category of the performative might be misinterpreted as providing absolute scope for the self-determination of racial identity. However, “performativity,” when understood additionally as a *process*, refers to the historical and discursive processes by which racial categories are sedimented. As a result of these histories and discourses, “performativity” is not a blank canvas or an infinite freedom of the acting subject, but a network of possibilities and constraints within which subjects perform racial identities.

“Performance,” on the other hand, refers to some specific actualization of the possibilities inherent in “performativity.” Within the category of the performative, race has no material reality. However, once performativity consolidates into an actual performance, it becomes possible to discuss the embodiment of racial subjects and their involvement in material social relations. Joseph Roach, in *Performance and Cultural Politics*, discusses Richard Schechner’s definition of performance as “restored behavior” or “twice-behaved behavior.” In other words, performance is a kind of behavior which invokes specific histories and cultural traditions and attempts to articulate the performer’s relationship to them. “Literature itself,” Roach explains, “may be understood as the historic archive of restored behavior” (254).

As Lott, Hartman, Roach, and others have shown, the category of the performative may be employed to de-naturalize racial categories and to spotlight the multi-layered discursive histories which always inform the construction of racialized subjects. For my project, the category of the performative will also be useful to the interpretation of poetry, and particularly to critical readings seeking to emphasize poems as sociohistorically situated *actions*. Reading poems as performances may help us to set aside the New Critical standards of judgment that still haunt the interpretation of non-canonical poetry. If we consider poems as self-contained textual artifacts, we might conclude (as too many critics have) that black poets of the nineteenth century mostly wrote imitative, uninteresting verse that contributed little of value to the tradition of African American literature. However, we might well consider poems differently: as particular kinds of *utterances* in dialogue with other utterances, all within a charged cultural conversation taking place between specific national, political, racial, and aesthetic communities. Such an understanding of poetry can only be achieved once we shift the focus away from aesthetics and authorial intentionality, and toward the nuance of historicity, intertextuality, and cultural context.

To demonstrate the ways that these conceptions of performance and performativity might operate in practice, I'll offer a brief example from the poetry of James Monroe Whitfield. "The Misanthropist," a poem published in Whitfield's 1846 volume *America and Other Poems*, offers an apt example of the kind of performative "signifyin'" that I plan to explore. The poem, like many of Whitfield's, is rather lengthy (164 lines), so I'll quote only two short passages. "The Misanthropist" begins:

In vain thou bid'st me strike the lyre,
And sing a song of mirth and glee,
Or, kindling with poetic fire,

Attempt some higher minstrelsy;
In vain, in vain! For every thought
That issues from this throbbing brain,
Is from its first conception fraught
With gloom and darkness, woe and pain.

.....

And I have stood on ocean's shore,
And viewed its dreary waters roll,
Till the dull music of its roar
Called forth responses in my soul;
And I have felt that there was traced
An image of my inmost soul,
In that dreary, boundless waste,
Whose sluggish waters aimless roll—
Save when aroused by storms' wild force
It lifts on high its angry wave,
And thousands driven from its course
Find in its depths a nameless grave. (1-8, 63-74)

If we were to consider “The Misanthropist” as a discrete object, isolated from political, social, and biographical contexts, we might judge the poem harshly. We might begin by observing that the poem presents as an imitation of Byron: in familiar High Romantic style, the author proclaims his isolation and inner turmoil, and portrays his personal anguish through a description of the sublime landscapes which surround him. Having categorized the poem, we would probably go on to enumerate the flaws in its construction. We might note the iambic monotony, the employment of the “pathetic

fallacy,” the slavish copycatting of the British Romantics. These judgments, although harsh, are all but inevitable if our critical starting point is a consideration of the text as an isolated object or artifact. In fact, observations and appraisals such as these are thoroughly characteristic of even the sympathetic critics who have offered commentary on Whitfield’s work. However, a consideration of the poem in light of its performativity and performative contexts yields a much different picture of the poem’s significance and accomplishment, proving the blindness of the New Critical hermeneutics still deployed all too frequently in the analysis of non-canonical poetry. To demonstrate the value of an alternative hermeneutics grounded in performativity, and to illustrate the shift in value judgments that would result from such a shift in interpretive practice, I will now sketch a discussion of “The Misanthropist” in terms of its performativity, which can be understood in at least three ways: in terms of the poem’s self-conscious reference to its status as a performance which echoes other past performances and cultural scenarios; in terms of its performance of a particular kind of blackness, and in terms of its strategies of impersonation.

Firstly, the poem immediately calls attention to its own performed-ness and to the scene of its own production. The poet begins by interrupting an unnamed auditor in order to express despair at the impossibility of creating a song that would fulfill the auditor’s request. In the process of foregrounding its own status as a troubled and difficult performance, the poem reveals a context of coercion: the poet has been *bidden*, and the pressure of the demand produces a violent and repetitive negation: “In vain, in vain!” But who is this commanding auditor? – or rather, since he is nameless and uncharacterized, what kind of audience does he represent? We might begin to answer this question by observing that Whitfield’s sketch of a black poet bidden into song by an exacting audience echoes other scenes of the historical past. Phillis Wheatley was reputedly

entreated to appear before an audience of eighteen of “the most respectable Characters in Boston” in order to prove the authenticity of her literary gift. Wheatley’s interrogation serves as the primal scene of the institutionalized coercion faced by generations of African American artists: their works were produced under the scrutiny of an oppressive power which passed judgment about authenticity and literary merit, while waiting expectantly for narrowly conceived “proofs” of the full humanity of black subjects. As early as Thomas Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia*, claims about the subhumanity or inequality of African Americans were supported with reference to black literature, which was always found inadequate. As a result, black poets were aware from the beginning that their productions would be placed under the microscope of power, weighed for conformity to European norms of rationality, beauty, and culture, and taken up into evidence in ongoing debates about the “Negro Question.” (George Moses Horton, for example, an enslaved writer whose first poems were published in 1829, once wrote a letter to Horace Greeley insisting that, if published, his poetry could “settle the question . . . of whether the Negro has any genius or not.”⁴) The scenario at the outset of “The Misanthropist,” I would argue, echoes all these scenes. The coercion of poetic speech, the invisible interlocutor’s demands for poetry of “mirth and glee,” the poet’s anxious awareness that his poetry will be unsatisfactory to his auditor – all of these elements in Whitfield’s text are resonant both with the specific scenarios acted out by historical antecedents such as Wheatley, Jefferson, and Horton, and with the more general cultural conditions surrounding black poetry. Whitfield’s poem, in this context, can be seen to stage a very different kind of gesture than that which his auditor clearly expects of him: he refuses to perform. Or, at least, he refuses to perform to the specifications of his

⁴ Horton’s letter to Greeley is published in Walser’s *The Black Poet*.

imagined audience, for his interlocutor has clearly requested a song of merriment and good cheer: “In vain thou bid’st me strike the lyre, / And sing a song of mirth and glee.” He knows what is wanted from him – a song that, according to his hearers’ expectations, will testify to his own contentment, or provide evidence of his natural boisterousness. The fact that his refusal to sing *is sung* signals not a logical contradiction, but an insistence on speaking on his own terms.

Secondly, and more specifically, the performativity of Whitfield’s poem lies in the speaker’s conscious construction of a particular idea of blackness. Scientific racism, one of the key nineteenth-century discourses around race, held blacks to be biologically indisposed for intellectual achievement or the creation of beauty. In a surprising performative strategy, Whitfield describes himself in terms that are initially consonant with this doctrine of essential black inferiority: the poet confesses that he *is* unfit to create artifacts of high beauty, that “every thought / That issues from this throbbing brain / Is from its first conception fraught / With gloom and darkness, woe and pain.” Although Whitfield makes no overt references to race in these lines, it is difficult to imagine a real contemporary reader who would separate this poem from the blackness of its author – the volume was published with a preface enumerating the circumstances of “the colored poet Whitfield,” and offering assurance that the poems within would be further appreciated “when the circumstances of its origin are known.” Given that these verses were racially marked from the beginning, and given the prevalent discourses of racial hierarchy, the import of the cited verses is inescapable. By vividly describing the ugliness of his supposedly twisted, stunted consciousness, the speaker echoes widespread beliefs about the primitive minds of African-American subjects, seeming by his protestations to perform a familiar gesture of blackness-as-artistic-inadequacy. However, several factors complicate this performance. As I have noted already, the speaker does not pronounce

himself incapable of any creation, but rather incapable of the kind of creation the imaginary interlocutor – and perhaps, by extension, the reader – might be expecting. Moreover, Whitfield's performance critiques the racial constructs which it apparently inhabits. In opposition to the discourses of scientific racism which posit an essential, biologically based African primitivity and inferiority, Whitfield stresses that the character of his "throbbing brain" results from his circumstances rather than his blood. As the later passages of "The Misanthropist" elaborate, the "darkness" in his song springs not from inborn or biological capacities, but from the darkness in his own experiences. If he finds himself incapable of producing a shapely work of stately beauty, he attributes this to environment. The "woe and pain" of Whitfield's poems arises from his experience as a poet who, as Cullen would later put it, has been made black and then bidden to sing.

Thirdly, "The Misanthropist" is performative because it is an act of impersonation. Whitfield's speaking persona assumes a recognizable literary *role*: that of the suffering Byronic hero. As a type, the Byronic hero is a struggling Everyman who embodies those supposedly universal human characteristics most valued by the Romantics (freedom, imagination, passion) and who finds himself in constant, tragic conflict with mankind. However, to be a racialized subject is, in the logic of the discourses of "universality," to be non-universal. By stepping into a Byronic voice which ought to be structurally incompatible with his position as a marginalized subject, Whitfield essentially pulls off a kind of "impersonation" of a literary hero, and in the process, signifies on the tropes which come along with that role, transforming familiar images and turns of phrase. The passage describing Whitfield's response to the ocean is particularly striking: he cannot look over the sea without despairing as he imagines all those who have perished. The evocation of the Middle Passage is unmistakable, especially since Whitfield was well-known within African American and abolitionist

circles for his outspoken support of emigration. With this and other sections of “The Misanthropist,” Whitfield refashions the Byronic hero as a black man, driven to despair by the constant reminders of racial oppression and injustice, who refuses to sing the minstrel songs that are expected of him.

As the foregoing reading suggests, my study will hinge on a particular kind of close reading. While traditional close reading slows down the reading process in order to magnify linguistic and semantic relationships, I intend to read slowly in order to magnify the performative aspects of the process by which the linguistic artifacts of a minority literature signify within the received context of domination. I would argue that nineteenth-century African American poems are most clearly performative within certain key scenarios: when dramatizing the moment of poetic enunciation, when echoing scenes from black history (whether through narrative or imagery), and when impersonating the works, mannerisms, or personas of other literary artists. Consequently, this study will tend to single out particular kinds of works: poems about poetry, poems which explicitly call attention to the speaking “I,” and poems which relate themselves directly to other poetic texts. I do not intend to imply that only particular kinds of poems are performative, for all poems are performative, whatever the subject, mode, or manner. I do believe, however, that certain poems in the early black poetic tradition model their performativity in ways which are helpfully illustrative of a specifically African American poesis.

A critical emphasis on performativity is particularly well-suited to the explication of this African American poesis, for several reasons. Firstly, because black poetry so often centers around acts of repetition and revision, the primary texts – particularly those from earlier phases of the tradition – are vulnerable to being misunderstood as merely imitative. By insisting that poetry’s meaning is generated through relationships between poets, texts, and various readers, the performative emphasis helps to spotlight the

publicly competitive and revisionary nature of much black poetry, thus enabling a contextually nuanced consideration of precursor texts. Secondly, when African American poems are read as performances, their political dimensions come into sharp relief. The political nature of “The Misanthropist,” for example, becomes clear only when we consider the positionalities of narrator and narratee, of writer and audience. Often, the accomplishments of nineteenth-century black verse come into focus once we realize that the texts, despite their staid and traditional surfaces, are actually speaking back to power by condemning those political and cultural forces which constrain their participation in literary and national life.

Thirdly, the performative model encourages us to imagine the preceding scenarios or scripts which inform the performance at hand, and to consider how the poem may be repeating, revising, or deconstructing those scripts. Fourthly, a close reading of poems’ performativity will allow equally close attention to be paid to language and history, and to the histories implicit within language. When we allow ourselves to see historical contingency, political positionality, and social context in the movement of poetic language, we can begin to remove the speaking “I” from the rarefication of universal humanity to the full-blooded participation in the life of the community.

It should be noted that the misunderstanding and neglect of nineteenth-century African American poetry partakes, to some degree, of the more general scholarly neglect of popular nineteenth-century verse. The most widely-read and critically-admired poets of the era – Longfellow, Whittier, Emerson, Bryant, Holmes, Emerson, Lowell – receive scant attention by serious theorists of American literature; conversely, Whitman and Dickinson, by far the most widely studied poets of the century, were not embraced by broad readerships within their own generation. The popular poetry of the nineteenth century can appear too mannered, moralistic, or hackneyed to be easily valued, especially

in an academic climate which has been shaped by the legacy of modernism and tends to privilege rebellious or iconoclastic poetry.⁵ But although the genteel and easily-swallowed rhymes of Whittier or Longfellow may feel tiredly familiar, contemporary readers would scarcely recognize the popular literary culture within which their poems were written and received. The performative emphasis, especially when coupled with historicism, can help to defamiliarize this body of work, thereby revivifying seemingly clichéd or impersonal texts. By restoring the complex energies between writers and audiences, by calling attention to the scenarios within which poems were received, an understanding of the performativity of poetry may help open entry points into the vast yet largely unmined field of nineteenth-century poetry. First, however, it is necessary to historicize the poetic vocation itself.

AFRICAN AMERICAN POETRY IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICA

In nineteenth-century America, poetry was regarded as far more than a genre; it was a spiritual force contributing to the moral and spiritual improvement of the populace – something scarcely less than a faith. It would be difficult to overstate the widespread cultural esteem in which poetry was held. William Cullen Bryant, in the first of a series of lectures delivered to the New York Athenaeum⁶, defined poetry as that which “cherishes patriotism,” “delights to infold . . . all the creatures of God in the wide circle of its sympathies,” “lifts us to a sphere where self-interest cannot exist,” “restores us to our unperverted feelings,” and then sends us “back to the world with our moral perceptions cleared and invigorated”. Bryant’s pronouncements, strikingly bold in the

⁵ For a discussion of these dynamics, see Joseph Harrington, “Why American Poetry Is Not American Literature.”

⁶ Collected in *Prose Writings of William Cullen Bryant*, pp. 18-19.

scope and power they ascribe to poesy, are by no means unique in nineteenth-century critical discourse. Analogous claims can be found throughout popular and literary discourse. An exceptional dispensation of moral authority was perceived to set poetry apart from other literary genres, and to underwrite poetry's mission to bolster nationalism, instill religious sentiment, enable self-renewal, and instigate moral clarity.

If poetry was to progress toward such lofty goals, it required a specially authorized speaker. The ideal poet would be both a patriot and a secular priest; both a democratic man par excellence and a vessel for eternal truths. Emerson's essay "The Poet," one of the most influential American visions of the poet-figure, makes large claims for the authority, power, and significance of the poet, asserting that "the poet is the person . . . who sees and handles that which others dream of, traverses the whole scale of experience, and is representative of man, in virtue of being the largest power to receive and to impart." Yet significantly, the essay's concluding paragraphs express anxiety about America's lack of a national bard: "We have yet had no genius in America, with tyrannous eye, which knew the value of our incomparable materials." Emerson, like many contemporary Americans, believed devoutly in the importance of poetry, yet fretted that the nation had not yet produced worthy poetic representatives. The anxiety and the faith were mutually stimulating: the public concern about the lack of authentically American literary productions was fueled by widespread belief in the power of literature (poetry being considered the highest literary form) to authenticate and represent the national genius; conversely, a belief in the importance of poetry induced leading literary lights such as Emerson to search diligently for traces of American genius.

As Robert Weisbuch elaborates in *The Atlantic Double-Cross*, Americans' defensive sense of their secondary relationship to Europe, as well as the Romantic era's tendency to emphasize literature's centrality to national identity, contributed to this

serious and long-lasting literary inferiority complex. Therefore, nineteenth-century American writing can only be fully understood in the context of an antagonistic relationship with the “originating” discourses of Europe. Weisbuch argues that American writers innovated two approaches to this problem. Some writers espoused an “outward-looking solution,” applying European modes of discourse to the new materials of the American scene. William Cullen Bryant exemplifies this approach, writing paeans to the prairies and forests of the new world. In celebrated pieces such as “The Prairies” and “Forest Hymn,” Bryant declares that the landscapes of North America are just as fit for artistic memorialization as are those of Europe. His diction and poetic constructions are reminiscent of the English Augustan and “Graveyard” poets, but his subjects are distinctly American. Other writers espoused an “inward-looking solution,” fashioning new discourses by drawing on the subjective experiences of Americans. The inward-looking poet par excellence is Walt Whitman. Rather than applying European discursive modes to new scenes, Whitman exploded the poetic line in order to emphasize the freedom of the American subject, and attempted to incorporate all of America into a song of unity-in-individuality. Weisbuch points out that Bryant and Whitman, although radically different in terms of preferred subject matter, philosophies, and formal choices, both find their poetic occasion in the shared project of creating a national literature at a time when “American literature” was perceived as an oxymoron, both regionally and abroad. During the long season of America’s cultural insecurity, writers’ choices were never “free,” but were always partially determined by the necessity of proving the existence of a viable tradition.

If America’s vexed relationship with European poetry has been obscured for modern readers and critics, this is largely because Whitman and Dickinson, by far the most canonical nineteenth-century American poets, were both “inward-looking poets”

who devised strikingly original poetic modes. Whitman and Dickinson circumvented artistic and cultural secondariness successfully enough that their generative struggle with European tradition begins to disappear, becoming all but invisible to American readers as cultural memory of the old socioliterary anxiety dims. On the other hand, the “outward-looking poets,” who worked within the discourses and traditions of Europe, are scantily anthologized or studied, despite the fact that their output comprises the lion’s share of nineteenth-century verse and the entirety of the era’s *popular* verse. As a result of these emphases, the true nature and extent of American poetry’s struggle with its European inheritance has yet to be adequately understood.

As late as the 1880s, many critics believed that America’s literature was still essentially an offshoot of British or European letters. As Edmund Clarence Stedman commented in *Poets of America*, “Unless the feeling of our home-poet be novel, his vision a fresh and distinctive vision – unless these are radically different from the French, or German, or even the English feeling and vision, – they are not American, and our time has not yet come” (5). Yet for much of the century most poets were, to some degree, imitating British productions. American writers freely chose models from a range of influential voices which had been, and continued to be, imported for American readers. Milton, Pope, Burns, Wordsworth, and Byron all impacted American verse substantially, as did the prose romances of Sir Walter Scott. Eventually, homegrown productions began to exert their own strong influences on the formation of poetic voice, and up-and-coming American poets took their cues from Bryant, Longfellow, Whittier, and (occasionally) Whitman. All of these writers, from Milton to Whitman, were widely imitated at some point in the nineteenth century. After being enshrined in the collective consciousness of the reading public, each of these poets became synonymous with a recognizable persona, or type; and insofar as their mannerisms, images, and worldviews were replicable, their

personas were available for others to inhabit. Literary newcomers were commonly evaluated by means of comparison to more established names: a fledgling versifier might be described as a “New England Byron” or as a “type of Longfellow.” These literary labels accomplished crucial cultural and literary-critical work. By means of these comparisons, readers and reviewers mapped out the terrain of poetic discourse as a network of personas, each of them representative of a particular set of cultural, moral, and stylistic values.

In the hands of black poets, these personas were deployable as “masks” (to borrow Paul Laurence Dunbar’s metaphor) – literary faces that, precisely because of their broad recognizability, were publicly acceptable and even marketable, yet were nevertheless capable of speaking transgressive and dangerous utterances. The trope of “the mask,” however, tends to imply a critical and often ironic distance between the speaker and the discourse being employed, and to signify a linguistic practice that aims to conceal more than it reveals. For the most part, I would argue that black poets writing in the nineteenth century were not “masking” in quite this sense. Their artistic personas were not disguises obscuring truer or more transgressive selves, but rather rhetorical strategies by which they represented themselves to their respective audiences. Their masks were conduits, not blockages, of signification. (My revision of the concept of “masking” here is practical as well as theoretical: for many of the writers included in this project, the poetic record is all we have to represent them. Where, then, would one pinpoint a more legitimate or fully present self hidden behind the mask of poetic production, even if one wished to do so?) I argue that the masks these poets borrowed did not “grin and lie”; on the contrary, their masks enabled them more fully to tell difficult truths. The major African American poets from Horton to Dunbar realized that the personas and poetic voices of Romantic poetry were doubly useful. On the one hand,

these poetic masks were socially sanctioned forms of discourse, and on the other hand, they were perfectly suited to the voicing of protest, the celebration of black selfhood, and the articulation of visions of freedom. It is important to remember that the expanded sense of the self which characterizes both British and American romanticism was assumed to exclude black subjects a priori. For that reason alone, any harmonious synthesis between poetic tradition and individual talent was forbidding, and perhaps in the end impossible, for black writers. Yet in the attempt, they created a vibrant literature which, at its height, transforms the way that we understand the “mainstream” tradition of American poetry.

By the very act of stepping onto the poetic stage, black poets of the era were already beginning to rewrite the rigid scripts for what “American poetry” should say and do. According to those scripts, all poetic utterances should be conscriptable into the service of nationalism, religion, or secular piety. Since African Americans were fully recognized neither as citizens nor as acting subjects, the possibility of a black American receiving true poetic inspiration *should* be excluded a priori. The poets of the present study recognize that the speaking position of “Poet” is ideologically overdetermined in this way, and proceed to exploit the symbolic and practical possibilities inherent in the act of seizing the laurels. The origins of this strategy for African American poesy lie with Phillis Wheatley. In “To Maecenas,” a poem addressed to a symbolic patron figure, Wheatley declares her intent to set aside a “grov’ling mind” in order to “snatch a laurel from thy honor’d head, / While you indulgent smile upon the deed.” The strong poets within the early tradition are able to play skillfully with their own representations in order to illustrate the distance between the marginalized social position given them as human beings and citizens, and the privileged speaking position they claim as Poets.

At the same time, black poets of the nineteenth century help to reveal the very workings of poetic tradition. The logic of nineteenth-century black poetic practice, by which cultural secondariness is exploited in the service of an art which borrows and revises, is in fact structurally identical to the logic of “mainstream” American poetic practice. The poetry written by Americans of European descent is marked by anxieties about cultural lateness, imitation, and perceived inferiority; anxieties analogous to those which mark African-American poetry and other “minority literatures.” Admittedly, to compare the cultural anxieties of a prosperous New England lawyer like William Cullen Bryant to those of a field slave like George Moses Horton may seem facile. In noting a structural analogy, I by no means intend to gloss over the enormous differences between the experiences of marginalization faced by different subjects. However, if we recognize that *all* American writers in the nineteenth century were working within the constraints of cultural discourses which to varying degrees denied their authority to write, we can better appreciate the originality of the solutions devised by African-American poets. Faced with the challenge of creating a representative national literature, Euro-American writers generally *privileged one side* of the dichotomy between public and private, subjectivity and objectivity, thereby becoming “inward-looking” or “outward-looking” poets. Although one could certainly find both “outward-looking” and “inward-looking” poems by black writers, the most unique and effective approach innovated by black poets was to construct a poetic self that would blur all these troublesome boundaries – inner and outer, public and private, self-as-racial-other and self-as-authorized-poetic-speaker. My project will illustrate this dynamic in two ways.

Firstly, by theorizing Afro-American writers’ self-representations (both on the page and off) as performative acts, we can begin to understand how certain black texts – like “The Misanthropist” – although structurally and tonally analogous to texts by

contemporary white writers, actually *play* quite differently. Secondly, I plan to examine both the contiguities and the tensions between Afro-American poets and the Euro-American texts which functioned as models and as rivals. Although the vast majority of black poets in the 1800s were writing in forms strongly associated with Euro-American audiences, their works, especially when considered in a full performative context, are expressions of black experience, functioning as vehicles for emotional and ideological utterances that are uniquely African American. In the process of claiming, tweaking, parodying, and reinterpreting the poetic culture available to them, the poets of this study transformed the Afro-American and Euro-American literary canons simultaneously.

HORTON AS THE “FETTERED GENIUS”: ROMANTIC POETRY IN BONDAGE

The story of black poetry in the nineteenth century begins in North Carolina with the career of George Moses Horton. And the career of George Moses Horton begins, fittingly enough, with a subversive series of poetic impersonations. Around 1817, Horton, a slave on William Horton’s tobacco plantation, began making weekend trips to the Chapel Hill campus, where he found a lucrative market writing love poems. When UNC students wanted to profess love to their sweethearts in verse, they would hire Horton, and he would write poetry to order (the higher the fee, the more effusive the language). As Horton later recounted: “I have composed love pieces in verse for courtiers from all parts of the state, and acrostics on the names of many of the tip top belles of Virginia, South Carolina, and Georgia.”⁷ In return, the students would pay him twenty-five to seventy-five cents per poem, and many of them offered him presents of books, as well – Milton, Byron, Homer – which may, in turn, have influenced his later writing.

⁷ Horton’s autobiography is included in his second collection, *The Poetical Works*, pp. 2-8.

In some regards, Horton's Cyrano-esque early career may seem a minor anecdote, but the story foreshadows several key aspects of 19th century black poetics. Firstly, we might note that in writing encomiums to the "tip top belles" of the South, Harper was expressing sentiments that were usually policed, forbidden to him as a black man and a slave. Yet because of the special license accorded to poetic speech (and also because of the transactional, ghostwriterly authorial situation), Horton found that he had greater liberty of expression as a poet than he would normally be accorded. And secondly, Horton learned in his visits to the Chapel Hill campus that poetry could *do* things in the world: poetry could connect him to a community (at first, to the university community and later on, to various other support networks as well); poetry could win him recognition, or at least notoriety; perhaps, in time, it might even open a path to freedom. Horton, and the poets who succeeded him, would seize on the possibilities that Horton must have glimpsed while selling verses to the young suitors at Chapel Hill – that verse could be used to encode transgressive utterances, and that poetry could be a field of practically engaged action.

Nevertheless, it is not always easy to draw extensive connections between Horton and other black poets of the nineteenth century. Because Horton was a slave until the end of his life, he seems to have been somewhat cut off from the developing sites and institutions of the black community. The concerns of his poetry reflect this isolation; Horton's primary subjects are himself, his own condition, and the scenes of his daily life. Consequently, his poetry contrasts with the work of later writers like Whitfield, Vashon, Harper, Simpson, and Whitman, all of whom used poetry to describe or transform some aspect of a *shared* black experience. Partly for these reasons, this study does not venture an extensive treatment of Horton's poetry. However, a brief survey of Horton's career

and performative strategies is essential, for in many ways, Horton sets the stage for the nineteenth-century black poets who follow him.

Horton was born around 1795 on William Horton's tobacco plantation in North Carolina. In 1800, the Horton family relocated to Chatham County, placing George Moses within a few miles of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, a fledgling institution founded only five years earlier.⁸ From an early age, Horton was intrigued by books and reading, and began acquiring the tools for literacy and the texts for a literary self-education. In his spare hours, Horton convinced other children to show him the alphabet, and studied any pieces of writing he could get his hands on. Horton soon discovered that poetry, and particularly the hymns of John Wesley, with their emphatic rhythms, their cosmic imagery, and their emphasis on freedom, sparked his imagination. Before long, he began to compose verse in his head, even though he could not yet write or read fluently. Horton describes this early period of discovery in an autobiographical sketch appended to his *Poetical Works*:

At length I began to wonder whether it was possible that I ever could be so fortunate as to compose in that manner. I fell to work in my head, and composed several undigested pieces, which I retained in my mind, for I knew nothing about writing with a pen, also without the least grammatical knowledge, a few lines of which I yet retain. . . . On one very calm Sabbath morning, a while before the time of preaching, I undertook to compose a divine hymn, being under some serious impression of mind:

Rise up, my soul and let us go
Unto the gospel feast;

⁸ For a richly contextualized account of Horton's life, see Sherman's *The Black Bard of North Carolina*.

Gird on the garment white as snow,
To join and be a guest.

Dost thou not hear the trumpet call
For thee, my soul, for thee?
Not only thee, my soul, but all,
May rise and enter free. (4)

This lyric clearly bears the stamp of Protestant hymnody, with its swinging ballad meter and imagery of white garments and resounding trumpets. Yet at the same time, the poem's emphasis on freedom, and its suggestion of a metaphysical force mandating that freedom, indicates that Horton has already found the key images and themes of his early poetry. In other words, Horton, like the other black poets who would write and publish over the course of the century, had found a way to wield a specific poetic discourse in a way which that discourse had never intended. Using the rhythms and imagistic vocabulary of Wesleyan hymnody, Horton began to articulate his longing for freedom and to express an implicit critique of his legal bondage.

As he attests in his autobiography, George Moses Horton was driven from an early age by the desire to understand and create poetry. In the years to come, he would become equally driven by a desire to achieve his freedom. These desires were inseparably connected throughout Horton's career: the hope of liberty fuelled his poetry, and poetry was his primary means of petitioning for freedom. As the poet continually discovered, however, winning active supporters was no easy task. Horton's bid for freedom required the creation and careful cultivation of a public persona, "Poet Horton," who would convince others to aid him in his struggle. But a multitude of shifting conditions – changes in University politics, an increase in statewide fear of slave revolts, the comings

and goings of Horton's key supporters – necessitated that Horton change his poetic and performative strategies several times over the long years leading up to emancipation.

In the early years of his career, Horton presented himself primarily as an adroit craftsman capable of turning out acrostics and other love poetry for his paying audience of UNC students. Horton became a well-known figure on campus, winning admiration and material support not only from students but also from influential members of the UNC community, such as president Joseph Caldwell and regionalist author Caroline Lee Hentz. In 1828, Horton's poems began appearing in local newspapers and more far-reaching abolitionist journals; a mere year later, Joseph Gales, president of the local chapter of the American Colonization Society, published Horton's first volume, *The Hope of Liberty*. And as the audience for Horton's verse widened, his decisions regarding subject matter became bolder – he began to criticize his enslavement directly, and to use his poetry to petition for his own release.

Like other African American poets after him, Horton actively employs Romantic poetic personas as a means of claiming authority and dramatizing his own experience. In some of the most striking poems collected in *The Hope of Liberty*, Horton characterizes himself as a divinely inspired poet, a conduit for larger-than-life forces. This self-representation – especially when contrasted with Horton's enslavement – was a powerful and effective way of illustrating the injustice of his situation. From the opening lines of "Praise of Creation," the first poem in *The Hope of Liberty*, Horton proclaims that the cosmos speaks through him: "Creation fires my tongue! / Nature thy anthems raise; / And spread the universal song / Of thy Creator's praise!" (1-4) The poem gestures continually towards the sublime; it begins by imagining creation at the beginning of time, when "each revolving wheel / assumed its sphere sublime" (13-14) and "Heaven was drown'd in song" (28). As the poem proceeds, Horton surveys a roiling series of larger-than life

landscapes, calling out instructions as if he himself is conducting the colossal phenomena he describes: “Ye vast volcanoes yell, / Whence fiery cliffs are hurled; / And all ye liquid oceans swell / Beneath the solid world” (45-48). The volume contains several such lyrics which stretch towards an awed sense of cosmic grandeur, demonstrating Horton’s growing imagistic prowess while simultaneously dramatizing the poet himself as a far-seeing, fiery bard.

Perhaps the most effective image in *The Hope of Liberty* is the recurring figure of the Muse, who in the poet’s imagination becomes a fierce proxy for himself and his own imaginative powers. His most extensive treatment of the image is in “On the Poetic Muse”:

Far, far above the world I soar,
And almost nature lose,
Aerial regions to explore,
With this ambitious Muse.

[. . .]

My Muse is all on mystic fire,
Which kindles in my breast;
To scenes remote she doth aspire,
As never yet exprest.

Wrapt in the dust she scorns to lie,
Call’d by new charms away;
Nor will she e’er refuse to try
Such wonders to survey. (1-4, 9-16)

Horton's "Muse," soaring through the skies, works as a representation of Horton's dream of the self at liberty, autonomous and unrestrained. At the same time, with her burning breast and her refusal of abjection, she serves as a proxy for Horton's *already*-autonomous poetic imagination, refusing to accept the limits of his physical bondage. Poems like "Praise of Creation" and "On the Poetic Muse" contrast with other poems, such as "On Liberty and Slavery," which focus instead on the psychological anguish of Horton's enslavement: "Alas! And am I born for this, / To wear this slavish chain? / Deprived of all created bliss, / Through hardship, toil and pain!" (1-4) Horton's early self-representation comes into focus when we consider these two kinds of poems together. By contrasting his legal slavery with the power and freedom of his poetic imagination, Horton created his first distinct persona – "Poet Horton," the Black Bard of North Carolina, a naturally gifted individual whose genius was stifled by his enslaved condition. Notably, this self-representation (like Whitfield's "Misanthropist") is also a redeployment of a poetic persona common to Romantic poetry: the sensitively suffering poet painfully aware of the contrast between the sublimity of his artistic imagination and the limiting material conditions of his reality.

The persona of these early poems – Horton the bard, accompanied by a fiery and indomitable muse – does not reappear in his later work, perhaps due to rapid changes in the cultural environment. In the years immediately following the publication of *The Hope of Liberty*, several events conspired to radically alter the political climate of North Carolina. A few months after the release of Horton's book, David Walker's *Appeal* was published. In response, the North Carolina legislature began enacting a series of intense restrictions on slaves and free blacks: slave literacy was criminalized, and harsh penalties were legally prescribed for anyone who published or distributed antislavery materials. In 1831, the Nat Turner insurrection occurred, further exacerbating the general condition of

panic. On the university level, UNC's president Joseph Caldwell died a few years later, replaced by David Swain, an administrator far less sympathetic to Horton's cause. The more restrictive and hostile climate clearly affected Horton's literary opportunities. He did not publish any new works in the 1830s, although his first volume was repackaged in a volume along with the *Memoir and Poems of Phillis Wheatley*.

By the time Horton managed to publish a second volume of new material, *The Poetical Works* (1845), his tone and his subject matter had undergone significant alteration. Unlike *The Hope of Liberty*, Horton's sophomore collection includes neither celebrations of imaginative power nor overt criticisms of slavery. The alternately triumphant and disconsolate tone of his earlier work is replaced by a mild but variable range of moods. Some of the poems are funny; many of them express stoicism in the face of regret and disappointment. Instead of reaching for the sublime or celestial, Horton depicts subjects close to home – the division of a plantation after the death of the owner, the pleasures and agonies of drunkenness, the death of a beloved dog. Many of these poems – especially the insightful “Division of an Estate” – are intriguing and fully-realized artistic statements which reveal Horton's growth as an artist over the preceding decade.

The Poetical Works is especially crucial to Horton's developing public persona: it begins with a brief autobiographical sketch, an important document which in some ways inaugurates the second phase of Horton's poetic self-representation. This introductory personal narrative contains a good deal of our information about George Moses Horton and his life. In this respect, Horton resembles two other poets in this study, Joshua McCarter Simpson and Albery Allson Whitman, whose poetry collections also include autobiographical narratives. In all three cases, the poets engage in significant acts of self-fashioning through textual appendices that continue to shape our knowledge and

impressions of their careers. One feature of Horton's biographical self-representation is especially relevant to the current study: as he relates the story of his own career, the term "genius," a word which he was to use with increasing consistency for the rest of his career, becomes prominent for the first time.

The word "genius" would appear with increasing frequency in Horton's poetry and his correspondence over the years. In 1844, one year before the publication of *The Poetical Works*, Horton wrote a letter to William Lloyd Garrison soliciting a donation towards the publication of his second volume.⁹ (He entrusted the letter to David Swain, who never mailed it – a fate that would befall a number of Horton's letters.) Horton assured Garrison that *The Poetical Works* would be instrumental in "resolving the problem whether a Negro has any genius or not," and furthermore expressed his general intention to "spread the blaze of African genius and thus dispel the skeptic gloom, so prevalent in many parts of the country." In these passages, Horton seems to be using the term "genius" to signify the creative aptitude of all African Americans. By referring to "African genius," and by framing black genius as a "problem" to be resolved, Horton enters into the longstanding debate about black racial inferiority, suggesting that his poetry could help "prove" the intellectual and artistic capacity of African Americans. (In fact, his poetry had already become enmeshed in these debates; the Knapp edition of *Hope of Liberty* packaged Horton's poetry together with Phillis Wheatley's in order to argue that slaves should be offered greater educational opportunities.) In this same vein, the introduction to *The Poetical Works* asserts that the poems should "remove the doubts of cavilists with regard to African genius."

⁹ This letter is reprinted in Walser's *The Black Poet*.

In Horton's autobiographical sketch, he uses the word "genius" with a frequency and a pointedness that would become characteristic. The word occurs twelve times in the autobiography and introduction to the volume, in a variety of contexts. To cite a few examples, Horton asserts that the UNC students "discovered a spark of genius" in him; he recalls that Caroline Lee Hentz was intrigued by his talents because she was a "lover of genius"; he claims that "the magnet of genius" was always "the true centre to which [he] was so early attracted"; he regretted that his heavy drinking tended to "stifle the growth of uncultivated genius." Perhaps most strikingly, Horton ends his autobiography with a quotation heavily emphasizing genius:

I will conclude with the following lines from the memorable pen of Mr. Linn, who has done honor to the cause of illiterate genius:

Though in the dreary depth of gothic gloom,
Genius shall burst the fetters of her tomb (8)

In this closing passage, Horton asserts his faith that "genius" (which, cannily, can be understood as either an abstract spiritual quality but also as a representation of the poet himself) will ultimately "burst the fetters," triumphing over bondage and death. Horton's embrace of the word "genius," not only in his autobiography, but throughout the rest of his career, demonstrates his determination to dramatize his persona as a gifted creator. The instability of the word, its shifting and multivalent meaning, made it extremely useful to Horton. "Genius," of course, often signifies a person, an individual of superior talents, but Horton tends to submerge this definition, using the term more frequently to denote a poetic aptitude ("the spark of genius in me") or the distinctive character of a race or national group ("the blaze of African genius"). But as Horton continues to repeat the word – and as he successfully influences others to use the word in describing him – his

implicit claim (that he himself *is* a genius, a special individual) emerges quite effectively without the poet ever quite speaking it.

For the rest of his life, this fluid conception of “genius” would continue to play a central role in Horton’s self-representations. “Genius,” for example, figures prominently in the poem attached to an 1852 letter that Horton wrote to Horace Greeley (although, once again, Swain retained the letter in his files, without mailing it as promised). In this letter, the poet made a proposal to Greeley, editor of the New York *Tribune*: if Greeley purchased his freedom, Horton would place his literary talents at the editor’s disposal. Horton enclosed a poem titled “The Poet’s Feeble Petition,” a piece that doubled as a further plea and a demonstration of his talents. The poem completely reverses the imagery of flight that pervades *The Hope of Liberty*, depicting the poet as stranded on the ground, unable to mount into the sky:

He is an eagle void of wings
Aspiring to the mountain’s height;
Yet in the vale aloud he sings
For Pity’s aid to give him flight.

Then listen all who never felt
For fettered genius heretofore—
Let hearts of petrification melt
And bid the gifted Negro soar. (8-12)

These lines demonstrate Horton’s facility for using the word “genius” at key moments to ambivalently suggest both an abstract quality of the spirit and the concretely embodied poet himself. It is as though Horton has made himself into his own allegory: “Fettered Genius,” representative of all the gifted voices that have been held back by slavery.

Horton's career – and his successful ongoing performance of “Poet Horton,” genius – had a surprising and climactic third act in the latter months of the Civil War. When Union troops occupied Chapel Hill in 1865, Horton attached himself to Captain William H.S. Banks and traveled with the army for thirty miles into Raleigh. Curiously, Banks saw Horton's poetic career as an entrepreneurial opportunity, and together they produced a volume titled, appropriately enough, *Naked Genius*, a hefty volume containing many poems from *The Poetical Works* as well as a slew of new poems Horton had written while traveling from camp to camp along with Banks's regiment. The second poem in the volume, “George Moses Horton, Myself” is a powerful summary of his career in which his description of his “genius” again takes on some of the qualities associated with the “Muse” of *The Hope of Liberty*:

I know that I am old
And never can recover what is past,
But for the future may some light unfold
And soar from ages blast.

I feel resolved to try,
My wish to prove, my calling to pursue,
Or mount up from the earth into the sky,
To show what Heaven can do.

My genius from a boy,
Has fluttered like a bird within my heart;
But could not thus confined her powers employ,
Impatient to depart.

She, like a restless bird,
Would spread her wing, her power to be unfurl'd,
And let her songs be loudly heard,
And dart from world to world. (5-20)

This poem communicates the human costs of slavery as effectively as any of Horton's earlier protest lyrics. The poet acknowledges the ways that slavery has frustrated his mind and spirit, while quietly resolving to pursue his artistic path with the time, energy, and liberty available to him. For the first time, the poet gives his "genius" a concrete form, imagining it as a confined bird that might yet be able to fly to other worlds. ("George Moses Horton, Myself" might be considered a forerunner of Dunbar's "Sympathy," with its similar central image of a caged songbird.)

Throughout Horton's career, his writing anticipates the main current of nineteenth-century black poetry by recognizing the persona of Poet as a source of cultural and personal authority, and appropriating that authority towards his own ends. Horton seems to have recognized that "genius" could alternately signify individual brilliance, a diffuse and democratic spirit of art and liberty, or the creative potential of all African Americans. By constructing himself as a "genius," Horton asserted his positioning at a social and metaphysical nexus where individuation meets racial representation; where the material difficulties of writing and publishing meet the immaterial cosmic currents of "liberty and science." The central work of Horton's career was to dramatize these cross-currents in a manner that simultaneously dramatized the condition of enslavement. In this sense, his body of work stands in sharp contrast to that of poets like Longfellow, Bryant, or Emerson, who saw themselves as Everymen, conveyors of universal truths. (Perhaps the most celebrated nineteenth-century formulation of this idea belongs to Emerson, who

described the poet as a “representative man,” one who “stands among partial men for the complete man, and apprises us not of his wealth, but of the commonwealth.”) George Moses Horton, by contrast, was “representative” in a way that Emerson could hardly have had in mind. Horton staged the tensions within his work – tensions between the poet, the world, and the ideal – as products of the contradiction-riddled institution of slavery.

PERFORMANCE, PERSONA, AND PROPHECY: AFRICAN AMERICAN POETRY BETWEEN GEORGE MOSES HORTON AND PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR

After Horton, many other nineteenth-century black poets would seek out publication networks and performance sites, interfacing with their audiences through poetry, readings, autobiographical writings, song performances, and letters. Although the remainder of this study focuses on three poets (Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Joshua McCarter Simpson, and Albery Allson Whitman), there are two other important figures who ought to be mentioned here: James Monroe Whitfield and George Boyer Vashon, the most imaginative of the black abolitionist poets. Whitfield and Vashon, who published in the late 1840s and early 1850s, represent a distinct transition in the dissemination of African American poetry. In contrast to Phillis Wheatley and George Moses Horton, who were able to reach publication only through the mediated assistance of influential religious lights, philanthropists, and other privately concerned well-wishers, Whitfield and Vashon were active participants in an expanding political community, engaging in exchanges of ideas through the medium of the black press.¹⁰ These two poets participated in a variety of conversations about abolition, emigration, black nationalism,

¹⁰ For an in-depth discussion of Whitfield’s political activities and involvement with the emigrationist movement, see Levine and Wilson’s introduction to *The Works of James M. Whitfield*.

and “racial progress,” publishing in black newspapers and journals and performing their work at abolitionist conventions and society meetings. Interestingly, both men were highly visible advocates of black emigration; in fact, they once combined efforts on behalf of the colonization question by cosigning a letter to the *Frederick Douglass Paper* which made an extensive case for the mass expatriation of the free black community.

Whitfield and Vashon are also linked by their reworking of certain tropes within the American Romanticism. With a poetic logic akin to that of Horton, who seized on the romantic conflict between the individual’s limitation and the imagination’s capaciousness and then restaged this conflict as a product of slavery, Whitfield and Vashon invoke the idea of a pervading spirit of cosmic order and unity, only to bemoan this spirit’s deformation by the cancer of racial injustice. Unlike their American contemporaries (such as Emerson, Longfellow, Bryant, and Whittier) who tended to presuppose a well-regulated universal order, Whitfield and Vashon gesture toward an ideal spiritual order that is being thwarted. Slavery and other political injustices have infected the moral, spiritual, and political equilibriums, and the time is out of joint. In the process of invoking a dangerously diseased world-spirit, Whitfield and Vashon rework one of the central concerns of British and American Romanticism: the relationship between humanity and the natural world. For some writers (Wordsworth and Emerson, for example) the created world contains a spirit and force of its own which can instruct and fortify mankind; for others (Coleridge, Byron, and possibly Bryant) nature reflects back to human observers their own thoughts and feelings, acquiring meaning and an apparent sentience at second hand. Whitfield and Vashon are the only American poets, however, to fully *politicize* this relationship within their poetry. For these two writers, human societies around the world have broken the natural order by denying full liberty to all men, and the result is an aggrieved turbulence within nature itself. Part of the brilliance of

Vashon and Whitfield lies in a sort of sleight-of-hand: on the one hand, they are signifyin' on the tropes of Romantic poetry; on the other hand, those tropes are simultaneously recast as the practical *results* of the racial injustices being condemned.

As the century continued, the abolitionist lecture circuit and the Underground Railroad helped to create new networks for the dissemination of black poetry and provide expanded audiences for live performance. In fact, the most widely known poet of the middle nineteenth century, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, reached audiences primarily by reading publicly to gatherings of abolitionists and freemen, and only secondarily through print editions of her poetry. Similarly, Joshua McCarter Simpson, a writer whose work has been virtually forgotten, wrote poetry which was written to be *sung* by passengers on the Underground Railroad. Simpson's poems, although originally distributed in pamphlet form, had their greatest impact as they were memorized, sung, and transmitted orally from one passenger to another. Being so closely bound up with praxis, with on-the-ground radical anti-slavery activities, the poems produced by Harper and Simpson are quite literally performative; the poems are more scripts to be sung or recited than they are free-standing literary artifacts. These poems challenge us by disrupting any easy distinction between "oral" and "written," by necessitating an imaginary reconstruction of their performative scene.

In the second chapter, I'll consider Harper's career in three phases, charting her continually-developing approaches to performance and to prophecy. From the beginning, Harper's vocation as a poet-activist was intertwined with her performance history, and her performance history, I argue, informed her approach to poetic composition. After the publication of her first volume, *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects*, Harper was making frequent appearances at abolitionist meetings, lecturing and reading her poetry. These poems have usually been discussed as print artifacts, but we know that they were also

adapted – and possibly intended – for performance. By reading Harper’s abolitionist poetry with orality in mind, we can perceive a performative strategy at work intended to make her hearers into witnesses, compelling them to attend to slavery and its injustices. The second phase of Harper’s career, in the years after the Civil War, is marked by the composition and publication of *Moses: A Story of the Nile* (1869), a remarkable and underappreciated retelling of the Exodus story. Public notices of Harper’s appearances in the Reconstruction era indicate that she often read the entirety of the work aloud. It’s an extraordinary and dialogic poem, shaped by her experience with live performance and also by her emerging understanding of prophecy. During the same period, Harper was touring the Reconstruction south, giving lectures and visiting former slaves in their houses and places of worship. By establishing the audience context for Harper’s southern tours, we can begin to reconstruct the performance scenes of *Moses*. In discussing her later career, I focus on the community-building work of Harper’s occasional poetry, focusing on a performance of “We Are Rising,” and conclude by considering the role of prophecy in her later verse.

The third chapter considers the poetry and autobiographical writings of Joshua McCarter Simpson. Simpson’s texts were disseminated through an alternative grassroots distribution network, circulating in pamphlet form among freemen, ex-slaves, and abolitionists. His poems, even more than Harper’s, are irreducibly performative because of their relationship to melody: Simpson took familiar patriotic or minstrel tunes and rewrote the words, creating new songs intended for singing on the Underground Railroad. The best of these pieces tweak, parody, or deconstruct the original words, often turning a savagely ironic light on the patriotic and minstrel traditions. Not only is Simpson’s verse especially performative, but in his collection of poetry, *The Emancipation Car*, he engages in a fascinating act of self-representation. Throughout the volume, poetry and

lyrics are interspersed with a variety of nonfictional prose pieces in which Simpson presents himself as a prophetic figure able to channel the “spirit of poetry” into songs and visions of the future.

Albery Allson Whitman, like Simpson, is no longer widely read or studied, but during his lifetime he was one of the most well-known and successful African American writers, often referred to as the “Poet Laureate of the Negro Race.” Whitman became famous for his long narrative poems, sprawling romances strongly influenced by the poetry of Longfellow and the prose romances of James Fenimore Cooper and Sir Walter Scott. Because his favored form was the extended verse narrative, Whitman’s accomplishments can be somewhat difficult to appreciate for modern-day audiences who tend to be accustomed to the lyric as the default mode of poetic discourse, and who may find novelistic poems cumbersome and impersonal. However, partly because of their very breadth, Whitman’s works are preeminent in the early African American tradition for their complexity of thematic construction and also for their unique ability to reference dozens of other poets’ styles and forms without veering into pastiche. Whitman’s works are interesting in a variety of ways, but Chapter Four will focus on one of the book-length poems, *Not a Man and Yet a Man*, examining Whitman’s construction of a complex poetic persona and his deployment of an idiosyncratic alternative narrative of American history.

Chapter Two: Prophecy and Witness in the Poetry of F.E.W. Harper

Until the second half of the nineteenth century, black poetic performance had been staged primarily in the textual arena. There were, of course, important and striking exceptions such as Phillis Wheatley's "examination" and George Moses Horton's address to the UNC senior class; for the most part, however, the dramatic self-representations of black poets took place in the virtual space of the black newspaper or the subscription monograph. But at mid-century, roughly a decade before the Civil War, Frances Harper began imagining another sort of poet-audience relationship entirely: a collaborative relationship between artist and audience that drew on the energies of live performance. Harper discovered that live, embodied poetic performance, precisely because of its power to generate a temporary community binding together the performer and the audience members in a kind of social contract, could also slip easily into prophecy, with its equally community-oriented, quasi-contractual relationship between prophet and populace. These discoveries led Harper to tailor verse meticulously to the spiritual and practical needs of her constituencies, to rewrite culturally dominant scripts about black history and culture, and finally to extend the tradition of prophetic black poetry inaugurated by Whitfield and Vashon. In describing Harper's life and work as "prophetic," I intend something very close to what Cornel West calls "prophetic pragmatism":

The prophetic religious person . . . puts a premium on educating and being educated by struggling peoples, organizing and being organized by resisting groups. This political dimension of prophetic pragmatism as practiced within the Christian tradition impels one to be an organic intellectual, that is, one who revels in the life of the mind, yet relates ideas to collective praxis. (171-2)

West understands prophecy as a form of visionary understanding which has historically allied itself with social movements to work towards collective action. The concept of “prophetic pragmatism” suggests an allegiance between theological and political activity – indeed, an allegiance that begins to blur the boundaries between the two spheres of interest.

Harper reveals in her letters, speeches, and, above all, her epic *Moses: A Story of the Nile*, that the prophets of the Old Testament were the primary models for her career as a poet-activist. Although Harper – unlike Simpson – never laid claim to oracular visions, she believed that the outlines of God’s providence were clear to anyone who knew how to interpret the signs. As a result, she was often able to assume the functions of prophecy without going so far as to claim the title of prophet. We can see this negotiation clearly in a letter Harper wrote to the *Christian Recorder* on September 27, 1862, a year and a half into the Civil War and five days after the announcement of the Emancipation Proclamation:

To me the times are gloomy, and though I stand not in the valley of vision,
and my lips neither tremble nor thrill with the prophet's ecstasy or agony,
yet if I can read the fate of this republic by the lurid light that gleams
around the tombs of buried nations, where the footprints of decay have
lingered for centuries, I see no palliation of her guilt that justifies the idea
that the great and dreadful God will spare her in her crimes, when less
favored nations have been dragged from their places of pride and power,
and their dominion swept away like mists before the rising sun.

If we look closely, this letter reveals Harper’s idiosyncratic understanding of prophecy, history, and – indirectly – poetry. Although Harper begins by disowning the title of prophet, she proceeds to speculate in prophetic fashion about the future of the nation and

the very intentions of God. One does not have to be a seer, Harper suggests, to foresee the trials and tribulations to come – one only has to know history. Harper can “read the fate of this republic” in the ashes of obliterated empires, not because she “stand[s] in the valley of vision,” but because she knows that the traces of God’s providence are legible in the chronicles of fallen nations. Those traces, which are available both in the stories of the Bible and in the narratives of history, can help right-minded citizens to navigate the present and even to discern the future. This style of prophetic utterance, which takes the past as its text and the present as its rhetorical occasion, is entirely typical of Harper. Although many of her poems present themselves as retellings or elaborations on Bible stories, they are also resolutely topical, addressing the needs and issues of the day. For Harper, all stories are aspects of the same great story – the long, slow, upward march of God’s people.

“HEARD YOU THAT SHRIEK?” – PERFORMANCE AND WITNESS IN HARPER’S EARLY POETRY

In 1853, at the age of twenty-eight, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper found herself moving once again. Only three years earlier, she had left her native home in Baltimore after the local authorities forcibly disbanded her uncle’s academy in the tense days following the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act¹¹. Since that time, Harper had managed to support herself as a teacher, first at an Ohio seminary and then at an academy in Little York, Pennsylvania, but she struggled with the question of her vocation. “What would you do if you were in my place?” she asked in one letter to a friend. “Would you give up and go back and work at your trade?” (Watkins). Certain that she was called to some

¹¹ For an extended account of Harper’s life and work, see Foster’s introduction to *A Brighter Coming Day* and Graham’s introduction to *Complete Poems of Frances E.W. Harper*.

greater endeavor, but unsure how to put her calling into effect, Harper was stirred to action after her home state of Maryland passed a statue forbidding Northern free blacks from entering the state, on pain of enslavement. Newly determined to place her formidable energies and her moral fervor in the service of the antislavery cause, Harper moved to Philadelphia, where she ended up living in a private home that doubled as an outpost of the Underground Railroad.

Harper's residency in Philadelphia was transformative. She visited the local Anti-Slavery Society office regularly, made contacts with prominent black activists, and began writing in earnest. She made a name for herself quickly among the educated black and antislavery communities, and by August of the next year, Harper was giving her first public lectures. As she was well aware, it was no commonplace event for a young maiden to speak before a "promiscuous assembly." Yet Harper, if she had not known already, discovered that she was adept at speaking before crowds, and in her first appearances on the abolitionist lecture circuit, she seems to have discovered the higher calling for which she had been searching. In a letter to William Still, she described these first experiences speaking before large crowds:

My lectures have met with success. Last night I lectured in a white church in Providence. Mr Gardener was present, and made the estimate of about six hundred persons. . . My voice is not wanting in strength, as I aware of, to reach pretty well over the house. . . . My maiden lecture was on Monday night in New Bedford on the Elevation and Education of our People." ("Well")

Harper's appearance in New Bedford was not only her first public lecture, but also her first public recitation: an account of the event in the *Liberator* describes Harper as having delivered "the lecture on Christianity and the Original Poem" ("From the New"). Within

months of this first speaking engagement, Harper published her first book of poetry, *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects*, the book that would make her one of the most popular poets of the day.

It is noteworthy that Harper's first success as published writer coincided closely with her first successes as a lecturer, for what she discovered in the writing of the early poems is nothing less than the full potentiality of *utterance*. In those formative years of the early- to mid-fifties, as Harper located her cause, her community, and her public platform, she realized that through poetic performance, with its elements of ritual, collective imagination, and bodily participation on the part of audience and poet alike, she could make her audiences witnesses of slavery's spectacular horrors.¹² One of the most potent examples of this dynamic can be found in the opening stanza of "The Slave Mother":

Heard you that shriek? It rose
So wildly on the air,
It seemed as if a burden'd heart
Was breaking in despair. (1-4)

Harper's poetry is often rich with performance cues, and these lines are no exception. When speaking the first line aloud, we might notice that the rhythm and the rhetoric alike seem to demand a pronounced caesura after the word "shriek." And in fact, scansion reveals that the first line of the poem lacks a foot; the ballad meter of "The Slave Mother" calls for four iambs, and Harper articulates only three. The metrical alteration is not at all typical of Harper, whose stresses tend towards the scrupulously regular, and I would suggest that she is creating a deliberate space, a pause after her initial question:

¹² For an exploration of this dynamic, see Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection*.

/ ~ ~ / [~ ~] ~ /

Heard you that shriek? It rose

Harper's opening question, then, actually *stages* a collective moment of inquiring attentiveness. As though startled by a strange sound in the distance, the poet turns to those nearby for corroboration, and then pauses while everyone listens together in the sudden hush. With this utterance, Harper compels her audience into the participatory space of performance. Her listeners are not simply "listening to a recitation" -- one line into the poem, Harper has foreclosed on the possibility of poetry as a one-way exchange with the audience as consumer. Instead, she will make her audience members into *co-witnesses*. The agonies of the slave mother unfold in the perpetual present tense of the performance space, as the artist and the audience respond together. Obviously, this is a fiction, but it is a fiction with a powerful ethical imperative: we are all implicated. As synecdoche, Harper's question has a broader valence: "Are you aware of suffering of slaves?" In 1854, of course, all of America has "heard that shriek" -- but its ethical implications are the same. Harper challenges the complacency of those who are aware of the human costs of the institution, but are not stirred to action.

After having called her audience to hearken to the reverberating shriek, Harper steadily draws them closer to the slave mother herself. In the initial stanza, the slave mother manifests only as a disembodied sound, a mysterious voice made uncanny by wild intensity; the hearers can only surmise the emotional turmoil that would explain such an outcry. But in the two succeeding stanzas, Harper's imagery turns away from the auditory and toward the visual as she draws her audience steadily closer and closer to the slave mother:

Saw you those hands so sadly clasped—

The bowed and feeble head—

The shuddering of that fragile form—
That look of grief and dread?

Saw you the sad, imploring eye?
Its every glance was pain,
As if a storm of agony
Were sweeping through the brain. (5-12)

In these stanzas, Harper brings her witnesses close enough to observe the woman directly, while still preserving a considerable degree of distance between audience and subject. Harper now represents her as a spatial figure rather than an isolated sound. By representing the “hands so sadly clasped,” the “bowed and feeble head,” and the “shuddering of [her] fragile form,” Harper allows the audience to see the woman, as if in silhouette, and to perceive those gestures which make her pain more tangibly perceptible. In lines 4-8, Harper draws her audience ever closer, first to observe the facial expressions and finally the look in the slave mother’s eyes. Throughout these verses, the poet repeatedly turns to her audience, continually questioning whether they, too, have witnessed the slave mother’s plight, demanding to know whether or not they have *seen*.

Having brought her audience firmly into the circle of witnessing, and having moved them progressively closer to the suffering slave mother, Harper now moves into the omniscient mode, informing the spectators of the woman’s circumstances:

She is a mother, pale with fear,
Her boy clings to her side,
And in her kirtle vainly tries
His trembling form to hide.

He is not hers, although she bore
For him a mother's pains;
He is not hers, although her blood
Is coursing through his veins! (13-20)

By contrast to the opening verses, these lines are brutally direct in their abrupt pictorial clarity and in their bald accounting of injustice. With the half-line “He is not hers,” which appears thrice in three stanzas, Harper insistently reminds her listeners that the institution of chattel slavery recognizes no claims of kinship. The final stanza summarizes the tragedy with frank concision:

No marvel, then, these bitter shrieks
Disturb the listening air;
She is a mother, and her heart
Is breaking in despair. (37-40)

These lines are, in part, a renunciation of the sentimentalism of the earlier stanzas. The atmosphere of mystery and dread with which Harper summoned her audience into an act of collective imagination dissipates here: the scene is not, in fact, mysterious. It is “no marvel” at all; such separations are a matter of course in antebellum America, and they inevitably bring trauma and anguish to family members forcibly separated from one another.

“The Slave Mother” represents a paradigm for poetic performativity that Harper was to employ, with increasing sophistication, throughout her career. The poems that employ this paradigm have three primary features: they include a number of gestures that explicitly invite audience members to imagine themselves as physically present and participatory in the experience being represented; they take immediacy as the subordinating aesthetic goal; they are narrated by a witness, observer, or participant who

guides the audience's subjective experience by modeling the appropriate emotional or critical response.

"Eliza Harris," another early verse from *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects*, further demonstrates this paradigm in Harper's emerging poetics. Based on an episode from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, this poem, like "The Slave Mother," begins with a dramatic, yet initially unexplained, event:

Like a fawn from the arrow, startled and wild,
A woman swept by us, bearing a child;
In her eyes was the night of a settled despair,
And her brow was o'ershaded with anguish and care. (1-4)

By using the second person plural – "a woman swept by *us*" – Harper again invites her audience to imagine themselves as participants in a shared experience, a strategy which is particularly apt in this poem. After all, the flight of Eliza Harris had already been experienced by readers of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (not to mention anyone who had been to a Tom show) and in all likelihood most members of her early audiences would have fallen into this category. Harper draws upon this shared literary experience and extends it through performance, rearticulating the flight of Eliza Harris as an event that she and her audience have witnessed as a community. Moreover, Harper's use of the first person plural functions as a revision of the technique as employed by Stowe in the novel itself. While *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is sprinkled liberally with "we"s, the "we" of the novel explicitly excludes blacks, as Stowe makes clear in her reference to the "African race as *they* exist among *us*" (emphasis mine). Harper's formulation, obviously, carries no such restriction; her circle of witnesses widens to include Afro- as well as Euro-Americans.

Harper produces the sense of a collectively witnessed event not solely by drawing on the power of Stowe's book, but through her careful manipulation of tense as well. Consider the second stanza:

She was nearing the river—in reaching the brink,
She heeded no danger, she paused not to think;
For she is a mother—her child is a slave—
And she'll give him his freedom, or find him a grave! (5-8)

This passage contains the first of several temporal shifts in the poem, as Harper moves briefly into the present tense: “she is a mother—her child is a slave.” Just as with the shift from past perfect to present in “The Slave Mother,” the tense shift works as a cue for the audience to imagine themselves as spectators. The slippage into the present reinforces Harper's intention to *re-stage* the pursuit and escape of Eliza Harris; to make her audience feel that they have been present (again) to observe the events being narrated.

In the poem's later stanzas, we see another typical Harper device: the overlapping of allegorical and realistic modes:

But she's free:---yes, free from the land where the slave
From the hound of oppression must rest in the grave;
Where bondage and torture, where scourges and drains
Have plac'd on our banner indelible stains.

The bloodhounds have miss'd the scent of her way;
The hunter is rifled and foil'd of his prey;
Fierce jargon and cursing, with clanking of chains,
Make sounds of strange discord on Liberty's plains. (37-44)

Harper smoothly transitions from symbolic hounds to the actual hounds on Eliza's trail, and then, just as effortlessly, the real grounds of Eliza's chase become "Liberty's plains." Like her contemporaries Whitfield and Vashon, Harper deftly superimposes the broader images of national conflict over a specific and concrete narrative. And by performing this gesture within the context of a community of imagining witnesses, Harper performs the literary maneuver that defines her project: she makes accessible a direct experience of the struggle towards liberty which is always greater than the individual, and which is always conceived as partaking of the divine plan, the movement of spirit in the world.

Part of this project involves the creation of tableaux; repeatedly, Harper creates moments that compress theological, political, and dramatic impact into a static, memorable image. Midway through "Eliza Harris," we see just such a tableau:

With her step on the ice, and her arm on her child,
The danger was fearful, the pathway was wild;
But, aided by Heaven, she gained a free shore,
Where the friends of humanity open'd their door.

So fragile and lovely, so fearfully pale,
Like a lily that bends to the breath of the gale,
Save the heave of her breast, and the sway of her hair,
You'd have thought her a statue of fear and despair. (25-32)

Harper transforms her protagonist into a statue, freezing Eliza Harris in a cannily emblematic moment. Eliza has gained freedom for herself and her child, but she is not yet safe. She may have "gained a free shore," but "fear and despair" are uppermost in her aspect. At this moment in the poem, the heroine is at her most iconic, representing both

the triumph of liberty and the ever-present danger of enslavement. Somewhat jarringly, Harper draws on the rhetoric of imperiled white womanhood to accentuate her plight – lilylike, fragile, pale, lovely, and maternally sheltering, Eliza seems more a damsel in distress than a heroic fugitive. Nevertheless, the moment serves Watkins strategically. The poem’s narrative may end happily, but the most carefully detailed image of the poem is this tableau of threatened mother and child, heroic but not yet victorious.

The two poems discussed thus far, “Eliza Harris” and “The Slave Mother,” are two of Harper’s best-known and most-anthologized works. Nevertheless, they indicate merely the beginning of Harper’s career-long dedication to creating poetry of immediacy and performative power, poetry structured so as to transform listeners (or, for that matter, readers) into witnesses. These early poems, moreover, are heavily beholden to the Fireside Poets, and in particular to Whittier, whom Harper especially admired. As Maryemma Graham notes, Harper “belongs not to one, but to three traditions—genteel, black liberation, and prefeminist” (xlvi). These early verses were firmly in the genteel tradition. In her future work, Harper would continue to develop an aesthetic of performativity, while assuming the persona of the itinerant prophet preaching a theology of black liberation.

“I’VE COME TO SHARE THE FORTUNES OF MY RACE” – PERFORMING MOSES IN THE RECONSTRUCTION SOUTH

Between 1860 and 1867, Harper was absent from the public arena, and when she returned with a lecture tour and a new volume of poetry, everything was different. In the intervening years, she had married Fenton Harper and given birth to a daughter, Mary. In 1864, Fenton Harper died, and Frances Harper, along with Mary, moved to New England, where she resumed speaking and publishing, both out of choice and financial necessity.

Although her lectures advocated an expansive and ambitious program of national reform – a program in which women’s suffrage and temperance figured prominently – the most urgent necessity, in Harper’s eyes, was to assist the project of Reconstruction. In the late sixties and early seventies, Harper traveled ceaselessly throughout the South, giving lectures and readings to communities of former slaves, often staying in the huts of freed blacks and doing her best, along the way, to foster literacy. During this same period, she gave readings of a new and remarkable work: *Moses: A Story of the Nile*.

Moses, the most ambitious and accomplished poem in the black poetic tradition to have emerged since “Vincent Oge,” has never been widely discussed or read. And indeed the work’s significance can be difficult to see clearly, for at least two reasons. Firstly, as an epic treatment of a biblical narrative, *Moses* can be misunderstood as overly conventional or predetermined. A careful reading of the text, however, reveals that far from being blindly faithful to the source material, Harper revised, re-wrote, and altogether transformed the original story to serve her own (pragmatically prophetic) purposes. Secondly, the poem can appear an uneasy fit within Harper’s oeuvre. The formal features that characterize the bulk of her work – such as ballad meter, compressed narrative, and an aphoristic style – are scarcely to be encountered in *Moses*. All of these features, moreover, are strongly associated with poetry that is popular, or at least populist – labels which are slow to stick to a nine-chapter poem in blank verse. However, the apparent discontinuity between *Moses* and Harper’s other work is an illusion dispelled by attentive reading. There are actually deep resonances between *Moses* and, say, “The Slave Auction” – both poems bear the traces of oral and print culture; both are crafted with an ear towards live performance; both explore the difficult intersections of public and private action. Nevertheless, having acknowledged that *Moses* is of a piece with Harper’s better-known work, one must also admit that because of its length, formal

daring, and extended treatment of a subject close to its author's heart, *Moses* does hold a unique place in Harper's body of work. And as this chapter will suggest, the poem remains sui generis not solely because of aesthetic considerations, but also and perhaps more importantly because of its place within Harper's mission in the South.

Although we have no record of Harper's thoughts and intentions during the composition of *Moses*, a few things seem clear. Firstly, her years on the abolitionist circuit speaking and reciting her poetry would certainly have had their impact. We should remember that Harper's early experiences as poet and public figure were, to a large extent, unique: she was the first black literary artist who had the advantage of prolonged, direct interaction with her audience. During the relentless schedule of recitations and lectures she maintained through the fifties and early sixties, Harper would have had the opportunity to observe the effectiveness of her verse in performance, to learn what aspects of her poetry *played* best before a live audience. Secondly, during the period of the poem's composition, Harper was at rest for the first time in many years. After a decade of itinerancy, she had a residence, a family, and a domestic station. Perhaps the unaccustomed stability of a settled position allowed Harper to devote sustained attention to a single work. Perhaps, on top of the duties of running a rural household, Harper was also "woodshedding," deepening her strengths and experimenting with new approaches to her craft.

Although there is no direct evidence of a "woodshedding" period, I suggest the possibility because the poetic and rhetorical powers evident in Harper's earlier work are suddenly stronger, subtler, and altogether more mature in *Moses*, her second widely published book of poetry. *Moses* is an extraordinarily dialogic poem, driven primarily by the conversations, songs, and meditations of its characters. The fact that Harper's poem relies for dramatic effect on an interplay of voices is all the more remarkable when we

remember that the Exodus narrative is so often dominated by spectacle: the plagues, the parting of the Red Sea, the encounter on Mount Sinai. For a reader of the printed work, the dialogic nature of the poem becomes clear immediately, reinforced by the textual presentation. The first chapter, “The Parting,” consists of a dialogue between Moses and his adopted mother, and is presented as a script, with great swathes of iambic pentameter alternately ascribed to “Moses” or “Princess.” Harper clearly relished the performability of the work; several accounts of her Eastern lectures report that she read *Moses* in its entirety. We do not know for certain how regularly Harper included the poem in her Southern lectures between 1867 and 1871, because concrete details about these appearances are sparse, and transcriptions are nonexistent. But we can speculate that unabridged performances of *Moses* are likely to have been a staple of her readings and lectures in the South as well as the East, especially since (as we shall see) the challenges of the Reconstruction moment are inextricable from the prophetic/poetic work of *Moses* as a performance text.

Harper had long since acquired a reputation as an electrifying reader and lecturer with the Maine Anti-Slavery Society, but her work in the Reconstruction South was an enormous departure from her earlier experience. Her antebellum lectures had, for the most part, been delivered to educated, white, middle-class audiences. Moreover, these lectures had *paid* – not an insubstantial consideration for a single, self-supporting woman of limited financial resources. But her Southern tours of the late sixties and early seventies were something else entirely. Now, many of her audiences were poor blacks, often in rural areas. Although she also spoke before white audiences – sometimes at their request, and always at her own peril – the struggling African American communities were her primary “field of work,” as she consistently explains in the numerous letters written between 1867 and 1871. In 1870, she wrote from Greenville, Georgia: “But this

part of the country reminds me of heathen ground, and though my work may not be recognized as part of it used to be in the North, yet never perhaps were my services more needed. . . Now is the time for our women to begin to try to lift up their heads and plant the roots of progress under the hearthstone” (“Private”). Yet although she felt the necessity and utility of her work, the years Harper spent traveling through the South were by no means easy ones. Her southern “tours” were physically exhausting and financially nonremunerative, and they continually placed her in poverty-stricken rural environments of which she had scant prior experience. In her correspondence from this period, she is matter-of-fact about the sheer scale of the work that needs doing, but optimistic about her ability to be, above all, useful. More than anything, these letters provide us with an excellent picture of Harper’s deep commitment to black communities in the Reconstruction South, and articulate her understanding of the nature of her work in the South.

Much of Harper’s correspondence during the late sixties and early seventies was addressed to William Still, whom she had befriended during her work for the Underground Railroad. Harper’s mission in the South, as she expressed it in these letters, was partly to serve as an exhorter. She hoped to encourage the people in their exploration of the power and possibilities of freedom and in their building of the institutions that would supply education, financial stability, and spiritual uplift. She conceived of her journey as an ordination and a spiritual calling. “Here,” she proclaims in one of her letters, “is . . . a race who needs to be helped up to higher planes of thought and action; and whether we are hindered or helped, we should try to be true to the commission God has written upon our souls” (“Here”). Besides communicating a sense of her purpose and illustrating the changed surroundings in which she found herself, the letters communicate a passionate sense of Harper’s personal calling to the work. As she states in another letter

of the same period written from Columbiana, Georgia: “I am standing with my race on the threshold of a new era, and though some be far past me in the learning of the schools, yet to-day, with my limited and fragmentary knowledge, I may help the race forward a little” (“Almost”). Harper’s self-deprecating reference to her “limited and fragmentary knowledge” may be a rhetorical gesture intended to disarm those commentators (and they were numerous) who castigated any woman who presumed to enter the public arena, or it could express a genuine anxiety about the disparity between the scope of the Southern crisis and her limited ability to effect meaningful change. In any case, strengthened by her resolve to “help the race forward a little,” she did something few others were doing: over the course of several years, she engaged in an open-ended, multi-party dialogue with people of all classes and races, risking her life to speak frankly with people (especially women) about everything from household management to the disenfranchisement of black voters. Without question, her performances of *Moses: A Story of the Nile* were a part of this project. These performances, I believe, were intended to be transformative -- to reshape her hearers’ understandings of themselves, of their newly won freedom, and of their place in the long history of God’s unfolding providence. The following account is an attempt to reconstitute a performative scene for *Moses*, to suggest contexts in which Harper may have presented the poem to audiences in the South.

Who were the audiences during Harper’s Southern “tour”?¹³ For the most part, they were black communities negotiating the transformations and upheavals of postbellum Southern life. Some members of these communities would have been born free, others would have purchased their freedom or been manumitted; the majority, however, would have attained legal freedom after the Civil War, with the passage of the

¹³ See McHenry’s *Forgotten Readers*.

Thirteenth Amendment. Whatever their individual histories of liberty and oppression, the African Americans visited by Harper were facing the long and difficult challenge of reorienting themselves to massive transformations in the social, economic, and political orders. Through her travels in the sixties and early seventies, Harper talked with enormous numbers of people, acquiring for herself a sense of what life was like for the members of these new civic communities. The letters she sent back North are filled with the particular stories of men and women she had met and with her general conclusions about the state of the race. These letters reflect her profoundly ambivalent mood about the prospects for advancement within the African American communities of the rural South.

On the one hand, Harper had no doubt that, in the long run, the “new citizens” were well-equipped, both by temperament and experience, to attain financial independence, to create enduring social and religious infrastructures, and to take their place within the regional and national political systems. In several letters, she discusses advancements in employment and the accumulation of assets: “As far as the colored people are concerned, they are beginning to get homes for themselves and depositing money in Bank. They have hundreds of homes in Kentucky. . . . In Augusta colored persons are in the Revenue Office and Post Office” (“Here”). In her most optimistic moments, Harper had a prophet’s faith that racial uplift was simply a matter of time: “If we have had no past, it is well for us to look hopefully to the future—for the shadows bear the promise of a brighter coming day; and in fact, so far as the colored man is concerned, I do not feel particularly uneasy about his future” (“Affairs”).

On the individual and local level, however, things were not so rosy. Harper reports again and again of the injustices which were continually coming to her attention: “While I am writing, a colored man stands here, with a tale of wrong—he has worked a

whole year, year before last, and now he has been put off with fifteen bushels of corn and his food" ("I Am"). In an 1867 letter concerning her visit to Marion, she expressed particular concern about the fate of Jeff Ghee: "He is a young man, under sentence of death, as an accomplice in a murder committed by two Union soldiers, escaping from that charnel house of death, Florence stockade. . . This colored man hid these men several weeks. . . The soldiers escaped, and this man is under sentence of death" ("Affairs"). At times in the letters, the tide of injustice and hopelessness seemed to nearly overwhelm her: "Oh, friend, perhaps, sometimes your heart would ache, if you were only here and heard of the wrongs and abuses to which these people have been subjected" ("I Am").

Despite the violence, racism, and poverty she encountered in her Southern travels, Harper seems to have remained confident during her repeated tours of the lower states. As she suggests in an 1870 letter, "Some of our people remind me of sheep without a shepherd" ("Almost"). These "sheep without a shepherd" were the people with whom Harper most wanted to communicate. Although she spoke before white audiences with some frequency, the heart of her work in the South was in helping to organize, educate, and encourage African Americans.

Additionally, she was speaking to them in the places of their daily lives: the black churches of the South, the huts of slavery, the meeting-rooms that served as church and lecture hall for the populations of Southern blacks. A few excerpts from Harper's letters will serve to supply a picture of the environments in which she recited her epic. Her pace was frenetic; in one letter she estimates: "I do not think that I have missed more than one Sunday that I have addressed some Sunday-school, and I have not missed many day-schools either" ("Almost"). These school-room appearances were a staple of her journeys through the South, even if the state of these rooms were shockingly inadequate: "Last night I spoke in a schoolhouse, where there was not, to my knowledge, a single window

glass; today I write to you in a lowly cabin, where the windows in the room are formed by two apertures in the wall” (“A Private”). Since her favorite topics included education and the cultivation of “enlightened motherhood” (to quote the title of a late Harper essay), these schoolrooms would have been a fitting, as well as practical, venue. Other locales, on the other hand, she found more disturbing. Harper was troubled to find many families still living impoverished in the same dwellings they had inhabited as slaves: “The people are living in the old cabins of slavery; some of them have no windows, at all that I see; in fact, I don’t remember of having seen a pane of window-glass in the settlement” (“I Visited”). Reminders of penury and brutal oppression were omnipresent. In Darlington, Harper notes, “my congregation was so large, that I stood near the door of the church, so that I might be heard both inside and out . . . and this, in Darlington, where, about two years ago, a girl was hung for making a childish and indiscreet speech” (“I Am”).

She often spoke at churches, but she was obliged on occasion to speak *outside* them. At times, the available buildings were too small to house the crowds; at other times the available churches had fallen into disrepair. In a letter from Eufala, Alabama, for example, she notes: “there was no fire in the church, and so they lit fires outside, and we gathered, or at least a number of us, around the fire” (“I Visited”). Similarly, when describing her visit to Glenville, Alabama, Harper notes that there were “two unfinished churches”: “One has not a single pane of glass, and the same aperture that admits the light also gives ingress to the air; and the other one, I rather think is less finished than that” (“A Room”). In this latter case, the limitation of space was as much of an obstacle as the physical discomfort; after speaking in one of these “unfinished churches,” she notes: “then the white people gave me a hall, and quite a number attended” (“A Room”). But in many cases, when the available facilities were spatially or structurally inadequate,

Harper and her audiences were driven to “roughing it in the bush.” Harper seems aware that these out-of-door gatherings were interesting sites as theatre, and she describes her meetings as such in one letter to William Still:

Let me introduce you to another scene: here is a gathering; a large fire is burning out of doors, and here are one or two boys with hats on. . . Do you know what the gathering means? It is a school . . . They have a church, but somehow they have burnt a hole, I understand, in the top, and so lectured inside, and they gathered around the fire outside. Here is another—what shall I call it?—meeting-place. It is a brush arbor. And what is that? Shall I call it an edifice or an improvised meeting-house? Well, it is called a brush arbor. It is a kind of brush house with seats, and a kind of covering made partly, I rather think, of branches of trees, and an humble place for pulpit. I lectured in a place where they seemed to have no other church; but I spoke at a house. (“A Room”)

With these letters in mind, we can begin more concretely to imagine Harper’s Southern itinerancy, her traveling constantly to the churches, cabins, day-schools, and brush arbors that functioned as community hubs. And these, then, were also the places where *Moses: A Story of the Nile* was originally read. Now we can begin, perhaps, to imagine the poem’s performance scene. Harper would stand before the assembled groups of people – sometimes before crowds that overflowed their spaces, sometimes before smaller groups – in the meeting-rooms, or the old slave cabins, or even beside an outdoor fire. And then she would step into the role of Moses to proclaim the remarkable opening lines of her poem:

Kind and gracious princess, more than friend,
I’ve come to thank thee for thy goodness,

And to breathe into thy generous ears
My last and sad farewell. I go to join
The fortunes of my race, and to put aside
All other bright advantages, save
The approval of my conscience and the meed
Of rightly doing. (1-8)

In the moment of this utterance, Harper presented her listeners with a stunning unity of Biblical narrative, contemporary history, and individual personality. This speech begins with a thanks and a farewell – often fitting sentiments for Harper herself, who would have been speaking, for the first and last time, to groups of people who had been her hosts for the past few days, offering her food, lodging and hospitality.

This is not to suggest that Harper saw herself as a Moses figure, or wished to present herself as one. Although she drew inspiration from the patriarch, and seemingly modeled aspects of her public career after his example, she certainly lacked the Messianic streak that would have been necessary for her to proclaim herself the Moses of her people. (Compared with Horton, whose ultimate subject was himself, or Whitman, who harbored a fierce ambition for public recognition, Harper primarily seemed to write with the interests of her poetic constituency at heart.) In fact, Harper's intention was more complex than narcissistic identification with her hero; she wanted, instead, to step into the character of Moses as part of her project of interrogating and understanding the challenges of the Reconstruction moment. Her presentation of Moses might be best understood as an instance of "voice merging," described by Keith Miller as a feature of the African American oral tradition in which a speaker assumes the words and the persona of another, blending his or her own voice with that of a previous authority. As Miller notes: "The repetition of equivalent and knowable types of religious experience

guarantees the order, predictability, and meaning of history, threading each succeeding generation to those before.” Harper merged her voice with that of Moses both as a way of constituting her own authority and as a way of connecting her audience to a meaningful historical mythology.

Harper’s listeners would likely have been anticipating a celebratory interpretation of the Exodus narrative – a joyful proclamation that God had set American slaves free just as He had with the Hebrews. This was, after all, the most widespread deployment of the Exodus narrative among slave populations in the South; moreover, Moses’s images of broken chains and freedom-led feet echo the rhetoric surrounding Emancipation. But Harper, as usual, had no intention of massaging her listeners’ expectations. She had a divergent interpretation of the Exodus message, and she performed it in her poetry, utilizing the multiplicity of voices in the Old Testament story as a tool to understand and reimagine the Reconstruction moment. The poetry of Harper’s previous phase had been performative, but univocal. During the early years of her Southern tour, Harper learned how to employ poetry as a heteroglossic space: an imagined platform for the collision of varying perspectives. The polyvocal, dialogic nature of the poem emerges forcefully in the first chapter, which takes its momentum from the clash of beliefs between Moses and his mother. This clash divides along several axes: class, race, religion. Moses, as his opening speech makes clear, represents racial solidarity, social conscience, and self-sacrificing service: the ethical life. The Princess, by contrast, represents aesthetic bliss and the danger of familial affection which, though genuine, is untempered by any broader vision, and is therefore short-sighted. Their dialogue is both a meditation on social responsibility and a statement of Harper’s evolving poetics.

Although Harper sketches many characters with empathy, her own sympathies and beliefs are most clearly articulated by Moses. As passages in a number of her other

writings indicate, she had long been fascinated by the patriarch, locating in his character the virtues of self-sacrificing love and unwavering commitment to a divinely-appointed cause. Harper's references to Moses in other speeches and poems help illuminate his function in *Moses: A Story of the Nile*. One of her first recorded references to him was in an 1859 speech published in the *Anglo-African Magazine*:

I like the character of Moses. He is the first disunionist we read of in the Jewish Scriptures. The magnificence of Pharaoh's throne loomed up before his vision, its oriental splendors glittered before his eyes; but he turned from them all and chose rather to suffer with then enslaved, than rejoice with the free. ("Our Greatest")

Harper's characterization of Moses as a "disunionist" demonstrates her facility for using Biblical narratives as a way of thinking through the political and social issues of the present. After the Civil War, she no longer refers to him as a disunionist, but her conception of him as model of solidarity with one's race remains constant. In an 1885 essay, for example, she again turns to Moses as a paragon of devoted love who functions as an intercessor on behalf of his own people:

[W]e have the picture of Moses entreating God to forgive the sin of his people, or blot his name out of the book he had written. Was ever human love more tender and devoted than that which could forgo God's remembrance for the sake of a people who could smite his ears with cruel murmurs, and be almost ready to stone him in their disappointed wrath? ("A Factor")

In her admiration for the patriarch, Harper considers him not only the premier example of a dedicated social leader, but also the premier poet and philosopher, most notably in this passage from an early poem "The Burial of Moses": "This [was] the most

gifted Poet / That ever breathed a word / And never earth's philosopher / Traced with his golden pen / On the deathless page truths half so sage / As he wrote down for men" (51-6). These lines suggest that, for Harper, Moses' significance extends beyond his power as an icon of spiritual and political leadership into the realm of art: by his words, deeds, and attributed writings, he guided people's minds and hearts towards a deeper understanding of truth.

The first chapter of *Moses: A Story of the Nile*, then, in which Moses confronts his royal adopted mother with his newfound dedication to the cause of Hebrew freedom, is not merely a narrative or dramatic device, but also a quasi-allegorical confrontation of two philosophies of life. The Princess, as represented by Harper, is both a hedonist and a conservative; her inner life is shaped by the pursuit of aesthetic bliss and her actions by a belief in the stability and legitimacy of the existing power structure. After Moses's initial statement of purpose, his mother responds:

What means, my son, this strange election?
What wild chimera floats across thy mind?
What sudden impulse moves thy soul? Thou who
Hast only trod the court of kings, why seek
Instead the paths of labor? (9-13)

If we compare these lines to Moses's, we notice that the Princess's rhetorical style contrasts sharply with her son's. Moses's speech consists of two carefully balanced sentences which unfold across eight lines of pentameter, whereas the Princess blurts four questions in six lines. The immediate rhetorical contrast functions as shorthand for the two characters; the poise of Moses's dialogue telegraphs his resolve and moral seriousness, while the Princess's jerky spattering of questions indicates her impulsivity and mercuriality. (Not coincidentally, this rhetorical approach to characterization is

perfectly suited to live performance. During Harper's recitations of *Moses*, she would have played both parts in the opening dialogue; without question, the contrasting oratorical styles would help the audience to differentiate the characters from one another.) To the Princess, moral seriousness is an alien concept. She misjudges her son's new purpose as a "chimera" or an "impulse," not only because the purpose itself seems to her bizarre, but because her life is precisely governed by chimerical impulses.

Moses, however, responds to her initial bafflement with a reaffirmation of his steadfastness:

Let me tell thee, gracious princess; 'tis no
Sudden freak or impulse wild that moves my mind.
I feel an earnest purpose binding all
My soul unto a strong resolve, which bids
Me put aside all other ends and aims,
Until the hour when God—the God
Our fathers loved and worshipped—shall break our chains
And lead our willing feet to freedom. (17-24)

Moses is not only insisting on the rightness of his decision; he is also revising his conceptions of family and belonging. Although the Princess has referred to Moses as "my son," Moses consistently declines to address her as his mother. In fact, a few lines later, he makes the argument that his loyalty should rest with his biological ancestors: "Within those darkened huts my mother plies her tasks," he explains. "My father bends to unrequited toil; / And bitter tears moisten the bread my brethren eat." Stirred, perhaps, as much by her son's new refusal to acknowledge her as kin as by her objection to his decision to live in poverty, the Princess begins a long speech intended to impress upon

Moses the extent of his obligation to the royal family. She begins by reminding her son of the day she rescued him from the Nile:

How like a dream the past floats back: it seems
But yesterday when I lay tossing upon
My couch of pain, a torpor creeping through
Each nerve, a fever coursing through my veins.
And there I lay, dreaming of lilies fair,
Of lotus flowers and past delights, and all
The bright, glad hopes, that give to early life
Its glow and flush; and thus day after day
Dragged its slow length along, until, one morn,
The breath of lilies, fainting on the air,
Floated into my room, and then I longed one more
To gaze upon the Nile, as on the face
Of a familiar friend, whose absence long
Had made a mournful void within the heart . . .
I sought my favorite haunt, and, bathing, found
New tides of vigor coursing through my veins.
Refreshed, I sat me down to weave a crown of lotus leaves
And lilies fair, and while I sat in a sweet
Revery, dreaming of life and hope, I saw
A little wicker-basket hidden among
The flags and lilies of the Nile . . . (45-58, 64-70)

As she recalls the day of Moses's arrival, the Princess begins with a scene more aptly descriptive of childbirth than adoption: she "lay tossing upon / [her] couch of pain". But

her pain and her fever are not the result of labor; rather, they are the symptoms of an overwrought romantic sensibility hungry for new aesthetic delights. The confusion is instructive – just as the Princess’s seeming labor consists of self-serving hedonism, her motherly love is self-interested. She surely intends to awaken Moses’ sympathies by waxing sentimental about the day of his adoption, yet in these lines, she primarily clarifies the differences of character and outlook between herself and Moses. After Moses’ solemn words of principled commitment, we are struck by the languor and luxuriousness of his mother’s speech. The passage overflows with flowers – the constant reference to lilies and lotus-flowers seems almost to overperfume the speech. Most importantly, though, the Princess’s perspective is dominated by a dreamy, shapeless passivity.

On one level, the contrast between Moses and the Princess functions as an allegory of Harper’s poetics. The Princess, with her dreaminess, her romanticization of nature, her impulsive character, represents the poet-as-aesthete – an emphasis on the beauties of verse, to the detriment of the poet’s mission and character. Moses, on the other hand, may represent the engaged poet, who clearly sees his place in the political and theological schemes. Both characters, in this sense, represent a possible paradigm of poetic production. The Princess’s passionate, dramatic, yet ultimately self-interested perspective represents those elements of Romanticism from which Harper wishes to distance herself. Interestingly, her speech includes an echo from Alexander Pope’s “Essay on Criticism.” In one passage from the *Essay*, Pope chastises those readers who judge the worth of poetry by vacuous smoothness of meter and rhyme:

But most by numbers judge a poet’s song,
And smooth or rough, with them, is right or wrong,
In the bright Muse though thousand charms conspire,

Her voice is all these tuneful fools admire (337-40)

Pope proceeds to vilify the vapid flourishes of shallow poetastory – the mindless repetition of stock phrases, the rote employment of metrical tricks – and to bemoan the too-common elevation of style over substance. He concludes the diatribe with a take-down of a specific formal feature common in Augustan verse: “A needless Alexandrine ends the song, / That, like a wounded snake, drags its slow length along.” This final phrase – “drags its slow length along” – surfaces in the Princess’s speech. Doubtless, Harper would have appreciated Pope’s point that poetry should be more concerned with the edification of its message than with the sweetness of its music, and the quotation works in part to telegraph her standpoint about poetic values to well-read readers. As a practitioner of prophetic poetry, Harper believes that verse should enlighten, instruct, and energize others, not merely please the aesthetic sense. But the phrase also functions psychologically, to clarify the nature of the divide separating the Princess from Moses. The limitations of Moses’s adopted mother are, to Harper, clear. For the Princess, “day after day / Dragged its slow length along,” every day as beautiful, lovely, and ultimately meaningless as the alexandrine in a shallow Spenserian stanza.

Nevertheless, the Princess’s love for Moses is passionate and real, and she forcefully reminds her son that their family bond was forged not by chance or whim, but because she offered up her own life to save him from her father’s anger. She recalls to Moses that when the Pharaoh wanted to kill him, she herself intervened:

I said, “The pathway to his life is through my own;
Around that life I throw my heart, a wall
Of living, loving clay.” . . .

. . . And thus I saved

Thee twice—once from the angry sword and once

From the devouring flood. Moses, thou art
Doubly mine; as such I claimed thee then, as such
I claim thee now. I've nursed no other child
Upon my knee, and pressed upon no other
Lips the sweetest kisses of my love, and now,
With rash and careless hand, thou dost thrust aside that love.

(134-6, 149-56)

The Princess is the first fully realized three-dimensional voice in Harper's poetry, and although Moses (and, in a sense, the poet herself) finally reject the mode of life and art which she represents, Harper gives her a powerful claim upon Moses' loyalty and affection in this passage. The image of her heart as a "wall of living, loving clay" is a powerful visualization of sheltering love, and her entreaties reveal that she, too, is capable of resolve, steadfastness, and self-sacrifice. Harper displays such profound empathy towards the Princess that she endangers, to some degree, her audience's regard for her hero; Moses seems rather cold as he immediately responds by declining to acknowledge the Princess his mother, and recalling his birth mother instead:

Gracious lady, thou remembrest well
The Hebrew nurse to whom thou gavest thy foundling.
That woman was my mother; from her lips I
Learned the grand traditions of our race that float,
With all their weird and solemn beauty, around
Our wrecked and blighted fortunes. (167-72)

Unbeknownst to the Princess, Moses has inherited an orally transmitted cultural tradition from his birth mother. Although he is cordial to the Princess, his words cut deep: "*that* woman was my mother" [italics mine]. The very pronouns which demonstrate Moses's

new understanding of self and community – “*our* race”; “*our* wrecked and blighted fortunes” – definitively exclude the Princess, an Egyptian who would not have considered her fortunes, or those of her son, to be blighted. Indeed, this latter phrase firmly signals Moses’s consciousness that he is turning class traitor, leaving the royal family and his adoptive mother behind him.

Harper turns to narration in order to give her audience an image of Moses and the Princess as they part: “Sadly she gazed / Upon the fair young face lit with its lofty / Faith and high resolves.” In this moment of severance, the Princess has one final opportunity to achieve a deeper understanding of her adopted son and his strange mission:

She had known life only
By its brightness, and could not comprehend
The grandeur of the young man’s choice; but she
Felt her admiration glow before the earnest
Faith that tore their lives apart and led him
To another destiny. She had hoped to see
The crown of Egypt on his brow, the sacred
Leopard skin adorn his shoulders, and his seat
The throne of the proud Pharaoh’s; but now her
Dream had faded out and left a bitter pang
Of anguish in its stead. (235-45)

In one key sentence here, we follow the quick vacillations of the Princess’s psychological response. Surprisingly, she begins to feel the stirrings of respect for Moses’s decision: “she / Felt her admiration glow before the earnest / Faith . . .”; however, this brief spasm of understanding collapses almost before it begins, eclipsed by grief and pain: “. . . that tore their lives apart and led him / to another destiny.” By the end of the passage, the

Princess's despair at the countermanding of her desires has won out over her capacity for empathy. As the Princess and Moses take their final leave of one another, their destinies are revealed as sharply and irrevocably divergent:

And thus they parted,
She to brood in silence o'er her pain, and he
To take his mission from the hands of God
And lead his captive race to freedom. (245-8)

As Harper is showing us, the Princess's love is deep but narrow – her hopes are pinned on her son's political ascendance, and on the family's happiness. Moses's dedication to God and to his people must, in the end, take priority. Harper makes no attempt to soft-pedal the bitter nature of this conflict between the public and private sphere, and by beginning her poem this way, she indicates that this conflict is in many ways formative for those who wish to be of service to their people or their God.

The nature of Moses's choice becomes clearer in the second chapter, during which the prophet travels from the palace down towards the Hebrew slave huts to speak with his mother. If the Princess stands in for the individual artist as self-involved aesthete, Moses' mother stands in for the artist as community member, taking her place as the next link in a constantly replicating oral tradition; if the Princess advocates an isolationist familial model of ethicality, Moses's mother advocates a broader allegiance to the welfare of one's people. And while the Princess's mode of understanding is fundamentally rational, Moses's mother models a faith-based, even prophetic approach to truth. As Moses explains his intentions, his language is reminiscent of the announcement made to the Princess:

Mother,
I've come to share the fortunes of my race,--

To dwell within these lowly huts,--to wear
The badge of servitude and toil, and eat
The bitter bread of penury and pain. (40-4)

His mother's reaction, however, is drastically different; although overjoyed, she is not surprised, having trusted that the workings of divine providence would bring Moses back to his own people. By way of explaining and demonstrating her faith in his eventual return, she relates a recent event. Two travelers had recently passed through the village, bearing the news that Moses had "forsworn [his] kindred, tribe, and race . . . and henceforth wouldst / Be engrafted in Pharaoh's regal line, / And be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter." Although the report had greatly upset Moses's father, his mother, as she proceeds to explain, hadn't believed the news of her son's defection for a moment:

But I had stronger faith than that. By faith
I hid thee when the bloody hands of Pharaoh
Were searching 'mid our quivering heart strings,
Dooming our sons to death; by faith I wove
The rushes of thine ark and laid thee 'mid
The flags and lilies of the Nile, and saw
The answer to that faith when Pharaoh's daughter
Placed thee in my arms, and bade me nurse the child
For her; and by that faith sustained, I heard
As idle words the cruel news that stabbed
Thy father like a sword. (59-69)

Since the princess has already related the story of Moses's rescue from the river, this second iteration of the tale is (in terms of plotting) completely redundant. But the differences in the telling are significant, illustrating the epistemological chasm separating

the Princess and Moses's mother. In the Princess's telling, Moses's rescue resulted from a combination of her own passing whim to visit the river and her feelings of pity towards the helpless infant – possibly even from her own broodings on the bank of the Nile as she dreamed of “life and hope.” To the mother, on the other hand, the story looks very different. In her eyes, none of the events surrounding her child's rescue are the product of chance or caprice. Rather, she understands this rescue as having been achieved through the actions of a sheltering God who watches over His people, guiding and shaping their individual and collective destiny. Her faith acts as both a catalyst, enabling her to take the bold action of placing Moses's ark in the Nile, and as a prophetic epistemology, allowing her to perceive the inaccuracy of the false reports concerning her son's acculturation and conversion. In Moses's mother, Harper creates a kind of character – one might go so far as to say an archetype – which would recur throughout her work: the prophetess who sees God's providence at work in human events, keeps faith when others falter, and predicts divinely-assisted triumph over adversity.

Moses tells his mother the full story of his separation from the royal family, and in the process, reveals the lasting impact her storytelling has had on both his racial consciousness and his spiritual development. As Moses explains, he had stood in the temple of the sun, preparing to complete the final ritual signifying his allegiance to Egypt, when he experienced a revelation:

. . . Pharaoh and his daughter sat waiting
In their regal chairs; all were ready to hear
Me bind my soul to Egypt, and to swear
Allegiance to her gods. The priests of On
Drew near to lay their hands upon my head
And bid me swear, ‘Now, by Osiris, judge

Of all the dead, and Isis, mother of us
All,' that henceforth I'd forswear my kindred,
Tribe and race; would have no other gods
Than those of Egypt; would be engrafted
Into Pharaoh's royal line, and be called
The son of Pharaoh's daughter. Then, mother
Dear, I lived the past again. (85-97)

At the moment of his choice, Moses says, he suddenly remembered listening to his mother as she told him "the grand traditions of our race, / The blessed hopes and glorious promises / That weave their golden threads among the somber / Tissues of our live." To his own surprise, Moses's memories of bedtime stories about Israel's past empower him to make the decision to return to his people:

Then, like the angels, mother dear, who met
Our father Jacob on his way, thy words
Came back as messengers of light to guide
My steps, and I refused to be called the son
Of Pharaoh's daughter. . . .

.....

And thus I left the pomp and pride of Egypt
To cast my lot among the people of my race. (133-7, 143-4)

From one perspective, this passage simply provides an example of a scenario common within sentimental literature: i.e., a parent's words and wisdom returning to a son or daughter in a troubled moment. Harper herself would later use the same device in "My Mother's Kiss." Such scenarios usually have a specific cultural work: to reaffirm the importance of a parent's role in transmitting spiritual and moral values and to emphasize

that the offspring ultimately profit from such instruction, even if the lessons seem to be ignored or rejected long into adulthood. And indeed, to Harper it was a matter of urgent importance to remind her audience of the parental duty to provide sound moral instruction. In addition, however, to this conception of a mother's words as "messengers of light," Harper includes other details which suggest additional, less conventional, meanings. The court scene which Moses remembers in flashback does not actually appear in Exodus; rather, it is an invention of the poet's. This additional backstory pushes us to consider Moses as the object of a program of acculturation and racial assimilation. This program is total, and calls for a complete and public espousal of Egyptian culture: Moses is being asked to renounce his family, tribal allegiances, racial identity, and religion, and to swear loyalty to the Egyptian state, the Egyptian religion, and his Egyptian family.

Why did Harper create this scene? I would argue that she wanted to communicate to her most cherished target audience – the blacks of the Reconstruction South – the necessity of racial and cultural cohesion in the face of oppressive state power. When Harper says in one of her letters that the biblical Moses is "the first disunionist we read of in the Jewish Scriptures," she suggests that his repudiation of Pharaoh stands as an example of a separatist, possibly even a proto-nationalist, approach to the problems of a subjugated group. The stories and tales Moses remembers are primarily significant not because of their content per se, or even because they remind him of his mother, but because they are potent reminders that his originary racial and cultural grouping still has a claim on his loyalty, and that there are alternatives to assimilation into the dominant culture.

Unfortunately, space forbids an attentive examination of each of the poem's ten chapters. I have dwelt at length on the first two sections, because they are in many ways the most accomplished sections of the work, and because the performative and dialogic

nature of the poem is most forcefully sustained there. Subsequent chapters are also more prone to narration, and are not as profuse in the presence of multiple voices which, I argue, is the poem's greatest strength. In the interest of space, therefore, I must move past chapters 3-6, although these sections certainly do not lack for poignant and memorable moments. Among them are Harper's clear-eyed description of the effects of slavery on the Hebrews, the debate between the Pharaoh's counselors, and the description of the Israelites' passage through the Red Sea. In chapter 7, however, Harper offers a jarringly unconventional rendering of the encounter on Mount Sinai which serves as a theological declaration:

God's fearful splendor
Flowed around, and Sinai quaked and shuddered
To its base, and there did God proclaim
Unto their listening ears, the great, the grand,
The central and the primal truth of all
The universe – the unity of God.
. . . Only one God! the strongest hands
Should help the weak who bend before the blasts
Of life, because if God is only one
Then we are the children of his mighty hand,
And when we best serve man, we also serve
Our God. Let haughty rulers learn that men
Of humblest birth and lowliest lot have
Rights as sacred and divine as theirs, and they
Who fence in leagues of earth by bonds and claims
And title deeds, forgetting land and water,

Air and light are God's own gifts and heritage
For man—who throw their selfish lives between
God's sunshine and the shivering poor—
Have never learned the wondrous depth,
Nor scaled the glorious height of this great central truth,
Around which clusters all the holiest faiths
Of earth. (6-39)

Once again, Harper demonstrates her willingness to reshape the well-known details and episodes of the Old Testament narrative, creating a revisionary myth in the service of her own thematic ends. In the passage above, she boldly rewrites the account of Moses on Mount Sinai, completely omitting the Ten Commandments in the process – an especially audacious decision, considering both the theological centrality of the commandments and the familiarity of the Exodus story. In place of the stone tablets, Harper gives us a single theological epiphany – “the unity of God.” The poet makes powerful and unexpected use of the concept of monotheism, transforming this simple central article of Judeo-Christian belief into a call for social justice. Strikingly, she also leaves her audience unsure of the speaker. Is this the narrator? Harper herself breaking form to speak directly to her hearers? The voice of Sinai itself, or of God? The absence of attribution for these words contributes to the sense that they are being received as an epiphany, not just by Moses, but by all the “listening ears” of the Israelites – and, by extension, the crowds listening to Harper's recitation.

The revelation on Sinai finds Harper assuming prophetic authority to its fullest, her ringing lines standing in for the words of Moses come down from the mountain. The lines quoted above offer one of the best examples of “voice merging” – Harper's poetic voice blends with the biblically authoritative voice of Moses himself, as she proceeds to

deliver her words of warning and exhortation to the freed blacks of the south. The next chapter, narrated again from Moses's perspective, offers a glimpse of a confused, uncertain Hebrew population in danger of forgetting the lessons of their captivity and deliverance:

. . . and thus for many years

Did Moses bear the evil manners of his race—
Their angry murmurs, fierce regrets and strange
Forgetfulness of God. Born slaves, they did not love
The freedom of the wild more than their pots of flesh
And pleasant savory things once gathered
From the gardens of the Nile.
If slavery only laid its weight of chains
Upon the weary, aching limbs, e'en then
It were a curse; but when it frets through nerve
And flesh and eats into the weary soul,
Oh then it is a thing for every human
Heart to loathe, and this was Israel's fate,
For when the chains were shaken from their limbs,
They failed to strike the impress from their souls.
.....
But though they slumbered in the wild, they died
With broader freedom on their lips, and for their
Little ones did God reserve the heritage
So rudely thrust aside. (7-21, 35-8)

The biblical version of the Exodus story memorably emphasizes the stubbornness and apostasy of the Israelites; as a result of their rebellion towards God's decrees, they wander forty years in the wilderness until almost all of the original refugee population has died. Once again, Harper tweaks the story. In her version, the Hebrews are doomed to wander the wilderness because they are unwilling or unable to live up to the high standards of their newfound freedom – “when the chains were shaken from their limbs, / They failed to strike the impress from their souls.”

In the foregoing passage, which is perhaps the crux of the poem, Harper's message is stern, and may even have sounded harsh to her audiences of new freemen. At a time when she may have been expected to tell a familiar, triumphal version of the Exodus moment, Harper offers a sharper-edged and challenging reworking of the narrative. In this version of the story, the Israelites are *not* the people who were led by God into freedom – rather, they are the people who were released from a state-sponsored external captivity only to languish in a self-imposed internal captivity, leaving the promise of freedom to languish until a later generation. Harper's purpose, I believe, was not to castigate her listeners for squandering their “heritage / So rudely thrust aside” – she had too much faith in the ongoing work of Reconstruction to believe that this was the case. Rather, she was employing the biblical story as a warning and as a corrective. Freedom, she seems to be suggesting, cannot be achieved by eliminating the condition of bondage; rather, it manifests itself only in the striving.

**“WE ARE MARCHING ALONG” – THE INSTITUTION-BUILDING WORK OF HARPER'S
OCCASIONAL POETRY**

Harper never repeated the grand experiment of *Moses*; never again in poetry would she use such a broad canvas. However, much of the best poetry of her later career

takes creative impetus from discoveries made in the composition of *Moses*. The well-known series of “Chloe” poems, for example, in which an aging black woman narrates the changes in her life, family, and community from slavery through Reconstruction, would not have been possible had Harper not already honed her ability to create individuated voices within an extended narrative framework. And in other phenomenal, less-familiar works such as “Simon’s Countrymen” and “Dedication Poem,” she tweaks familiar biblical stories in the service of a social message or a commemorative event.

Harper was wildly prolific until 1900, when, as Frances Smith Foster suggests, she may have retired from public service to care for her ailing daughter. Her poetic work spins out in many directions from *Moses*, and to follow all of them would require a great deal of time and space. Consequently, the subsequent discussion will focus on two aspects of Harper’s later achievement which stand out as especially relevant within the larger context of the African American poetic tradition: her rediscovery of the power of occasional verse (a mode which she inherited from Phillis Wheatley), and her increasingly powerful and skilled deployment of the prophetic mode.

An 1876 poem titled “We Are Rising,” a rousing folk hymn composed “for the unveiling of the Allen Monument,” stands as an early and contextually rich example of Harper’s occasional verse. And the occasion, in this particular case, was both important and controversial: the Allen Monument was unveiled at the Centennial Exposition, as the culmination of a long and rancorous dispute over the representation of blacks in the commemorative celebration.

Though most Americans were apathetic about the American Centennial Exposition of 1876 – it was a year of high unemployment and high-profile scandals within the Grant administration -- many African American individuals and organizations saw the event as an opportunity to publicize the achievements of black Americans from

the Revolution onward. Participation in the Centennial, they felt, could serve symbolically to represent the full arrival of African Americans as publicly acknowledged participants in the American story. In almost every case, however, the proposed contributions of African Americans were rejected by the Centennial organizers. In the end, African American participation in the Centennial was limited to only two events: Frederick Douglass would appear on the main platform on the opening day to read the Emancipation Proclamation, and the Allen Monument would be given a place. As it happened, even these two events were partially hindered. Douglass was nearly barred from attending by security officers who refused to believe that he was slated to appear alongside President Grant and the other worthies, and the Allen Monument was green-lighted on the condition that it be removed from the grounds shortly after the Centennial.

As originally envisioned, the Allen Monument would be a statue of Richard Allen – the founder and first bishop of the AME Church – placed atop an ornate, richly symbolic pedestal commissioned from Afro-Italian sculptress Edmonia Lewis. But the Monument was more than a tribute and memorial to an honored African American bishop and statesman; it was, as Mitch Kachum points out, “the earliest successful effort by black Americans to honor one of their own with a commemorative statue” (300). The effort had not been easy, and the unveiling of the monument in Fairmont Park concluded a long period of acrimonious wrangling. Firstly, Benjamin Tucker Tanner, who initially proposed and advocated for the statue, had had to convince skeptical members of the A.M.E. Church to fund an expensive monument at a time when the Church was increasingly concerned with finding ways to combat far more pressing problems than the racial imbalance of public memorials: lynching, unemployment, and political disenfranchisement, to name only a few. After Tanner and other like-minded individuals succeeded in rallying the necessary support for the monument, the organizers of the

Exposition presented another obstacle, finally agreeing to allow the Monument on the condition that it be removed within sixty days after the closing of the Exposition (in contrast to the other monuments to acceptable public figures like Miles Standish and Alexander von Humboldt, which were given permanent place).

Two ceremonies were slated around the monument: a July 4 event to celebrate the laying of the foundation, and a September 23 event – the same date as the preliminary announcement of the Emancipation Proclamation – to celebrate the monument’s unveiling. Things did not go as planned. Edmonia Lewis’s pedestal was broken en route from Rome, and the unveiling ceremony was consequently postponed until November 2. Bishop John Mercer Langston, a black educator, poet, and politician, had been invited to give an oration on the life and work of Reverend Allen, but was unable to attend. Instead, the address was delivered by John M. Brown, with Langston giving his address weeks later, after the monument’s transferral to the Mother Bethel A.M.E. Church.

The “occasion” for which Harper was asked to compose a poem was thus bifurcated in time and place – a thrice-dedicated dedication. (In his December address at Bethel, Langston asked his hearers to imagine themselves in Fairmont Park on September 23 – an instruction that accentuates the imaged contemporaneity of the three events). And for this complex, divisive and divided ceremony, Harper composed “We Are Rising,” a poem that, somewhat surprisingly, overtly mentions neither the centennial, nor the political controversy surrounding it, nor the Allen Monument. Instead, the poem offers a resounding, joyful celebration of progress towards freedom:

We are rising, as a people,
We are rising, to the light;
For God has changed the shadows
Of our dark and dreary night.

In the prison house of bondage,
When we bent beneath the rod,
And our hearts were faint and weary,
We first learned to trust in God.

We are marching along, we are marching along
The hand that broke our fetters was powerful strong.
We are marching along, we are marching along,
We are rising as a people, and we're marching along. (1-12)

With these first verses, Harper begins to offer the paean to freedom that she had pointedly held in reserve during the composition of *Moses*. Her tone, somewhat uncharacteristically, remains joyous, vibrant, and celebratory throughout the poem. Even in slavery, the poet claims, God was mindful of His children and preparing them for their place in His plan.

Upon a casual or cursory reading of the poem, we might misinterpret it as politically disconnected or formulaic. But viewed within the context of Harper's career, and especially within the performance context of the Centennial Exhibition and the unveiling of the Allen Monument, the poem begins to stand out as the masterful public theatre that it truly is. Moreover, "We Are Rising" departs from Harper's previous work in so many different ways that may arguably represent a turning point in her oeuvre.

Unusually for Harper, the poem communicates more by the force of its variable rhythmic drive than by its deployment of narrative or persona. Especially remarkable is the chorus, which is actually *syncopated*. The rhythmic structure, a fusion of early spirituals and protestant hymnody, includes a persistent rhythmic motif that alternately accents downbeats and off-beats. The result is syncopation – a difficult-to-define and

much-abused term denoting a rhythm in which normally unaccented beats are given emphasis. If we imagine the lines from the chorus of “We Are Rising” fitted into four-beat measures, the syncopated movement becomes clear:

1	2	3	4		1	2	3	4
<	<				<	<		
We are marching along, we are mar-ching a – long								
˘	˘	/	˘	˘	/	[˘ ˘]	˘	˘
					/	˘	˘	/
							[˘ ˘ ˘]	
[4]	1	2	3	4		1	2	
	<	<	<			<	<	
The hand that broke our fetters was powerful strong.								
˘	/	˘	/	˘	/	˘	[˘]	˘
					/	˘	˘	/
							[˘ ˘ ˘]	

When the text is arranged in this way, three of the “measures” (the first, second, and fourth) share the same pattern of accentuation: one accent on the downbeat and another on the off-beat of 2. In the third “measure” reproduced above, this syncopated pattern is interrupted by a contrasting pattern, with accents on the beats 1, 2, and 3. The rhythmic pattern established in the foregoing lines is repeated almost exactly in the next two lines, which conclude the chorus. Harper produces a driving, syncopated effect here which is endemic neither to nineteenth-century metrical prosody nor to the Western classical tradition, but rather to those forms of Afro-American musical expression which have their roots in the polyrhythms of West Africa. Additionally, with the colloquialism “powerful strong,” Harper makes vibrant use of the black vernacular. The very fabric of the poem, in other words, testifies to the idea of African Americans “rising as a people” – the unique rhythms and expressions of those people are woven into the chorus. Her approach stands as a rebuke to the Centennial organizers who would deny that blacks in

America had a distinctive contribution to make, and resonates with the words of Bishop Jenifer, who had spoken earlier that day: “We come to make our contributions to the New World’s Fair, which shall stand forever as the first national scientific effort of a race heroically struggling to shake off the degradation of centuries.”

As the verses continue, Harper subtly frames the controversy surrounding the centennial celebration by offering a reminder (rare in Harper’s postbellum work) of the divine rebuke delivered to the nation by the Almighty:

For the sighing of the needy,
God, himself did bare his hand,
And the footsteps of his judgments,
Echoed through the guilty land:
When the rust of many ages
On our galling fetters lay,
He turned our grief to gladness,
And our darkness into day.

.....

Help us, Oh! Great Deliverer,
To be faithful to thy Word,
Till the nation’s former bondmen,
Be the freemen of the Lord. (13-20, 31-4)

In these verses, Harper takes the occasion to remind her audience that God – not any secular power, and especially not “the guilty land” of America – was the author of their liberation. The last line, in particular, suggests a kind of transferral of citizenship. Once, Harper proclaims, you were the bondmen of *this nation*; now, you are the freemen of *the Lord*.

“We Are Rising” may have inaugurated a subtle shift in Harper’s oeuvre, giving her insight into the potential power of occasional verse. In the preceding decades, she had penned only one true occasional poem – the forgettable “Obituary for J. Edward Barnes” – but from 1876 onward, she frequently composed important dedicatory and commemorative pieces. Frances Smith Foster, in her collection of Harper’s work, notes the sudden uptick in Harper’s production of occasional poetry, speculating that “[f]rom 1876 on, such poems appear more frequently because, by this time, Frances Harper was performing as an unofficial African-American poet laureate and was often called upon to memorialize important events” (237). This statement, although certainly true, does not seem to me sufficiently explanatory. After all, Harper was not one to produce verse on demand unless the work furthered her own vision and sense of personal mission. Moreover, there were two other poets in the nineteenth century who, in their day, could claim to be the “unofficial African-American poet laureate” – Albery Allson Whitman and Paul Laurence Dunbar – and neither of these writers produced any significant quantity of occasional verse. I would attribute Harper’s drastic mid-career embrace of the genre to a renewed dedication to the grassroots network of local institutions and communities which undergirded and sustained black society. Most of Harper’s early verse works as a goad and a tonic to the individual conscience; community may have provided the occasion and the intended audience, but community is rarely in any sense the *subject* of poems until 1876, with the appearance of “We Are Rising.” As though her own poem or her overall Centennial experience acted as a minor revelation to her, Harper began writing occasional verse that would recognize, celebrate, and unite (sometimes only in imagination) black communities.

The titles themselves are eloquent, and speak to Harper’s commitment to institution-building: “In Commemoration of the Centennial of the AME Church,” “For

the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the ‘Old Folks’ Home” (a retirement facility for elderly blacks), “To Bishop Payne” (bishop of the AME Church), “Respectfully Dedicated to Alexander Crummell on the Fiftieth Anniversary of his Pastorate,” “To Mr. and Mrs. W. F. Johnson on their Twenty-Fifth Wedding Anniversary” (the Johnsons ran an orphanage out of their home). More often than not, these poems make grand gestures towards a shared – often invisible or diasporic – community. “For the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the ‘Old Folks’ Home,” for example, records the names of no less than ten individuals who helped inspire, fund, construct, or operate the facility, and imagines a future reunion that would bring together the residents who dwell within the home and the workers who made the place a reality: “May friends and patrons meet again/ In God’s fair halls of love and light.” Even more striking is “In Commemoration of the Centennial of the AME Church,” in which Harper imagines the AME church as a massive tree overspreading (and nourishing from beneath) the black diaspora:

From shore to shore its branches spread,
From snow-clad hills of Maine
To where, against our coral reefs,
The wild waves dash in vain.

Its roots have run beyond the sea
To Hayti’s sunny strand
And spread its branches far away
In Africa’s distant land. (13-20)

The notion of using occasional verse as an imaginary bridge between members of a community divided by geography or death was not new to Harper – Phillis Wheatley, for one, used the genre in strikingly similar ways – but her deployment of the technique was

both exemplary and pertinent at a time when African Americans were hungry for a sense of inclusion and broader belonging.

“A FAIRER HOPE, A BRIGHTER MORN”: VISIONING AMERICA’S RACIAL FUTURE

In many of her poems from the eighties and nineties, Harper seemed to be searching for a poetic mode that could adequately portray her sense of God at work in the social and political affairs of the world. One of the most interesting of these poems, “A Fairer Hope, A Brighter Morn,” is in some ways typical of her later work, and in other ways anomalous. Like much of the verse Harper wrote in her later career, “A Fairer Hope” surveys the bitterness of injustices present and past, yet ultimately takes a triumphal view of ongoing social struggle, looking ahead prophetically to proclaim God’s eventual victory over corrupt worldly powers. Although tonally similar to many of Harper’s other poems, “A Fairer Hope” is distinguished by its incisive and daring analysis of the white racial imagination.

The poem begins with a narrator who has been unpleasantly yanked from a “higher life” to confront some kind of evil, the nature of which is not immediately apparent:

From the peaceful heights of a higher life
I heard your maddening cry of strife;
It quivered with anguish, wrath and pain,
Like a demon struggling with his chain.

A chain of evil, heavy and strong,
Rusted with ages of fearful wrong,

Encrusted with blood and burning tears,

The chain I had worn and dragged for years. (1-8)

These opening lines are, in numerous ways, disorienting. As with “The Slave Mother,” Harper begins this poem in medias res, and with an unexplained shout that takes the narrator herself by surprise. To whom does the anguished and wrathful shout belong? For that matter, who is this narrator who speaks to us from “the peaceful heights of a higher life”? Is she an angel or a seer? Moreover, within the language of these stanzas there is a certain blurring of the line between reality and metaphor – the voice quivers “*like* a demon struggling with his chain,” but in the next verse the narrator claims to have worn the chain herself. The chain seems to be an emblem of slavery, but in what sense does the shouter now wear it?

These questions are not answered overtly, but in the succeeding stanzas Harper reveals that the broken chain of slavery still haunts the thoughts of the “you” to whom she speaks. This “you” seems to suffer from a convulsive, constant re-creation of the days of slavery:

You thought of your fields with harvest white,
Where I toiled in pain from morn till night;
You thought of the days you bought and sold
The children I loved, for paltry gold.

You thought of our shrieks that rent the air—
Our moans of anguish and deep despair;
With chattering teeth and paling face,
You thought of your nation’s deep disgrace. (21-8)

In these verses, we begin to understand that Harper is speaking of the phenomenon of white guilt over slavery. The “harvest white,” of course, refers both to the cotton production of the south and to the fundamental structure of chattel slavery: economic exploitation is a harvesting not only of crops, but of the privileges of whiteness. Harper aptly describes the addressee as “paling” – in contemplating the injustice of the slavery system, this “you” begins to perceive the consequences and the true nature of his whiteness for the first time.

As the interlocutee ponders the horror of slavery, his thoughts begin to twist away from his own factual past deeds and into the realm of the guilt-ridden racial imagination:

You wove from your fears a fearful fate
To spring from your seeds of scorn and hate;
You imagined the saddest, wildest thing,
That time, with revenges fierce, could bring.

The cry you thought from a Voodoo breast
Was the echo of your soul’s unrest;
When thoughts too sad for fruitless tears
Loomed like the ghosts of avenging years.

Oh! Prophet of evil, could not your voice

In our new hopes and freedom rejoice? (29-38)

Having mulled over the systematic atrocities that he has committed, directly or by proxy, during the years of institutionalized slavery, the man now begins to brood on the possibility that the victims might return to seek retribution, or “revenges fierce.” Harper’s scenario is far from hypothetical; slaveholders had long feared that slaves, if

they attained their freedom, would turn violently against their erstwhile oppressors. Thomas Jefferson, for example, voiced this belief in *Notes on the State of Virginia*. If the slaves were freed, he argued, then “ten thousand recollections, by the blacks, of the injuries they have sustained” would “produce convulsions, which will probably never end but in the extermination of the one or the other race.” As he concludes the chapter, Jefferson – the great rationalist and religious skeptic – finds himself in utter terror: “Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep for ever: that considering numbers, nature and natural means only, a revolution of the wheel of fortune, an exchange of situation, is among possible events: that it may become probable by supernatural interference!” The panic detectable here, a panic quite at odds with Jefferson’s normally measured, scientific tone is the same emotional reaction being examined in Harper’s poem.

Harper understands perfectly the roots of such paranoia, and follows the logic of its unfolding: the archetypal white man in her poem, as he considers the injustices he has committed, naturally begins to fear that his crimes will be revisited upon his own head, and “imagine[s] the saddest, wildest thing / That time, with revenges fierce could bring.” The consequence of his guilt and fear, however, is the introduction of a dangerous fantasy into the world. When he considers the state of interracial relations in America, this man hears the terrifying “cry of a Voodoo breast” where none exists. The “avenging ghosts” which he imagines are anatomized cleanly by Harper: they are the products of his own guilt and fear. She designates this man a “prophet of evil” because, as she goes on to elaborate, he claims to foresee calamities that are nothing more than racist fears and refracted shame:

‘Mid the light which streams around our way

Was there naught to see but an evil day?

Nothing but vengeance, wrath and hate,
And the serpent coils of an evil fate—
A fate that shall crush and drag you down;
A doom that shall press like an iron crown?

A fate that shall crisp and curl your hair
And darken your faces now as fair,
And send through your veins like a poisoned flood
The hated stream of the Negro's blood?

A fate to madden the heart and brain
You've peopled with phantoms of dread and pain,
And fancies wild of your daughter's shriek
With Congo kisses upon her cheek?

Beyond the mist of your gloomy fears,
I see the promise of brighter years,
Through the dark I see their golden hem
And my heart gives out its glad amen. (39-56)

In these stanzas, Harper simultaneously enumerates and ridicules the “prophecies” of the racist imagination. This “prophet of evil” believes that the emancipation of the slaves will lead directly to the destruction of whiteness; that the white race will be crushed and degraded, that miscegenation will alter and eventually destroy the beloved white European phenotype, and that white maidens will suffer sexual violence at the hands of

black “primitives.” Harper counters these false visions in two ways. Firstly, she makes them sound ridiculous: she simultaneously trivializes the imagined fears. The phrase “Congo kisses” is simply silly, and Harper’s characterization of miscegenation as “a fate that shall crisp and curl your hair” serves to make white phobias about racial mixture seem hysterical and absurd. (Although such racist fears were absurd, they were of course deadly serious as well -- at the time the poem was written, black men were regularly being lynched in the name of white feminine sexual purity.) Secondly, she offers a contrasting vision of “brighter years,” which she elaborates in the succeeding stanzas.

As in so many of her later poems, Harper turns from a diagnosis of social and moral ills to a prophecy of a brighter future. In this particular poem, she predicts the coming-into-being of a new and different theology, a theology which will have its roots in black exceptionalism and its purpose in the forging of an international coalition of love:

The banner of Christ was your sacred trust,
But you trailed that banner in the dust,
And mockingly told us amid our pain
The hand of your God had forged our chain.

We stumbled and groped through the dreary night
Till our fingers touched God’s robe of light;
And we knew he heard, from his lofty throne,
Our saddest cries and faintest moan.

.....

God, to whose fingers thrills each heart beat,
Has not sent us to walk with aimless feet,

To cower and couch with bated breath
From margins of life to shores of death.

Higher and better than hate for hate,
Like the scorpion fangs that desolate,
Is the hope of a brighter, fairer morn
And a peace and love that shall yet be born;

When the Negro shall hold an honored place;
The friend and helper of every race;
His mission to build and not destroy,
And gladden the world with love and joy. (57-64, 69-80)

In these concluding stanzas, the underlying vision of supernatural struggle becomes clearer. Harper's narrator, an oracle of freedom, cross-cultural understanding, and Christian agape, confronts an antagonist who represents the forces of self-interest, fear, prejudice, and apostasy. In the course of this struggle, Harper suggests, the mantle of spiritual authority decisively passed from those leaders of the church who collaborated with the oppressors, to be picked up by the black church and those who shared its vision of peace and love.

For whatever reason, Harper's later poetry increasingly speaks in prophecy and dream, surveying the distant past and distant future alike as if from a great height. These poems proclaim with particular insistency that all empires eventually succumb to moral blindness and corruption and, finally, to decay and collapse; such will be the fate of America. As she puts it in "How Are The Mighty Fallen,":

O'er the tombs of fallen nations,

Of kingdoms made desolate,
Is written, in light, the sentence:
Only God himself is great. (29-32)

As these lines imply, Harper's prophetic poetry springs from her knowledge of the past – especially the past as told in the Old Testament and Greco-Roman history – as much as from her convictions about the future. Her study of history assured her that unjust and oppressive systems bring about their own destruction by awaking the wrath of the people, and of God himself.

Chapter Three: Parody and Performance in the Lyrics of Joshua McCarter Simpson

Although Joshua McCarter Simpson was a contemporary of Frances Harper, his public career could hardly have been more different. While Harper was an instant celebrity after the publication of her first volume, Simpson was quietly, even anonymously, influential. His songs and poems were well known on the Underground Railroad long before they were available to the general public. A great many of his verses were covertly circulated in pamphlet form, and Sojourner Truth, for one, sung Simpson's songs at abolitionist meetings. During the 1840s and 50s, when the Underground Railroad was running at full steam and abolitionist meetings were more widely-attended and fervent than ever, Simpson was probably at the height of his influence; yet during this same period, he was neither a public figure nor even a published writer, and few people knew any details about his life. Nearly two decades after the Civil War, though, Simpson emerged from his near-anonymity. In 1874, he collected his songs and poems into a book titled *The Emancipation Car*, which remains the principal source for most of what we know of Simpson's life and work.

As we have seen, Harper developed a mode of prophetic poetics in which she called audiences into a collaborative space, asking her listeners to be co-witnesses of both past and future. Simpson had a very differently structured relationship with his readers and hearers. Because his poems were always intended to be sung by others, not performed by himself, Simpson's work suggests a prophetic poetics quite distinct from Harper's, a model that places less emphasis on personal presence, and more emphasis on the process by which songs are transmitted. Simpson begins to illuminate the relationship between prophecy and poetic performance in the autobiographical sketch which prefaces

The Emancipation Car. In this sketch, Simpson offers a striking account of the moment he was called to be a poet:

Persecutions in 1836 against Abolitionists became quite prevalent . . . but my heart secretly moaned all the time and said “Lord what can be done for my people.” As soon as I could write, which was not until I was past twenty-one years old, a spirit of poetry, (which was always in me,) became revived, and seemed to waft before my mind horrid pictures of the condition of my people, and something seemed to say, “Write and sing about it—you can sing what would be death to speak.” So I began to write and sing. (iii-iv)

In this brief yet stunning passage, Simpson ventures a kind of thumbnail spiritual autobiography. To describe his ordination as a poet-prophet, Simpson pulls together variegated experiences, both personal (literacy, prophetic vision, attainment of the age of majority, an answered prayer) and socio-cultural (the anti-abolitionist backlash, the de facto prohibition of black political speech, the Romantic conception of an indwelling spirit of poetry, the idea of music as a socially sanctioned form of protest) into a unified epiphany. We might well read Simpson’s seemingly off-hand inclusion of his age as pointedly ironic: at twenty-one, enfranchised American males reach the age of legal self-determination and are granted the right to vote. But Simpson, of course, can assume neither of these things – instead, he is granted horrific visions of his people. His inheritance comes, rather, in the form of a mandate to prophesy, to testify to what he has seen and to what he has divined.

We may well wonder what Simpson’s narrative might suggest about the relationship between literacy, prophecy, and song. Simpson implies that some kind of connection exists between his literacy and his poetic commissioning, noting that he

received the latter “as soon as [he] could write”. In considering the significance of Simpson’s literacy here, it seems significant that he was compelled, not merely to write verses, but specifically to *sing* them. Lyric poets, of course, have long referred to themselves as singers and to their verses as songs or “lyrics” – but in Simpson’s narrative, there seems to be more to it than this. Since literacy was an illegal and highly dangerous attainment for a black man of the mid-nineteenth century, it seems fitting that, “as soon as [he] could write,” the poetic spirit would impress upon him that certain truths are dangerous and only utterable within song. In this sense, Simpson’s visitation by the spirit can be understood as a response to the a dangerously charged political landscape that violently enforced restrictions on black speech; the newly anointed prophet must take shelter in song, a less-policed “folk” form.

Most importantly, perhaps, this passage enables us to make some opening observations about the structure of a prophetic poetics. Notably, the role of nascent prophet provides Simpson with both an epistemology and a model for social engagement. The “horrid pictures” inform the young poet of the material realities of chattel slavery and galvanize his moral outrage while leading him to understand that he has a particular duty to the enslaved (“my people”). Simultaneously, the voice offers Simpson a program of action: “write and sing about it”. This brief account from the preface to *The Emancipation Car* offers us, in an abbreviated form, the basic elements of an emergent African-American prophetic poetics: visions of worldly injustice, a sense of being divinely chosen as an agent of social change, and an obligation to bear witness through poetry.

Simpson’s model of prophecy, interestingly, sidesteps any religious or theological affiliations. Whereas Harper quite clearly and specifically invokes an Old Testament God of retribution, much as Whitfield and Vashon had done before her, Simpson describes his

vision and epiphany with a rather opaque set of terms: “A spirit of poetry . . . seemed to waft before my mind horrid pictures”; “something seemed to say, “Write and sing about it”. Doubtless, Simpson’s preface as a whole implies that his “anointing” experience should be best understood within a Christian framework, but when the poet narrates the actual moment of his epiphany, the language becomes strangely noncommittal. Instead of the Holy Spirit, he gives us the “spirit of poetry”; instead of God, we have a nameless “something” that only *seems* to speak. Throughout *The Emancipation Car*, Simpson maintains this extreme reticence about the source of his visions and epiphanies; whenever he discusses his “flashes of prophecy,” the customary terminologies of Christian spirituality are surprisingly absent.

Could Simpson’s indefinable “spirit of poetry” bear the traces of African spiritual belief? Intriguingly, his account echoes Sojourner Truth’s conversion narrative, in which she describes her encounter with a “Holy Wind.” As Margaret Washington has convincingly demonstrated, Truth’s syncretic belief system combined Pentecostalism with African convictions regarding spiritual communication and the animation of the material world. Simpson’s autobiographical sketch, taken together with the appendix to *The Emancipation Car* in which he describes his flashes of prophetic vision, might indicate that he, like Truth, adhered to a syncretic faith blending African and Baptist elements. Since Simpson was the an elder in the Baptist Church at the time of his book’s publication, he would probably have deemphasized any components of his spiritual experience which defied Christian orthodoxy – a factor which could explain the curious lack of specificity about the nature and origin of his spiritual visitations. We shall return later in the chapter to the subject of Simpson’s prophecies and doctrinal opacity. For now, it suffices to observe that prophecy, as it was emerging in the black poetic tradition, could be decoupled from theology without great ideological strain. Although the religious

orientation of Simpson's work differed from that of Harper, his poetry shares with hers a prophetic element allied to a sense collaborative performativity, a combination which steered both poets towards prophetic poetry as a mode of socially engaged action.

Of course, the difference in Harper's and Simpson's public careers creates a corresponding difference in their respective archives. Harper's ceaseless touring over five decades, combined with her high-profile status as poet-statesman, produced a substantial body of documentary evidence in the form of advertisements, reviews, and eye-witness accounts; the shape of her career over time is inscribed in the archive. Simpson's endeavors, by contrast, come down to us almost exclusively in the shape of his book; we cannot, as with Harper, make any observations about the evolution of his work, and more dispiritingly, we currently have little information about performances of his songs. Fortunately, *The Emancipation Car* is a marvelously polyvocal, layered document. The book includes forty-eight "anti-slavery songs," a Franklin-esque autobiographical essay complete with improving maxims ("How I Got My Education"), a genre-bending parody of a worship service ("Consistent Family Worship of Slave-Holders"), an oration ("The Colonization Society"), and a number of introductions to the songs themselves, in which Simpson not only offers performance instructions, but discusses his inspirations, intentions, and "flashes of prophecy." As a result, the text of *The Emancipation Car* allows us to partially reconstruct the performative context for Simpson's songs. And because the volume includes representations of Simpson's spiritual calling and his visions, we can also consider his performance as a poet-prophet. We cannot, however, clearly situate all of these texts and performances in time. Unlike Whitfield, Vashon, and Harper, whose publication and performance histories are clearly datable, Simpson's lyrics were circulated orally for decades before being collected in print. Therefore, the

following discussion will proceed tropologically rather than chronologically, focusing on three salient aspects of his work: parody, performance, and prophecy.

“TO CHANGE THE FLOW OF THOSE SWEET MELODIES” – PARODY IN *THE EMANCIPATION CAR*

After receiving his ordination from the “spirit of poetry,” Simpson seems to have followed precisely the spirit’s injunction to “sing what would be death to speak.” Nearly all of the poems collected in *The Emancipation Car* are written for singing –they are *lyrics* in the colloquial sense. In order to perceive Simpson’s work accurately, then, we must remember that the melodies of Simpson’s compositions are often just as important as his texts. In fact, Simpson often aimed to *recover* the tunes he used for his compositions from their appropriation into minstrelsy, as he indicates in this passage from the preface:

In my selection of “Airs,” I have gathered such as are popular, and extensively known. Many superstitious persons, and perhaps, many good conscientious, well-meaning Christians, will denounce and reject the work on account of the “Tunes,” but my object has been to change the flow of those sweet melodies (so often disgraced by Comic Negro Songs, and sung by our own people,) into a more appropriate and useful channel; and I hope that my motives may be duly appreciated; and that this little work, (the first of the kind in the United States,) may find a resting place and a hearty welcome in every State, community and family in the Union, and as a far as a friend to the slave may be found. (v-vi)

By expressing a hint that his “motives may be duly appreciated,” Simpson urges his audience to understand that he has not selected the “Airs” casually or lightly; rather, the melodies have been chosen strategically, artistically. In fact, Simpson was dead

serious in his complaint that beautiful melodies had been “disgraced by Comic Negro Song,” and his intentions with regard to tune selection are rather more radical than he lets on. Although he occasionally employs a well-known melody simply for metrical or melodic utility, in the best of his compositions, Simpson actively writes against the grain of the original text, letting his new lyric serve as a commentary or corrective.

Among the “popular, and extensively known” tunes referenced in *The Emancipation Car*, nearly a dozen are minstrel tunes (“Camptown Races,” “O! Susanna”) and another five are patriotic songs (“Marseilles Hymn,” “America”). When setting lyrics to these two types of songs, Simpson’s words nearly always contradict the spirit or the intent of the original tune. The ingenuity of his revisions, though, varies wildly from poem to poem. In some cases, Simpson’s take-offs repudiate the original lyrics in a direct, rather literal-minded fashion. For example, Simpson’s “The Song of the Alien American,” a parody of “My Country, ‘Tis of Thee,” rejects the patriotic sentiment of the original in a blunt, bitterly ironic fashion. The familiar lyric, of course, begins with these words:

My country, ‘tis of thee,
Sweet land of liberty,
Of thee I sing

Simpson’s parody echoes the phrasing and even some of the wording of these lyrics, while reversing its appraisal of the American experience:

My country, ‘tis of thee,
Dark land of Slavery,
In thee we groan (1-3)

Lyrics of this kind, in which Simpson engages in word-by-word substitution (sometimes at the expense of the sense, as above) do not represent his best or most imaginative work.

Nevertheless, these parodies were probably quite effective on the Underground Railroad, as well as being easily memorized for singing.

In his best lyrics, however, Simpson turns his source texts completely upside down, showing an often-startling perspective on the original. As an example of this second and more radical kind of revision, here is a verse from “The Fugitive at Home,” preceded by a verse from its original text, “Ben Bolt”:

Oh! Don’t you remember the wood, Ben Bolt,
Near the green sunny slope of the hill;
Where oft we have sung
‘Neath its wide spreading shade,
And kept time to the click of the mill.

O, don’t you remember that tall towering oak,
Where you put on my last “fourty-four”?
When he bows his lofty head
To behold where I bled –
O, remember, I’ll bleed there no more. (21-5)

In this excerpt, far from playing with word substitutions, Simpson writes lyrics that place the whole issue of nostalgia and what Wordsworth might have called “communion with nature” in an entirely different light. On the page, Simpson’s lyric, although eloquent enough, is not altogether remarkable. But on the Underground Railroad or at an abolitionist meeting, sung to the tune “Ben Bolt,” his text would acquire a savage irony, the nostalgic pastoral longing of the original text repudiated by the violence and near-gothic grimness of Simpson’s lyric, a landscape of blood seen through the prism of a triumphant escape. Many of his finest verses work this way, by reshifting the grounds of

the original so completely that the primary texts themselves look different. Placed next to “The Fugitive at Home” (and in performance, the original text is always closely adjacent), “Ben Bolt” looks like the delusional pastel-colored imaginings of the oppressor. In my discussion of Simpson’s parodies, I will focus on two texts that, in my view, fall in this second camp – not simple substitutions, but supplements that reveal a critique by transforming their source texts from the inside out.

One of these transformational parodies is “The Fugitive in Montreal,” a lyric which Simpson instructs his performers to sing to the tune of “Dandy Jim of Caroline.” “Dandy Jim from Caroline” was one of the most well known minstrel songs of antebellum America. This song, as popularized by minstrel troupes such as the Virginia Minstrels and the Ethiopian Serenaders, would almost always have been sung by performers in blackface, and more specifically by performers who specialized in portraying the minstrel character often referred to as “Zip Coon”: a comic figure whose dandified pretensions to sophisticated urbanity make him the butt of minstrel humor. The character of “Dandy Jim” is cut from the same cloth as “Zip Coon,” and the song bearing his name describes the farcical courtship initiated by his master. Although numerous sheet music editions of the song exist, “Dandy Jim” remains fairly consistent from one version to the next. Here are the chorus and second stanza from F. D. Beteen’s version, as published in Baltimore in 1844: “For my ole massa tole me so, / I was de best lookin Nigger in de County O, / I look in de glass an I found it so, / Just what massa told me O. / I drest myself from top to toe, / And down to Dinah I did go, / Wid pantaloons strapp’d down behine, / Like “Dandy Jim from Caroline.” Subsequent verses of “Dandy Jim” tell of Jim’s successful courtship of Dinah and describe the couple’s many children (“Dar heels stick out tree feet behind, / Like ‘Dandy Jim’ from Caroline”). Each of these verses is followed by the four-line refrain: “For my ole Massa tole me so,” etc. As portrayed by

a minstrel performer such as Cool White, the character of Dandy Jim is a swaggering narcissist, laughable despite his sexual potency. Minstrel show dandies like Dandy Jim and Zip Coon offered white audiences the possibility of enjoying and even identifying with black male sexuality while neutralizing its threatening aspects through buffoonery and white control. As the chorus reminds us, Jim's romantic exploits are commenced at the encouragement of, and under the watchful eye of, "ole massa".

In addition to borrowing the melody of "Jim Dandy" for his lyric "The Fugitive in Montreal," Simpson also borrows the basic narrative structure – in both songs, a slave decides to pursue his own betterment, spurred to action by the master. But Simpson twists the basic narrative in a very different direction. In the first verse of "The Fugitive," the narrator informs his listeners that he was once a Southern plantation slave laboring under a cruel master. In the second verse, he begins relating the circumstances leading to his escape:

One day as I was grinding cane,
My master passed me too and fro;
Says I, what can old master mean?
It's nothing good for me I know.
I caught his eye – he dropped his head.
And stuck his cigar in his mouth,
Ha! ha! Says I, old master Ned;
You're going to sell me farther south!

My old master don't like me,
[I begged him so to set me free;
He swore before he'd let me go,

He'd feed me to the carrion crow.] (13-21, full reproduction of chorus mine)

This one verse alone provides at least two striking contrasts to the lyrics of “Dandy Jim.” For example, as the story begins, we find The Fugitive doing hard manual labor, whereas in “Dandy Jim,” no actual scene of slave labor mars the sunny atmosphere. The most pointed contrast however, lies in Simpson’s depiction of the master-slave relationship. “Dandy Jim,” like most minstrel depictions of slavery, characterizes this relationship between slave and master as paternalistic, jokey, and essentially friendly. As each chorus of “Dandy Jim” reminds us, it was “ole massa” who first gave Jim confidence in his good looks (even if we’re encouraged to suspect that the master may well have been amusing himself at Jim’s expense). In the foregoing quotation from “The Fugitive in Montreal,” by contrast, relations between master Ned and the soon-to-be fugitive are tense, and both characters simmer silently in an atmosphere of mutual distrust, trying to suss one another out. Surveillance and the constant threat of violence saturate every word and gesture that pass between Ned and the Fugitive.

In the next two verses, the Fugitive suspects that a strange visitor intends to purchase him, and confirms this suspicion when he overhears his master saying “I have sold old Sam.” He decides to break, and the final two verses describe his flight to Canada and his current condition there:

It was a dark and dreary night,
‘Bout one o’clock, when all was still;
No stars nor moon to give me light,
And naught to be heard but the whipporwill.
I wandered not to the left nor right,
Though hard it was to find the way;

And just six weeks from that dark night,
I landed safe in Canada.

My old master don't like me, [etc.]

I have a wife, I know not where
(At least sometimes I call her mine,)
When last I saw her countenance fair,
She was on her way to *Caroline*.
I have a son both young and brave,
Who broke the ice some time ago,
And now with me (though not a slave,)
He's safe beneath the Lion's paw.

My old master don't like me, (40-57)

This final stanza, restrained and dignified in tone, suggests the psychological anguish of slavery more forcibly than the impassioned rants and stylized horrors offered by much abolitionist poetry. The Fugitive is well aware that in the condition of slavery, the love- and kin-relationships of “wife” and “son” are at best tenuous, and at worst all but meaningless. In his wistful and near-hopeless reveries about the wife whom he sometimes thinks of as his own, he offers a forcible reminder of ways in which institutionalized slavery debases or prohibits meaningful familial commitment. These lyrics, when we compare them with those of the original tune, reveal the deep delusions underlying the comedy of “Dandy Jim.” The minstrel tune’s vision of a South in which a slave jauntily strikes up a courtship and founds a large nuclear family is a sham vision,

and with “The Fugitive in Montreal,” Simpson shows us the extent of the fakery by offering a portrait significantly closer to reality.

As noted earlier, plantation nostalgia was often a target of Simpson’s best satirical pieces. An instructive example is his piece “The Fugitive’s Dream,” a re-writing of Stephen Foster’s “My Old Kentucky Home”. Because the authorship of Foster’s tune was never contested, we can be fairly certain that Simpson would have been familiar with a unitary, authoritative version. The first verse and chorus provide a sufficient sense of Foster’s lyric sensibility:

The sun shines bright in the old Kentucky home,
‘Tis summer, the darkies are gay,
The corn top’s ripe and the meadow’s in the bloom
While the birds make music all the day.
The young folks roll on the little cabin floor,
All merry, all happy and bright:
By’n by Hard Times comes a knocking at the door,
Then my old Kentucky Home, good night!

Weep no more, my lady,
Oh! Weep no more today!
We will sing one song
For the old Kentucky Home,
For the old Kentucky Home, far away.

Although Foster uses formal English rather than the minstrel dialect of “Dandy Jim,” the narrator of this song is almost certainly black. (Contemporary audiences certainly interpreted the narrator as a plantation slave; for example, the musical theatre

performances of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* known as "Tom shows" often included a rendition of "My Old Kentucky Home" sung by Topsy.) In Foster's nostalgic depiction, plantation life presents itself as a pastoral paradise of sunshine, music, and carefree amusements where the "darkies" frolic in innocent contentment. "My Old Kentucky Home," of course, became one of Foster's most successful and enduring compositions, and eventually became the state song of Kentucky. Nostalgia is probably the key to the song's broad appeal. During a period of cultural upheaval and, especially, urbanization, the song tapped into many Americans' feelings of loss and uprootedness, evoking visions of a vanished rustic home-life.

In Simpson's lyric, nostalgia itself becomes the enemy, a sentiment that quite literally functions as a trap. As the song opens, the narrator recounts a dream in which he found himself back on the Kentucky plantation where he had once been a slave. Initially, the scenario seems to hold some appeal for the narrator:

I dreamed last night of my old Kentucky home,
Of my old Kentucky [sic] home far away;
I thought old master and I were all alone
In the parlor about the break of day.
I thought old master was weeping like a child,
Said I, O Master, what is wrong?
He heard my voice, and he then began to smile,
Why, said he, what made you stay so long?

Weep no more, old master –
Weep no more, I pray;
I will sing one song at my old Kentucky home,

And return again to old Canada. (1-12)

Upon his first appearance in the dream, “old master” is sitting alone and crying in the parlor at daybreak, thus initially creating a sympathetic – and more than slightly pathetic – impression. Simpson may well be playing with stereotypes here. In the minstrel repertoire, the master (like the master in “Dandy Jim”) tends to appear as a concerned, utterly benign figure, a man who is, above all else, paternal. Simpson takes this fantasy to an extreme by introducing the master in the domestic space of the parlor, thereby underlining his fatherly nature and, more bizarrely, by having the master weep out of longing for his cherished runaway slave, smiling only when he hears his voice once more. (The emotionality of the master in Simpson’s lyric also inverts the common depiction of blacks as childlike and sentimental; here, it is the master who is found “weeping like a child.”)

Importantly, the presence of the master at the center of Simpson’s lyric immediately creates a structure of feeling far removed from the nostalgia of “My Old Kentucky Home.” Whereas Foster’s narrator sings about the Kentucky home to comfort his lady in her sadness and longing, Simpson’s narrator sings to *comfort the master* in his affliction. The true nature of that affliction will remain murky; it is ultimately unclear why, exactly, “old master” is weeping. But as the lyric proceeds, he continually conscripts the Fugitive to comfort and cheer him through song. We see, then, that despite the fact that the fugitive is the one singing, his song is not truly *for* him; it exists to serve the nostalgic needs of the master. We might think of the narrative situation here as a representation of the cultural theft so central to minstrelsy itself, making visible its enabling fantasy that black cultural productions find their natural and proper use in a sentimental economy benefiting white audiences.

In the second verse, the narrator's (dreaming) delusions of a peaceful reconciliation at the old Kentucky home begin to be troubled by suspicions about the master's intentions:

He says, my boy come and let us take a walk;
Thinks I, there's something yet behind;
And the first thing I know I'll be standing on the block,
Or be writhing 'neath a sweet "ninety nine,"
Says I, O master, I pray don't punish me!
I'm weary, my journey has been long;
I have been up North where the colored man is free,
Now I'll sing to you a sweet little song.

Weep no more, old master, &c. (13-21)

Slowly, Simpson begins to peel away the fantasies of the first verse, with its unreal and absurd vision of a happy reconciliation between a master and runaway slave. As if the realities of power have begun to intrude into the dream of the narrator, he begins to suspect that old master may not be entirely on the up and up. Nevertheless, the master's words and attitude are carefully neutral, and by the verse's end the narrator seems to have chosen to trust his hope rather than his fear, and he again agrees to sing "a sweet little song" to his former owner.

Only in the final verse does the master make clear that he wants more than a pleasant moment of nostalgia, or a second hearing of the old plantation songs. What he really wants is the return of his property:

Now the moon shone bright, and the day began to break;
It was time for the Negro Horn to blow;

Then old master says you shall never see the Lake.
You are *mine*, I shall never let you go;
Then he gave one yell and the hounds began to bey;
He bolted the West parlor door—
I awoke from sleep just as we commenced the fray,
And beheld, '*twas a dream* and nothing more.

Weep no more, old master
Weep no more, I pray;
I will sing one song of my old Kentucky home,
Of my old Kentucky home, far away. (40-51)

As with most of Simpson's parodies, "The Fugitive's Dream" draws a great deal of its rhetorical and political force from its adversarial relationship with the original text. But unlike, say, "The Fugitive in Montreal," which, as we have seen, mounts a fairly specific critique of "Dandy Jim," "The Fugitive's Dream" targets the entire structure of nostalgic feeling that serves as the emotional underpinning of the minstrel repertoire. In this sense, the Foster lyric functions less as a specific object of satire than as a jumping-off point for Simpson's commentary on the potentially perilous sociopolitical imaginary of the minstrel ballad. (We might well remember at this point that in the prologue to *The Emancipation Car*, Simpson expresses a desire to "change the flow of those sweet melodies" – a carefully neutral phrase that nevertheless indicates a desire to reshape the cultural terrain.) Simpson's barbed commentary works first by literalizing certain desires and fantasies expressed in plantation-themed minstrel songs, secondly by reframing those desires and fantasies as tricks motivated by power and by the economic realities of chattel

slavery, and thirdly by again reframing all of the preceding as the dreamwork of a subject far removed from the imagined scene.

Simpson's lyric literalizes a longing often expressed in minstrel songs: the longing of slaves to return to the plantation, whether to revisit the simple rustic pleasures to be had there or to reunite with loved ones. In the fugitive's dream, he has actually returned – a purposeful contrast to “My Old Kentucky Home” or similarly themed Foster tunes such as “Old Folks at Home” and “Farewell My Lily Dear,” in which such return is seemingly impossible. But in the final verse, Simpson makes explicit that all of these fantasies embedded in the minstrel tradition are, from the fugitive's standpoint at least, dangerous illusions which serve the interests of the economic order represented by the slaveholder. As old master “bolt[s] the West parlor door,” the atmosphere of open-armed domesticity that had been so potently represented by the weeping paterfamilias in the parlor is revealed to be a façade, and the self-same parlor in which the fugitive found welcome becomes a trap in which to contain him. And whereas the fugitive had attempted to satisfy old master by offering him a song, it becomes viciously apparent that this substitution will not satisfy; bellowing “you are mine,” the master makes plain that repossession of the runaway's physical body is the only acceptable outcome. Above all, the fugitive's nostalgic return itself is the primary trap; his false identification with “the old Kentucky home” sets the stage for his recapture.

Simpson's re-writing of “My Old Kentucky Home” not only points out the deadly fatuousness of plantation nostalgia; it also questions the epistemology of minstrel representations. Granted, the perennially stale “it-was-all-a-dream” trope seems an unlikely vehicle for such a message. We should note, however, that Simpson tips his hand at the beginning of the lyric, and indeed in the title itself; “The Fugitive's Dream” does not present its audience with a “gotcha” twist, but rather frames the entire action as

a sequence of images from the dreaming mind of an escaped slave residing in Canada. The significant thing here is that the entire conceit – that a former slave might travel back to the plantation for a joyful reconciliation with his doting master – has been dreamed up by a subject who is remote both in place and in time, and furthermore, by a subject who should be well aware of the counterfactual nature of his representations.

THE EMANCIPATION CAR AS PERFORMANCE SCRIPT

In the foregoing analyses of “The Fugitive in Montreal” and “The Fugitive’s Dream,” I have not explicitly invoked performativity as a hermeneutic, concentrating rather on the dynamic textual interplay between Simpson’s lyric and the “original” lyrics written by Beteen and Foster. However, Simpson’s revisionist poetic practice makes sense only in the context of performance. For the most part, his poems are intended primarily for performance, and exist only secondarily as printed texts. Simpson composed his “anti-slavery songs and ballads,” not so that they might be perused quietly in the homes of interested readers, but so that they might be sung on the Underground Railroad or shouted out at abolitionist meetings. For this reason, most of the poems in *The Emancipation Car* include some form of performance instruction. In addition to indicating the tune to which his lyrics are to be sung, Simpson stipulates interplay between multiple singers, assigns songs or lines of songs to characters both fictional and historical, and occasionally provides stage directions. Most of his poems, in other words, are more like scripts than sonnets.

When we encounter his lyrics as published in *The Emancipation Car*, we encounter the “Air,” or tune name, only once, cited in italics just under the title. Similarly, when the lyrics are reproduced in Chadwyck-Healey poetry database, the name

of the “air” is relegated to a footnote. These presentation formats, coupled with the disposition of most modern-day readers to approach a poem as a self-sufficient textual artifact, tend strongly to elide the centrality of performance – and more specifically, of melody – to Simpson’s poetic output. It is worth reminding ourselves that at the height of his popularity and influence, Simpson’s songs were heard exclusively as *songs*, and no print copies were available to the public. His texts would therefore have been inextricable from the listening experience; the melody would have served as a pivot point, keeping the “original” in the minds of the listeners even as the newer lyric was being sung. This dynamic would only have been strengthened by the fact that the minstrel tunes being rewritten were enormously popular. (A well-known parallel in contemporary experience may be the songs of “Weird” Al Yankovic: “Amish Paradise,” for example, relies for its effect on the audience’s familiarity with “Gangster Paradise”.) This is, perhaps, rather a straightforward point requiring little in the way of critical elaboration here; yet the irreducible performed-ness of song parody can easily be lost when we encounter the poems, transcribed as a series of graphemes.

Yet aside from these considerations – which, after all, hold true for any lyrics that have been removed from their primary musical context and reproduced within a literary culture – Simpson’s work can be performance-oriented in surprising and idiosyncratic ways. Consider the “The Final Adieu,” a lyric sung to the tune of “Camptown Races”. Although Simpson’s instructions are sparse, the text indicates that the lines are to be divvied up among multiple singers:

Come all my brethren now draw near—

Good-bye, Good-bye.

My resolution you shall hear,

I’ll soon be on my way.

Last night I heard some spirit say,
Good-bye, Good-bye,
'Tis time to go to Canada,
I'll soon be on my way.

FIRST VOICE—

I'm bound to run all night,

SECOND VOICE—

I'm bound to sleep all day,

Let the wind blow high,

Come wet or dry,

I'm bound for Canada. (1-13)

The delegation of singing parts is not laid out as clearly as one might wish. The appellations “First Voice” and “Second Voice” appear only once, and are never repeated in the text, leaving us rather in the dark about what vocal arrangement Simpson might have had in mind. (Do the “First Voice” and “Second Voice” sing their respective lines each time the chorus comes around? Or does the “First Voice” sing only this one solitary line? And who was singing for the first eight lines, anyway? Does “Second Voice” keep singing solo until Simpson gives a direction to the contrary?) It seems most likely that the entire song is intended to be performed as a call-and-response, with the opening lines traded off between a soloist (“Come all my brethren now draw near”) and the remainder of the group (“Good-bye, Goodbye”), with two members of this larger group (the first and second voices) emerging from the texture to sing a line apiece of the chorus.

The performance scenario I've just suggested is interesting in a number of ways. Firstly, we can observe that Simpson's project of radically transforming minstrel tunes extends past lyrical content to include elements such as song structure and musical

arrangement. The outrageous “Doo-dah! Doo-dah!”s of “Camptown Races,” are mercifully absent, replaced by genuine call-and-response, a structure with deep roots in African and Afro-American musical culture. Secondly, the back-and-forth performance format would be well-suited to singing on the Underground Railroad, tending both to encourage convivial group solidarity and to provide a structure for mutual encouragement, as individual voices proclaim their resolve for freedom and the group periodically responds: “Let the wind blow high, / Come wet or dry, / I’m bound for Canada.”

“The Final Adieu,” then, would seem to be a layered call-and-response lyric well-fitted for performance by the passengers and conductors of the Underground Railroad. This conception of the lyric, however, is somewhat complicated by a curious stage direction given by Simpson later in the song:

(A voice is heard in a low but distinct tone from the kitchen cellar,
uttered by an old house servant.)

“If you get there before I do,”

Good-bye, Goodbye.

“Look out for me I’m coming too,”

I’ll soon be on my way.

I have a son that’s gone before;

Good-bye, Good-bye,

And I will meet him on that shore,

I’ll soon be on my way. (40-7)

The parenthetical instructions tend subtly to reframe our understanding of the nature of the song itself. Before the interjection of this “low but distinct voice,” the lyric has no

spatial dimension, no explicitly delineated physical environment. Suddenly, however, Simpson asks the reader/singer to imagine a concrete physical space in the form of a kitchen cellar. And this cellar seems to be offstage – this low voice is being overheard from another room. Should this detail cause us to reconceptualize the nature of the text? Rather than a tune to be sung by multiple voices, Simpson seems to be envisioning a miniature drama, complete with at least two distinct character parts and a chorus. His lyrics were certainly meant to be sung – were some of them intended to be staged as well?

The Emancipation Car provides a number of similar examples of Simpson's theatrical approach to lyrical composition. For example, Simpson prefaces "The Slaveholder's Rest" with a description of the setting and the dramatic situation: "A Song, illustrative of the true feelings of the slave, when a tyrant Master dies, sung by the body-servant and his field brethren, in a retired negro quarter." Once again, Simpson goes beyond specifying characters and provides a setting. Several other songs revolve around dialogue between two parties; "Ho! Boys, Carry Me Back" imagines a friendly bragging contest between free black farmers and mechanics, played out "in a land of equal rights," and in "Queen Victoria Conversing With Her Slave Children," the titular monarch attempts to convince reluctant slaves to escape north to Canada.

Simpson's most sustained, and original, experiment with performance-oriented material is "Consistent Family Worship of Slave-Holders," a genre-bending sequence of songs, prayers, and oration. "Consistent Family Worship" follows the religious observances of a slave-holding family throughout the course of a day, from the hymn for the "Morning Service" which gives thanks for the previous night's blessings ("Thy promise, Lord has been our stay; / Not e'en a slave has run away") to the evening prayers ("anoint the eyes of our negro-hounds to-night, that they sleep not").

FIGURES THAT SEEMED TO BE FACTS: PROPHECY IN *THE EMANCIPATION CAR*

As the foregoing analysis suggests, Simpson was one of the first black poets whose writings were created specifically for performance. This categorization raises a number of questions which cannot be satisfactorily answered. What, one might well ask, did performances of Simpson's songs sound like, or look like? When and where were these verses sung, and by whom? What did listeners think of them? Unfortunately, such highly pertinent questions are currently unanswerable because of the lack of an extended performance archive. However, Simpson does offer us, in the form of his book, an elaborate performance of his own. *The Emancipation Car* is itself a highly self-conscious representation of Simpson as a poet-prophet. Although this performance does not, in any sense, substitute for the live enactments of Simpson's work carried out on the Underground Railroad and at abolitionist meetings, it is nevertheless interesting in its own right, as a *sui generis* assumption of a prophetic persona.

Simpson deploys the prophetic mode so idiosyncratically, and his conception of prophecy seems so rootless and hazily defined, that his book may be said to limn the outer limits of the concept within the African American literary tradition. If examined in isolation, few of Simpson's verses seem to mark themselves as prophetic in nature. Yet *The Emancipation Car*, considered as an extended performance or an act of self-fashioning, clearly insists on positioning (or, for those who were already familiar with his songs and ballads, *repositioning*) Simpson as a poet-prophet. The volume is, in fact, book-ended by hermeneutic cues, with the category of prophecy coming to the fore in both the preface and the Appendix. Once again, the prefatory "Note to the Public" supplies our best starting-point in this matter:

[The reader] will also find many historical facts that are worthy of preservation. He will also see flashes of prophecies, pointing to events

which came to pass, and which passed before my mind while writing them, but I did not comprehend their exact meaning but used them as poetic figures, though they seemed to me to be facts. (iv)

Situated two paragraphs after Simpson's account of his mystical calling, the general import of this passage within the preface is clear: the "spirit" shows the poet various things – some of them scenes of contemporary life, some of them precognitions, and some simply images useful for the creation of poetry. Intriguingly, Simpson's remarks include a curious ambiguity. The "flashes of prophecies" occupy an indeterminate middle ground between history and metaphor; they are figures that seem to be facts, or else facts that seem to be figures. Simpson, interestingly, does not claim the authority to know precisely what the import of such visionary images might be – he bequeaths that authority to the reader in these lines, cueing his audience to be on the alert for potentially prophetic moments in the poetry.

Similarly, the Appendix, which contains the verses Simpson wrote after the circulation of his pamphlet on the Underground Railroad, begins with an extended and vivid discussion of his prophetic visions. He recounts three dreams which, he claims, presaged the conflicts of the Civil War. Of these three, the second stands out for its hallucinatory iconography:

. . . I dreamed one night that I was in a strange, wild, wilderness country, on a high eminence, covered with heavy timber and thick underbrush. On the top of this eminence was a queer looking furnace with its boilers heated to their utmost endurance. Steam whistling out of every little crevice, but no engine or machinery attached! The woods were full of excited people of all sizes, sex and colors . . . I looked behind me and saw a crooked, rail fence, about sixteen rails high. We all rushed for this

monstrous fence, and clambered over it in great haste. As I mounted the top rail, I threw one leg over and looked back, and to my surprise, the under-brush had been cleared off as clean as though it never grew there. Then the furnace on the top of the hill began to shoot like cannon. Awfully frightened, we started for home. On our way we crossed a valley and to our left stood two armies, shooting at each other with cannon and small arms. We all stopped to gaze, and two of the cannon were turned toward us, and threw blazing balls, resembling cotton-balls saturated with turpentine. I thought one of those blazing shot struck me on the shoulder.
(139-40)

Although Simpson's dream-vision clearly relates to the war, the correspondences are too strange and indeterminate for this dream to be functional as allegory. These images have the iconic clarity of symbols, yet they resist full readability. A furnace on a hill. An enormous and crooked rail fence. Cannons firing burning and pitch-soaked cotton. What does Simpson mean by all this? He offers no clue to the interpretation of these visions, remarking only "I told my friends that trouble was brewing," a distinctly unhelpful exegesis.

Although several conjectures might be made about the import of these images (the marvelous furnace in particular), the most relevant conclusions to be drawn here relate precisely to what Simpson does *not* say. Just as in the preface, when Simpson confesses of his visions that he does "not comprehend their exact meaning," he quietly declines, in the above passage, to engage in interpretation. Apparently, for Simpson, prophecy amounts to something closer to reportage than to activism – he merely passes along the visions he has received, and leaves the meaning-making activity to the various singers, listeners, and readers who encounter the material. His understanding of prophecy, we

might say, is all phenomenology and no hermeneutics. Simpson's representations of himself as prophet suggest an extraordinarily anti-hierarchical approach to questions of vision, ordination, and foreknowledge. He invokes no specific religious tradition, no divine authority, and no authorized interpretations – there are only the writings and the performances: only a voice, speaking.

How might Simpson's amorphous references to prophecy and spirit communication, situated as they are at the opening and closing of his book, affect our interpretation of the poetry between? The dream cited above offers one clue. The "furnace dream," which drops a lone traveler into the midst of a strangely heightened and iconic American landscape, bears a striking family resemblance to many of Simpson's most vivid poetry, in which runways, plantation slaves, and freemen navigate similarly iconic terrain. The visions encoded in Simpson's poetry function according to the logic of the "paysage moralise," or allegorical landscape. Although these poems are filled with details taken from reality, they effectively map out a kind of symbolic geography: the South as a wilderness filled with carrion crows, pursuant blood-hounds, and other "wild beasts"; an America overseen by an enormous and threatening eagle ("his golden wings exulting / O'er the slave"); a land across the lake where former slaves are protected by the paw of a great lion. Throughout these scenes, the wind, or other objects in the natural world, consistently speak out to slaves, telling them that all men are born free. The cumulative effect of these images is indeed prophetic or visionary, despite their underlying; they are, indeed "poetic figures . . . which seemed to be facts."

Chapter Four: A.A. Whitman and “The Negro of the Future”

On March 6, 1878, Albery Allson Whitman – a up-and-coming 27-year-old black writer and preacher from Kentucky who would one day be known as “Poet Laureate of the Negro Race” – wrote a strange and impassioned letter to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, one of the greatest literary celebrities in the Anglophone world.

The two poets had already exchanged a brief round of correspondence. Some months earlier, Longfellow had written Whitman a note extending a few words of encouragement. Whitman surely found this note heartening, for more than one reason. As a neophyte black writer, Whitman stood to gain professionally and materially from any connection to the renowned New England bard; just as importantly, Longfellow’s poetry had been uniquely interesting and valuable to Whitman. In fact, Whitman’s most recently published work, the sprawling narrative *Not A Man And Yet A Man*, had been strongly influenced by Longfellow’s *Hiawatha* and *Evangeline*. Naturally, Whitman responded to Longfellow’s message, writing a letter dated January 27.¹⁴ Whitman made note of some recent successes – acclaim for his recent poetry, an upcoming excursion to Europe – and urged a continuing correspondence between them:

Any word from you will greatly help a poor young student. The few lines which you sent me, have already done great good. And, yes, I would have you remember that one who was once a slave and is now a young and poor man, is endeavoring to know something.

May I hope to hear from you soon?

¹⁴ Whitman’s letter to Longfellow is reprinted, and discussed, in Sherman’s *Invisible Poets* and Wilson’s *At the Dusk of Dawn*.

Whitman seems to have hoped for an endorsement from the elder poet, and possibly even a mentoring relationship of some kind. If these were in fact his expectations, then he was disappointed.

Several months passed, with no word from Longfellow. Undaunted, the persistent Whitman composed another, more strident communication – this was the letter of March 6th. In this letter, Whitman expresses his gratitude and admiration for the elder writer in remarkably intense language:

You have controlled my life. Had you not have said a kind word to me,
I would have been discouraged, and ere this had ceased to “try.”

You are my literary salvation.

I pray each day that God may prolong your days.

My greatest ambition is to see your face.

And I *intend* to see it. I go once a week to the library to look on your
picture.

In its essential purpose, Whitman’s second letter resembles the first. On both occasions, he thanks Longfellow for his encouragements and stresses the elder poet’s ability to assist him further, while urging a further correspondence. But in tone and detail, this second letter is a different kind of performance altogether. Whereas the first letter was carefully decorous, the second raises some productive, awkward questions. Why does Whitman ascribe such a transformative, almost superhuman level of influence to Longfellow? What, we might wonder, does Whitman mean when he says that he “intend[s]” to see Longfellow’s face? What kind of benefit did Whitman seek through gazing weekly at Longfellow’s picture? When he gazed, what did he see? And in what sense did that face function as Whitman’s “greatest ambition”?

These questions, and the letters which raise them, offer a relevant entry point into the career of A.A. Whitman, a unique figure in African-American history. In his poetry and other writings, Whitman tried to consider questions of [literary influence, hero-formation, the relationship of minority writers to the canon]. We will return to consider these questions after examining Whitman's *Not a Man and Yet a Man* – a fascinating text which itself courts related questions about hero-formation, literary influence, and the significance of the idealizing gaze. But there is another question to be asked about the Longfellow letter, a question that leads us more directly into Whitman's work and its significance: why he was fixated on Longfellow, particularly? Whitman's early writings acknowledge the influence of other writers – James Fenimore Cooper, Lord Byron, and Walter Scott – but, as the correspondence makes plain, his engagement with Longfellow assumed a particular importance. So why did Longfellow – or, at least, the *idea* of Longfellow as a muse, mentor or image of an ideal poet – come to exercise such a powerful influence on Whitman's imagination? Although Longfellow was a widely popular American poet, he had never inspired imitators even in his heyday, and by 1878 his old-fashioned and Eurocentric poetics certainly made him an unlikely model for an ambitious young American poet. In Bloomian terms, he rarely functions as a “strong precursor” in the American tradition. Yet his influence on Whitman is evident, and not only from the letters. *Not a Man and Yet a Man* contains entire chapters which clearly “signify” on specific works of Longfellow's, as several contemporary readers pointed out.

I would suggest that Whitman considered Longfellow the “Chief of American poets” largely because his compositions suggested a way forward for the young poet's own work. Longfellow's reputation, after all, rested on his ability to forge narrative poetry of sweep and power out of native materials, an ability he repeatedly demonstrated

in works like *Evangeline*, *The Song of Hiawatha*, *The Courtship of Miles Standish*, and *Tales from a Wayside Inn*. In all likelihood, these novelistic and thoroughly American poems were exciting to Whitman because he himself longed for a similar kind of accomplishment. He recognized in Longfellow's long works a potentiality, a literary mode, a form of representation, capable of holding and shaping a broad swathe of the American mythos. The young Whitman, whose thoughts and ambitions had revolved around poetry since his early days, found in poems like *Hiawatha* an approach to poetic creation perfectly suited to conveying the vision of America that he saw in his imagination.

And as we might expect, Albery Allson Whitman, a Kentuckian born into slavery, had a somewhat different vision of America than did Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, well-to-do son of a prominent Massachusetts lawyer. In Longfellow's poetry, American history most often presents itself as a pageant of European settlers and New England gentry, all of high and patriotic character, whose lives and struggles exemplify the spirit of America. Whitman, too, presents a fundamentally heroic vision of the country, but in his narratives the American myth takes a much different character. In A.A. Whitman's America, the American project is sullied and almost undone by violence and racial injustice, but its ideals are finally inherited and carried forward by black and native communities. Whitman takes Longfellow's populist nationalism and expands it to include the struggles of slaves, free blacks, Native Americans, and others. As this essay will argue, Whitman was re-visioning the national mythology. In his prefaces, poems, and essays he mixes black exceptionalism, manifest destiny, and an idiosyncratic vision of evolution into a potent and highly referential brew.

At the outset of his career, Whitman was already announcing this ambitious poetic project with confidence. In the "Prologue" of *Not a Man and Yet a Man*, he

proclaims his intention to write American historical epic from the margins: “The black man has a cause, deny who dares, / And him to vindicate my muse prepares. / A part of this great nation’s hist’ry, he / Has made in valor and fidelity” (14). These lines nicely encapsulate Whitman’s determination to create poetry that could generate and undergird a revisionist national mythology. In this work and others like it, Whitman wanted to “vindicate” African-Americans and other marginalized citizens, restoring them to their rightful place in the American story by illuminating their “part of this great nation’s history.” A similar underlying vision shapes Whitman’s other, later works as well: *Twasinta’s Seminoles* relates an episode of the Indian Wars from the viewpoint of a heterogeneous community of black maroons and Seminoles; “The Octoroon” (rather less radically) considers the antebellum South through the prism of a romantic relationship between a “tragic mulatto” and a plantation owner’s son.

Although Whitman also composed lyric and occasional poems, he poured the greater part of his talent and energy into these three longer works – *Not a Man and Yet a Man*, *Twasinta’s Seminoles*, and “The Octoroon” – and they anchored his reputation as “Poet Laureate of the Negro Race.” There is a strong family resemblance among these three poems, a particular goulash of personality, narrative structure, and thematic preoccupation that we might call “Whitmanesque.” All three works are sprawling adventure stories featuring a superlatively strong, courageous and morally upright man who fights and romances his way through one or more iconic scenes of American history. All three are extended prosodic experiments in which the poet engages with unusual metrical schemes. All are preoccupied primarily with masculinity and romantic love, and secondarily with the racial past. And each of these three poems features a prominent and digression-prone narrator who occasionally upstages the plot of his own story and turns up occasionally to make cameo appearances, Alfred Hitchcock-like, inside his own

narratives. This narrative persona, who may be more or less identifiable with the living individual “Alberry Allson Whitman,” is in some ways, Whitman’s most successful literary creation.

NOT A MAN AND YET A MAN: OVERVIEW

These resonances and doublings between Whitman’s major works are, for the purposes of this essay, fortunate. Whitman’s literary output was sizable, and the scope of this chapter does not allow for an adequate discussion even of the three book-length poems referenced above, much less for a consideration of his lyrics, occasional poems, and less-accomplished longer works. This chapter will, therefore, focus on a single work: *Not a Man and Yet a Man*. This narrower approach will not, I believe, greatly distort our view of Whitman either as a thinker or as a poet, precisely because his concerns and methods remained relatively stable over the course of his career. As a result, his writings form an extended and interconnected network of thought, and any insight we might draw from the study of a single poem, letter, or essay tends to enhance our understanding of the man’s whole bibliography.

Yet *Not a Man and Yet a Man* does stand out as especially worthy of close attention, for at least four reasons. Firstly, in *Not a Man* Whitman works out his mythic-historical impulse on an unusually broad canvas. His other tales are strictly delineated in time and place: *The Rape of Florida* concerns the end of the Seminole Wars, and “The Octoroon” takes place on a plantation in the antebellum south. In *Not a Man*, by contrast, the poet takes his reader on a veritable tour of iconic American landscapes. The poem begins, in fact, with a series culturally potent tableaux (wagon trains moving across the plains, hardy yeoman farmers hunting game, noble Indians living in peace and harmony).

After this introduction, a narrative begins to emerge, centered on the character of Rodney, an octoroon slave. Rodney's adventures take him from a fort on the Illinois frontier to a Georgian slave pen, a Florida plantation, and a settlement of Canadian freeholders. And in the epilogue-ish final chapter we find Rodney, along with his sons, fighting in the Civil War. This panoramic approach allows Whitman the scope to work through some of his bigger ideas about race and human evolution in American history. In Whitman's other long poems, these ideas often find expression only in the narrator's digressive musings, without any correlative in story or image. *Not a Man*, precisely because its involved historical plot models Whitman's key insights, offers the clearest elaboration of the poet's project.

Secondly, *Not a Man* most fully delineates Whitman's vision of heroic manliness. Both *The Rape of Florida* and "The Octoroon" feature courageous and noble heroes, and many of the lyric poems pay tribute to men whom Whitman saw as especially worthy of praise and emulation. But in *Not a Man*, Whitman explores this "heroic" theme with a prolific virtuosity, offering us three heroes for the price of one: Rodney, unquestionably Whitman's prime exemplar of manly virtue; White Loon, a promising but ultimately flawed potential hero; and the narrator himself, who becomes more and more participatory as the story proceeds. Moreover, the narrative involves two weak and wicked men of noble birth, both of whom act as foils for the three heroic characters. All of these figures, as we shall see, function in tandem within the poem to establish Whitman's philosophy of heroism and true manhood, and to theorize the place of the "manly man" in the American story.

Thirdly, *Not a Man* is by far Whitman's most prosodically experimental text, employing unrhymed trochaic tetrameter, heroic couplets, rhymed iambic tetrameter, ballad meter, anapestic tetrameter, and dactylic hexameter. These meters matter.

Literary critics have underestimated Whitman's metrical schemes, dismissing them as the productions of a "mockingbird" poet, as second-hand formalisms arbitrarily cribbed from other poets. But to the contrary, Whitman's schema are artfully, purposefully, and quite originally cribbed from other poets. As we shall see, prosody was the poet's most prominent means of quoting, parodying, and generally "signifying on" other poets (Longfellow, among others). Meter is the medium through which Whitman publicizes, proclaims, and generally acts out his fraught relationships with "strong" precursors.

And fourthly, only in *Not a Man* does Whitman develop an elaborate and contrapuntal narrative structure that can contain all of these other concerns and relate them understandably to one another. From a reader's perspective, *Not a Man* might be considered the poet's finest gift; one can most easily apprehend Whitman's characteristic topoi through the architecture of this one poem that binds them together. One might well argue, as did many of Whitman's contemporaries, that *The Rape of Florida* is more successful artistically; nevertheless, *Not a Man* must certainly be considered more comprehensive, more representative of Whitman's range both as poet and thinker.

The main plot of *Not a Man and Yet a Man* follows the adventures of Rodney, a slave living in the frontier village of Saville. Although Rodney's exploits form the core of the narrative, his story does not really begin until over 60 pages into the poem. Instead, the work begins with a preface announcing the theme and scope of the work, and then a first chapter, "The Movers," in which the narrator engages in a romanticized survey of frontier life. This chapter, which we will consider more thoroughly below, introduces Whitman's vision of the American mythos but it does little to advance the plot besides introduce the village and a few of the principal inhabitants, Rodney included. Near the close of "The Movers," the narrator intimates his theme that slavery and racial prejudice will corrupt the community's ideals:

But, Saville, pause! for God's sake pause! I beg!
For thy fair bosom warms a viper's egg.
The hatching ruin will thy young life sting,
And pour a deadly poison thro' thy nature's spring.
Thou hold'st one slave! Of barbarisms old
An evil seed now in thy life takes hold. (429-434)

With these lines, *NAM* has indicated its themes and introduced its characters, and seems about to launch its proper narrative. But instead, Whitman takes his reader on a massive and unexpected detour. Chapters two through six, as it turns out, don't concern Rodney or Saville at all, but rather a Sac chief (Pasepaho), his daughter, (Nanawawa), and a young fair-haired captive (White Loon) who becomes Pasepaho's adopted son and eventually Nanawawa's husband. This entire Indian subplot is written in direct parody of Longfellow's *Hiawatha*, and composed in that poem's distinctive trochaic meter. These chapters initially seem to be a well-executed but irrelevant burst of mimicry, but they are actually central to understanding Whitman's revisionist nationalism. I'll return to them in short order, but first I wish to outline the primary narrative of *NAM*, which resumes in the seventh chapter.

As the plot begins (again), Sir Maxey is leading the men of Saville on a hunting party. In the course of this expedition, the Savillians discover a Sac village, which they raid and plunder, killing Nanawawa in the process. The enraged Sacs pursue Maxey and his men through the forest, killing many. Shortly afterward, following a panicked meeting of the Saville council, Maxey orders his slave Rodney to travel to nearby Fort Dearborn to request reinforcements. Rodney declares that he will only go if Maxey agrees to "own [him] a man". Maxey refuses, but his daughter Dora nevertheless convinces Rodney to undertake the trip. Once at Dearborn, Rodney finds the

townspeople unable to send men, and he turns back towards Saville. On his arrival, he finds the villagers dead and the town reduced to a smoking ruin, annihilated by a retaliatory Sac raid. Dora, however, has been captured alive, and Rodney tracks her into the forest, rescues her from her captors, and takes her to Fort Dearborn, where Saville's survivors have fled after the Sac raid. As it happens, Sir Maxey has promised to give Dora in marriage to whomever manages to rescue her – a pledge that confounds the villagers when Rodney arrives bearing her to safety.

The narrator interrupts the narrative here and abruptly changes the scene to Memphis. Whitman-the-narrator finds himself observing a slave auction in that city, talking to the slaves who are imprisoned and awaiting sale. He catches sight of Rodney, who, he learns, has been sold by Maxey after professing his love for Dora. At the auction, Rodney is purchased by Mosher Aylor, and the scene changes again, to the Aylor plantation in Florida. Whitman-the-narrator is familiar with this particular plantation, and has learned the family's history by talking with the slaves on the estate. They tell him that the character of the Aylor family has hardened generation by generation, and that Mosher, the last surviving Aylor, is a greedy man of luxurious lifestyle whose character has been corrupted by his harsh treatment of his slaves.

Accustomed to the relative freedom of his life in Saville, Rodney chafes at life on the Aylor plantation, and before and after his labors each day, he walks the woods to ease his mind. Early one morning, Rodney happens upon a young woman bathing by the river and secretly watches her for several minutes. The woman, disturbed by the sounds of someone nearby, dresses hurriedly and runs into the woods. Rodney "pursue[s], not knowing why," but he stops when he realizes that Aylor himself (who had been covertly watching the same girl) is giving chase behind him. Stunned, Rodney stops running and returns to his morning labors; Aylor, continuing on, tracks the woman to the gates of the

neighboring Brentwood estate. Filled with lust for the young stranger, Aylor makes inquiries and discovers that she is a slave (and also a descendant) of the Brentwood house. Delighted, Aylor immediately makes arrangements to purchase Leeona and move her into the house. However, Rodney and Leeona quickly fall in love with one another and meet often in the woods. When Aylor discovers their romance, he locks up Leeona and makes plans to sell Rodney. An elderly slave named “Aunt Ameriky” unlocks Leeona’s room and takes her to the chamber where Rodney is being kept – together, they free Rodney, and Leeona directs him to a nearby cave where he can hide until they have an opportunity to escape together. Some few days thereafter, Aylor finds Leeona sleeping in the woods and rapes her (though the narrative itself breaks off just before the assault). Many months later, Whitman-the-narrator is walking in the woods and sees Rodney and Leeona, now shouldering an infant, make their escape into the swamp with Aylor’s men and hounds on their trail. They hide out in the swamp for days, preparing to make their escape for Canada. Just before they leave, Leeona encounters White Loon (Nanawawa’s lover), but he has become a mental and physical wreck.

Leeona and Rodney travel through Kentucky and are pursued across the Green River, where they lose track of each other. Leeona, though, is assisted by a fisherman named Ben Guildern, and continues her journey alone. Somewhere in Ohio, the infant dies. As Leeona grieves, Rodney finds her, and they bury the child together. When we next see Rodney and Leeona, they are settled in Canada, in a “little green cottage,” raising their family and living through idyllic years. In the final chapter, Rodney and his two sons have returned to the United States to fight in the Civil War, on the Union side. One day, as they are encamped at Nashville, Rodney encounters a dying soldier and discovers that it is Aylor. Rodney offers a drink of water from his canteen, and Aylor asks for Rodney’s forgiveness as he dies.

As the foregoing summary might begin to suggest, the sprawling narrative of *NAM* is highly intertextual; Whitman pulls together narrative tropes and character archetypes from dime novels, captivity narratives, literary romances, and other sources. To cite just a few examples: the Saville chapters invoke James Fenimore Cooper and other popular frontier fiction; Aylor's character recalls numerous depictions of cruel slave owners (including Stowe's *Legree*); and Rodney's courtships, first of Dora and then of Leeona, hark back to tales of chivalric romance. Admittedly, this technique can sometimes make Whitman's compositions seem disjointed (particularly since Whitman employs a similar method with the very style and prosody of his poetry). As I will argue, however, Whitman employs these freewheeling appropriations in order to comment on several interlocking strands of mythopoeic America while simultaneously staging a revised version of those myths.

One of the clearest examples of Whitman's appropriative (or "signifiyin") poetics can be found in the character of the hero himself. In Rodney, Whitman has created a kind of pulp-fiction superhero. Rodney outraces horses, fights off packs of hounds, and battles throngs of "savages," all while displaying a chivalric sense of nobility, courage, and high decorum. His closest analogues may be Cooper's Natty Bumppo, or perhaps the Daniel Boone of dime paperbacks. But despite his familiar pedigree, Rodney's function in the narrative serves to suggest some radical ideas about American history. Whitman wanted Rodney to represent an archetype that, according to Whitman, would appear first in literature and then in the world: "The Negro of the Future."

WHITMAN AND “THE NEGRO OF THE FUTURE”

Whitman did not fully delineate his concept of “The Negro of the Future” until 1891, about fifteen years after the publication of *NAM*. At this time, Whitman’s reputation was at its zenith. He was esteemed one of the intellectual luminaries of the black community, both for his poetry and for his role as a leader in the AME church. In a series of essays titled “Bugle Note,” published in a black newspaper named *The Christian Recorder*, a confidently authoritative Whitman offers a sprawling poetic description of black people’s role in American history, concluding with a prophetic-sounding vision of things to come. In the second “Bugle Note,” Whitman predicts that the destiny of the race, and indeed of America itself, will be transformed by an emergent figure he calls “The Negro of the Future.” He begins by voicing an opinion which, however discredited now, was common among many black elites and figures in the African-American public sphere: that blacks in America had no usable past. “So far as civilization is concerned,” Whitman asserted, “the Negro is without ‘the beginning of days.’” This blinkered conception of black Americans as ahistorical and without a past was not uncommon among educated black elites and voices by numerous prominent figures in the African-American public sphere. Whitman, however, pushes this idea in an unexpected direction, arguing that blacks are the embodiment of an enhanced future America: “The very existence of a ‘Dark Continent’ and the accidental or providential appearance of the African in this country suggest clearly, if they suggest anything at all, that the Negro is a man of the future.” This last sentence suggests that Whitman – like Frances Ellen Watkins Harper – believed that the presence of blacks in America indicated some sort of design or divine narrative. For Harper, the design unquestionably pointed towards the redemption of the nation: black people, through their spiritual force and purity, would rejuvenate the church in America and restore the nation’s moral leadership. Whitman’s

conception of the “accidental or providential appearance of the African,” however, is less religious and more world-historical. Just as America represented a new idea in human civilization, the “negro of the future” will be a new element in history, a thesis that Whitman continues to develop in his “Bugle Note.”

Whitman’s description of “The Negro of the Future” is so striking, and so clearly relevant to *NAM* and his other literary creations, that it is worth reproducing at some length:

Under conditions yet to prevail and in obedience to the forces of our great Christianity, the Negro of the future must appear. This great man has no prototype in history. Legend is silent concerning him. The Sphinx and the Pyramids suggest no traces of his ancestry. The romances of the past have had no dream of him. . . .

But nowhere among [the past] is there any suggestion of the world’s Negro. Looking forward we see him. . . . A child of great forests and solemn shades, he is full of lofty thought and the fountain of his being is ever fresh and clear. He is of stalwart size and in his limbs is the strength of the mighty. . . . Erudition has taken from his face the marks of savagery, and lines of light follow in the smooth rhythms of the sunniest of natures. His smile is the signal of conscious strength, and of a courage that disdains to assert itself over the weak. He is a manly man. The music in his soul is a continual prophecy . . .

Child of the Sun, his life is a noble poem, suggesting high mountains, bright cascades and peaceful lakes. His mien bespeaks the wealth of realms, and from the heights he looks beyond to wider fields. With him there is no looking backwards. He worships none of the old

deities of fear and hate, apotheosizes no old heroic ghosts. . . And in this sublime triumph of the beautiful, the true and the good, life is summed up and our humanity is complete. This is the Negro of the future, elevated by the forces of a triumphant Christianity. . . This is the mighty exemplar of the ages & the Africans of the kingdoms of the sons of men.

Again, we see Whitman melding the vocabularies of the factual and the mythical, emphasizing that the “Negro of the future” will take a form not only historically unprecedented, but unanticipated in legend, dream or story. Over and over in these lines, Whitman returns to invocations of the country’s natural beauty, suggesting that this future man will take the impress of the wildness, grandeur, and strength of the physical landscapes surrounding him. This idea, that the “coming colored man” would necessarily be a frontiersman or hearty small-acre farmer vivified and shaped by his communion with the earth, may be the most eccentric element of Whitman’s vision, at least to modern ears. But it also connects to his conception of evolution-driven racial progress

Aside from his masculine vitality, the “negro of the future,” as we can observe, is marked by moral virtue (courage, mercy, dignity, reflectiveness) and by the especial stamp of Christian religion. This, then, is a secularized version of Harper’s “special destiny”: the future man will be shaped by his religious faith, but his significance will reside in his cultivation of the humanistic virtues. Indeed, some of Whitman’s writings suggest that his predictions of the race’s future were influenced, not only by the providentially-oriented thinking of Harper and other prominent A.M.E. leaders, but by the doctrine of evolution. As he observes in the first “Bugle Note,” “some of our good men are a little skeptical in regard to the purposes of an Almighty who ‘shapes our ends, rough hew them as we may,’ leading us ever to the attainment of the survival of the fittest.” Nevertheless, he argues, brutal struggle for survival will remain the law of God

and man, and this struggle will shape the future of the race and the country itself. “‘Root hog or die,’” he insists, “will from now on be the motto of American life and the colored man must stand by it . . . we must bring ourselves into the spirit of enterprise, which characterizes our age.” Whitman goes on to argue that Reconstruction had been essentially anti-evolutionary in nature, “an abnormal condition in American society” in which “the colored man enjoyed the benefit of accidents, reaped where he had not sown; occupied positions of emolument and trust for which he was not qualified.” At this point, he suggests, the injured manhood of white southerners unleashed violence on the blacks of Reconstruction; the end result was the blacks were oppressed, even as white investment capital continued its upward march. “Survival of the fittest” had produced material progress, and the best hope for the black community was to embrace the emerging competitive ethos. “Electrical, quick, orderly, strong, calculated and correct, the forces which underlie the movements of the business world today, are certainly tiding us to the shores of a new and larger province of possibilities, and our only hope as a race lies in the fact that we have the opportunity of falling into line and marching on with the columns that are heading for the front.”

Although Whitman began penning his “Bugle Note” series in the 1890s, decades after his publication of *Not a Man*, and certain debates of this later period impact his thinking about the race, we can certainly observe a continuous, abiding set of concerns and positions in these articles and his literary productions. Firstly, he believed in the possibility of an emergent archetype for black masculinity, an archetype which had always been latent, if only sporadically recognized in the nation’s brief history. Once we see Rodney and Atlassa as the attempted instantiations of this “negro of the future,” their prime artistic liability – the absence of any humanizing flaws – as a by-product of their function. Whitman was creating the man he saw as a potentiality, and pulling back the

veil of history to reveal what he saw as this figure's inherent, if unrealized, presence in the nation's mythos.

Whitman's philosophy of racial evolution and the "Negro of the future" illuminates *Not a Man* in a number of ways. First of all, Rodney's character is determined, almost to an absurd degree, by his strength, heroism, intelligence, and high courtesy. Whitman establishes Rodney's heroism by subjecting him to various extreme tribulations: his status as a slave, his embroilment in a frontier fight with a village of Sacs, his dangerous journey to Dearborne to recruit reinforcements, and so on. The poet's models for these depictions of heroic deeds seem to be the adventure stories and dime novels – the pulp fiction – of the day. Rodney's exploits often rise to the level of the superhuman, as in this scene, where he flees the Sacs:

Rodney left,
As lion of young bereft,
And thro' the wasty forests wheeled
A speed that would have shamed the steeled
And wildest travel of the horse,
That snuffs up strength and leads the course ("The Fair Captive," 69-74)

Or in this scene, in which he single-handedly fights off a pack of hounds:

Right on the hounds with flashing steel he flies;
They on him furious turn, with eyes that glare
Like furies' jaws gaping, and teeth bare;
This one and that he seizes as they lunge
Upon him, and their dread fangs in him plunge
.....
Till with their warm blood dripping from his hands,

He master of the situation stands! ("Flight of Leeona," 323-7, 330-1)

As the first passage demonstrates, Whitman wants to cast his story as an epic and Rodney as an epic hero, praising his supreme swiftness with an epic simile – he is like a lion or a courser. According to the classic definition, "epic" features a hero superior to nature itself, and the poet wants to make certain that his reader gets the point; this hero is superior to all his environments and everyone else in them. Yet as the second example shows, *Not a Man*, despite its metrical self-assurance and lofty themes, does not have a tone that one would call "epic". Conversely, the poem's combination of lurid detail, hyperbolic action, and sensationalistic yet conventional diction suggests that the poem counts as its literary ancestors not only Longfellow and Byron, but also James Fenimore Cooper. The numerous scenes of physical conflict in Whitman's poems are written up in a similar style; the "flashing steel," "dread fangs," and "warm blood dripping" are, in this sense, quite representative of the overall tenor of Whitman's "action writing."

As Whitman's "Bugle Note" pieces suggest, however, Rodney's heroics are not simply racially inverted reproductions of genre convention. Rather, his character throughout *Not a Man* attempts to express Whitman's sense that historical and geographical forces were creating – through a quasi-evolutionary process – a superlative black man, the Negro of the Future. The language of Whitman's "Bugle Note" could be applied with no difficulty to the hero of his earlier epic: Rodney is "stalwart of size," with "the strength of the mighty"; he displays a "courage that disdains to assert itself over the weak; he has been raised on the frontier, "a child of great forests and solemn shades." But Whitman's vision of racial destiny in *Not a Man* is not fully expressed by Rodney; rather, Rodney's character works in tandem with two others – the narrator himself, and the perplexing figure of White Loon – to express Whitman's ideas about the evolving American character.

“DARK MYSTERY”: THE MADNESS OF WHITE LOON

Rodney is unquestionably the hero of *Not A Man and Yet a Man*, and he stands moreover as an archetypal representation of the triumphant black masculinity which Whitman believed to be the nation's destiny. Yet curiously, Rodney is not actually the first larger-than-life hero we encounter in the poem; rather, he is the *second*. As I mentioned in the summary above, *NAM*'s central plot is abandoned almost immediately after it has begun. In the second chapter, Whitman withdraws narrative attention from Rodney and the Savillians and focuses instead on a separate cast of characters – Nanawawa, Pasepaho, and White Loon. The adventures of these three individuals are not strongly relevant to the plot. Although the shooting of Nanawawa and the resulting threat of Sac retaliation does spark the events which allow Rodney to display his heroism for the first time, the Sac plot is otherwise unconnected to Rodney's story. Whitman himself, presumably recognizing the extraneous nature of this introductory subplot, trimmed away most of it when creating a revised and condensed version to be published together with *Twasinta's Seminoles* in a one-volume edition. Yet the “Nanawawa” section, despite being both stereotyped and narratively tangential, is valuable in several ways. Firstly, by crafting a carefully positioned variation on *Hiawatha*, Whitman invites the reader into a contentious intertextual dialogue between his own poetry and Longfellow's. The “Nanawawa” chapter offers us one of the clearest and most legible examples of Whitman's practice of “signifyin” on the literary canon, a practice shared by many other minority poets of the nineteenth century. Secondly, I will argue that White Loon is the central figure in Whitman's patterning of failed heroes in the poem. White Loon (and also, in very different ways, Maxey and Aylor) act as foils, illuminating Rodney's archetypal place in the national story and gesturing towards his symbolic function as “The Negro of the Future.” A close reading of the “Nanawawa” subplot will

therefore illuminate Whitman's relationship to Longfellow and the canon, while also bringing into focus his revisions of the myths of American exceptionalism and racial destiny.

The first chapter of the "Nanawawa" section, titled "The Old Sac Village," begins with a series of direct addresses to the reader:

Ye who read in musty volumes
Pages worn of Backwoods Times,
Of the red man and the white man,
In the thrilling days of danger,
.....
Ye who read these musty volumes,
Till a strange sensation thrills you,
As of Indians skulking near you,
Lay aside your volume lightly,
Hear me sing of Nanawawa. (1-4, 18-22)

These lines would be immediately recognizable to the late-nineteenth-century reader as being some kind of parody, imitation, or send-up of Longfellow's *Hiawatha*. In composing *Hiawatha*, Longfellow had wanted a prosodic scheme that he hoped would suggest oral poetic tradition. He chose to write the poem in unrhymed iambic tetrameter, a form that had perhaps been suggested by the Finnish *Kalevala*. Iambic tetrameter creates an insistently rocking rhythm, and it contributed enormously to the distinctiveness of Longfellow's poem. Not only does Whitman borrow a metrical scheme from Longfellow, he borrows a subject as well – like *Hiawatha*, these five chapters of *NAM* portray a realm of idealized Indians, leading up to a symbolic moment in which those Indians are superseded by colonizers.

Yet even as Whitman borrows Longfellow's meter and subject, he begins by asking his readers to turn away from the tales and poems with which they are already familiar, entreating them: "Lay aside your volume lightly." The poet invites his audience to set down whatever Indian tales they are currently reading, and to *read his instead*. Whitman contrasts the "musty volumes" with "pages worn" to his own song, which will presumably be fresher and lighter. Whitman continues in this vein:

Ye who pore for weary hours,
In the deep wild nooks of legend,
In the forest-nooks of legend,
Gath'ring up these strange old relics,
For your idle thoughts to play with;
Such as wigwams rude, and war posts,
Belts of wampum, bows and arrows,
.....
Ye who pore for weary hours
In these pathless nooks of legend,
Wake, and hear of Nanawawa. (25-9, 36-8)

Just as the opening lines discount other writers' Indian tales by describing them as dusty books to be set aside, these lines present those tales as exhausting, dreamlike mazes. Whitman invites his reader to wake up from these legends and, again, to *listen to his legend* instead.

In these first two addresses – as Whitman speaks to readers of "musty volumes" and then to relic-gatherers in "pathless nooks of legend" – the poet negatively contrasts other tales with his own (forthcoming) tale; he calls to readers who are reading the wrong

stories for the wrong reasons. But Whitman then pivots, envisioning and affirming the kind of audience he wishes to construct for himself:

Ye who wander long delighted,
In the distant realms of romance,
On the mountain highs of romance,
And in woody depths of romance,
Getting lost in shady windings,
Looking not to find your way out,
But a wood to wander off in,
.....
Where the noon-beam parts the fore locks
Of the forest looking shyly,
Where a thousand wind-swung branches,
Wild songs pour in Solitude's ear,
And the heart of meditation
Slowly beats and warms in beating;
Pause, and hear of Nanawawa. (39-45, 58-65)

In these lines, Whitman seems to address a reader who seeks a particular kind of relationship to the text – not a struggling reader who will “pore” for native relics, and not a scholar seeking antiquities in “musty volumes,” but rather a reader who longs for a kind of idealized meditative absorption into the text. In these lines, Whitman expresses his intention to be a poet of nature who can lure his reader deep into a wood and express nature’s hidden histories.

After these invocations, Whitman begins in earnest to unfold the “Nanawawa” subplot. The poet introduces us to a Sac chief named Pasepaho, who is preparing to host a

large feast which will be attended by representatives from all the neighboring tribes. The evening before the gathering, Pasepaho and his daughter Nanawawa pass the time singing. In the morning, the various tribal representatives arrive with gifts. The chief makes a speech of thanks, telling the story of a time when the Great Father gave all the surrounding lands to the tribes for hunting, bidding them live in peace. After Pasepaho's story, many of the visiting chiefs court Nanawawa, each suitor offering additional gifts. The princess declines nearly all of their presents, accepting only the white slave of a Dacotah chief. Pasepaho – rather arbitrarily – adopts this young man as his son, naming him White Loon. White Loon quickly becomes one of the most accomplished Sac braves; not only is he unexcelled at hunting and fishing, but his storytelling gift and his ability to relate the mythic origin of various natural phenomena make him special: “to his friends a prophet.” He woos Nanawawa, who accepts him as a suitor, provided that he build a wigwam. Pasepaho dies, urging Nanawawa to take a “strong and valiant young chief” for a husband. At this point, the “Nanawawa” subplot is interrupted by the story of the Saville settlers, and Sir Maxey's hunting party swoops in, raiding the Sac village and murdering Nanawawa. The narrative rushes on, pausing only briefly to note White Loon grieving over the body of his lover.

This story, of course, is already familiar, almost pre-digested -- the basic elements (again) come from Longfellow, Cooper, and dime novels about the Western frontier. However, like other poets in this study, Whitman's greatest strength lies with recontextualization rather than invention; he creates new and surprising effects out of a shifting series of imitations. The most salient, and in some ways the most surprising, element of this story is its valorization of a “white Indian.” Considering Whitman's announcement in the prologue that “the black man has a cause” which his poem will “vindicate,” why does he pause Rodney's story and take up White Loon's? Part of the

answer, as I have suggested, has to do with Whitman's wrestling match with Longfellow, constantly reinforced by that distinctive, emphatic trochaic tetrameter. But White Loon's story also relates complexly to thematic connections Whitman's poem tries to draw between race, personality, masculinity, and the trajectory of American history. The story of White Loon at first seems to bolster white supremacist ideology – how, the reader might wonder, does such a figure function in a poem about African American heroism?

As an example of the troubling racial iconography of White Loon, consider the opening description of White Loon at the point of his first appearance in the narrative, just before Nanawawa takes notice of the young captive and claims him as her gift:

In the captive's face, the light shone
Of intelligence and training.
He the hopes showed of proud parents.
Long his locks, and golden, floated
To his shoulders, blue his eyes were,
And as sunbeams penetrating.
But captivity's cold buffets
Pensive made him seem and forlorn. (42-9)

Immediately upon entering the story, White Loon is represented as a superior kind of man. And his superiority seems clearly linked to his Aryanism, which Whitman emphasizes. His physical lightness – the “light” in his face, those blue eyes and golden locks – corresponds with his “intelligence and training,” being the outward manifestation of inner qualities. He is a stereotype, in other words, of the white supremacist's ideal self-made: perfectly enabled, quietly enlightened, and obtrusively, inherently superior to the other tribes of humankind. Yet the final two lines quoted above already betray a quality increasingly evident in the poem: White Loon is a melancholic personality, and

prone to being unmoored by adversity. His captivity (by contrast with that of Rodney, in particular) has caused him to withdraw moodily into himself. Upon this first appearance, his “pensive . . . and forlorn” aspect may seem romantic, but it is also the leading indicator of an instability that will come to dominate his portrayal.

Similarly, the captive’s adoption and christening by the Sac chief Pasepaho seems, on the face of it, to be an affirmation of the boy’s worth: “For the Stabber took the captive, Smeared his face with many colors, / Hung his golden locks with brooches, / Armed him with a bow and arrows, / And his son, the White Loon, named him.” On the one hand, this ritual signals that White Loon will inherit the Indian chief’s authority and right to the land; yet on the other, the christening telegraphs to the reader that White Loon would be a problematic bearer of that authority. And he will indeed prove mentally unstable, a white loon.

After White Loon’s adoption and rechristening, Whitman takes pains to authenticate his credentials as a worthy “white Indian,” briskly enumerating the youth’s other accomplishments. According to our narrator, White Loon was widely esteemed (“All the young men of the village / Sought the companionship of White Loon”) and an able huntsman (“For the deer hunt he was ready, / For the bison chase and bear hunt”) and fisherman (“He was called the lucky fisher”). By this point, we can clearly see that the young Anglo is meant to be, not merely acculturated into the Sac community, but the outstanding if not superior member of the tribe: the perfect Indian. But White Loon’s most perfect demonstration of his mastery lies not with his feats of physical prowess, but rather with his facility with myth and legend:

Old men talked of him with wise looks,

And the young men with brightened faces.

Children spoke of him in whispers,

And with little looks of wonder.
Grouped behind him in the tent doors;
For to them he was a prophet.
He could tell of ghosts and genii,
In the woods and in the waters;
.....
He could tell of evil genii,
Clasping hands upon the waters,
And to elfin music dancing
On the clear and moonlit waters. (96-103, 107-110)

The text suggests that White Loon's most significant accomplishments are in the area of tale and story. After all, his hunting and fishing only cement his acceptance within the group, proving his prowess in the necessary skills of Sac life. His tales, however, cause others to look at him differently, as a prodigy – “for to them he was a prophet.” And while the former activities result in his integration into the social fabric – “His canoe was seen with others” – the storytelling seems to isolate him, as elders whisper solemnly and children peek shyly into his tent door.

As an example of this prodigious story-telling, the narrator reproduces two of White Loon's own stories: first, a tragic story of two lovers and the then, more briefly, a Sac “origin” tale. The first tale concerns a young woman, the daughter of a “mighty” chief of white men. In White Loon's story, this daughter, although “light . . . and full of sunshine,” was “light and wayward of heart,” and rejected the young suitor whom she truly loved. Coyly, the chief's daughter “smiled on him, but went from him / Till his eyes were mooned in frenzy, / And he fell into Lake Huron.” We might consider it significant that the lover's fall results from his madness – this story seems to foreshadow

the eventual fate of White Loon himself. However, the young suitor does not actually die from his fall into the lake. Instead, genii catch him and bear him “to a land beneath the waters.” The chief’s daughter, walking by the waters at night to grieve and ask forgiveness, eventually arouses the pity of a compassionate genii who takes her beneath the Huron to reunite with her lover. Now, White Loon concludes, “within the land of shadows, / Far beneath the sad still Huron, / In the deep home of the genii, / These two lovers are seen riding / E’er behind two harnessed moonbeams.” The second, much shorter, tale concerns the giants that, according to White Loon, lived once “in a far off land of mountains” and engaged in terrible anger that may or may not have had some effect on the weather. These two stories somewhat implausibly serve as examples of White Loon’s extraordinary status in the village. “Thus it was,” concludes the narrator “that White Loon’s wisdom / Made him to his friends a prophet.”

In all, Whitman devotes nearly a hundred lines to White Loon’s story-telling. This is a considerable digression, especially considering that the primary thread of the narrative has yet to begin properly. The poet seems to enjoy spinning these yarns, and moreover, the sense of Whitman’s competition with Longfellow is particularly acute here. But these pages have a direct bearing on Whitman’s central project as well. First of all, it seems quite significant that the lover’s fall results from his madness – this aspect of the tale seems to foreshadow the eventual fate of White Loon himself, as we shall see. But more importantly, the thing that makes the former captive a “prophet” is his ability to convincingly tell about the genii beneath Lake Huron, about the shadowland underneath the lake, and about the “giants in the mountains.” The narrator seems to suggest that White Loon has achieved some kind of supernatural link with the land and has gained knowledge of its elemental spirits. If we are inclined to pursue an allegorical/psychological reading here, White Loon might be plausibly considered a

stand-in for Longfellow himself; the white “prophet” who has made a name for himself by mastering the stories of the native earth, and who tells the Indian legends with an air of authority. If so, the eventual end of White Loon might represent, among other things, a kind of Bloomian revenge taken by Whitman upon his strong precursor.

The remaining two chapters of the “Nanawawa” section emphasize White Loon’s role as Pasepaho’s successor. In a variety of ways, the narrative signals that the “fair captive,” having become the perfect Indian, will soon step into the shoes of the tribal patriarch himself. In “Nanawawa’s Lakelet,” White Loon declares love to the princess and she accepts of his suit. At this point, White Loon has become doubly distinguished, being both the adopted son of chief Pasepaho and now the future husband of his daughter. This substitutional logic culminates in “The Death of Pasepaho,” a chapter which relates the aged Indian chief’s dying words in a scene which seems almost prescribed by convention. On his deathbed, Pasepaho tells Nanawawa: “I am now upon a journey, And you now cannot go with me,” and exclaims “I behold great lands before me.” This scene again invites comparison with the final scenes of *Hiawatha*, in which the hero departs peacefully into the distance, paddling his canoe into the sunset.

At this point in the book – sixty-three pages in, no less – Whitman suddenly resumes the primary narrative concerning Rodney and the settlers at Saville, and the story of Nanawawa, White Loon, and Pasepaho abruptly ends. But “ends” is perhaps too neutral a term. The “Nanawawa” narrative doesn’t simply stop; rather, it is violently exterminated – as described earlier, Maxey and his men provide a brutal terminus to the love story concerning White Loon and Nanawawa. Maxey and his hunting party have just raided the Sac village when they encounter Nanawawa in the woods. They halt, and one of his men shoots and kills her. As Maxey, Rodney, and the others flee, pursued by an entire host of enraged Sacs, Whitman offers the parting image of White Loon standing

over his lover's body: "The White Loon bends, and kisses her pale cheek, / And trembling lips that can no longer speak; / While from his eyes the streams of loud grief start, / And downwards pour the anguish of an manly heart." This image will be the last we see of White Loon for some time. But although his character disappears, his narrative seemingly concluded, the poem is not quite done with him.

Much, much later in the book White Loon makes a final, pathetic appearance. Rodney and Leeona have just made their final escape from the Aylor estate, and they are preparing for their flight to Canada. Leeona, having become lost in the woods while gathering fruit, encounters an unsettling figure:

A tall old man in skins half guized,
Half savage and half civilized,
With a great cudgel in his hand,
Towards her gazing still did stand.
About his waist a leathern thong
Bound his long locks, they were so long.
Uncombed and matted close they lay,
And age's touch had made them gray.
His gaunt arms were of monstrous length,
The ghastly signs of wasted strength. (417-26)

Nowhere in these lines – and nowhere afterwards – is White Loon mentioned by name; not for several dozen lines does his identity become clear. The reader might be forgiven for not even recognizing the figure described above. The wrecked man seems significantly older than White Loon should be, given the story's implications that no more than a few years have passed since Sir Maxey's underling shot and killed Nanawawa. Yet this figure is an "old man" with gray hair (and his hair, we are told, is

gray from “age’s touch” rather than hardship or emotional turmoil). This hair, once an emblem of White Loon’s noble nature, now acts as an emblem of madness. His savagery is emphasized here – not a word that was ever associated with him as he assimilated into the Sac tribe. But now, with a “great cudgel,” a “leathern thong” and “monstrous” arms, he seems truly “savage” for the first time. The madness seems to have effected a devolution; White Loon now seems to be a relic from an earlier, more brutal prototype of humanity. [Refer back to the previous section and Whitman’s understanding of evolution] Although the hermit’s barbaric appearance might seem to indicate that he has succumbed to the “savagery” inherent in his acculturation as a Sac, I believe that this would be a grave misreading. As the scene unfolds, the poet increasingly suggests that White Loon’s devolution works as a synecdoche for the debased moral and cultural fibre of the white race.

For White Loon, formerly a paragon of manly virtue much like Rodney, moves to threaten Leeona. The hermit “stalked / Around her hiding place, “ Swung his great cudgel round and round, / Chattered and gnashed, and stamped the ground, / Rolled his wild eyes, growled like a bear, / And thrust his fingers in his hair.” In these lines, White Loon is described as bestial, a figure who has lost not merely his sanity, but somehow his very humanity. Once a masterful storyteller, he can now barely muster speech at all. Moreover, he threatens Leeona with violence – probably the greatest of transgressions in Whitman’s ethical/moral framework – thus showing himself more akin to the villains Sir Maxey and Mosher Aylor rather than Rodney. Interestingly, Leeona is the only heroine of three (the other two being Dora and Nanawawa) who averts the danger herself, by means of an insightful subterfuge. Threatened by White Loon’s stamping, gnashing, and cudgel-swinging, she stands and shows him her infant child. The sight of the baby disarms the old hermit, rekindling memories of Nanawawa and the Sacs, memories both

of happiness and tragedy. His confused response, and Nanawawa's rumination upon it, form the crux of the scene:

“Have you seen Nanawawa?” then he cried.
“She died long time ago, and then I died;
Who wrongs the red man, wrongs the race of man.
You hurt my wigwam now, sir, if you can!”
Leeona answered, pointing him away,
For no auspicious moment long will stay;
“Your Nanawawa lives in yonder glen,
Make haste and find her – come and tell me then.”
Now both hands in the air the madman threw,
Dashed off and laughed, and gibbered as he flew.
“Dark mystery,” Leeona, leaving, said,
“Hath in that human waste her mansion made!
Ah! Now within his once love-lighted breast,
The owly phantom builds her broody nest.
And that high seat where wisdom once did dwell,
Is now inhabited by visions fell,
And recollections harassing, among
Which, a dreadful secret holds her tongue!” (445-62)

On one level, Whitman encourages his audience to savor the melodrama, to indulge the sentimental spectacle of a once-noble soul wrecked by the buffets of unhappy love. The first couplet quoted above, for example, works almost exclusively on this level, focusing our attention on the pathetic ghostliness of a soul whose sole object of attachment has stranded him alone without purpose. But the subsequent couplet steers Nanawawa's, and

the reader's, attention towards a different – and hitherto unstated – aspect of the “Nanawawa” story: Nanawawa's death as one casualty of the broader tragedy of systematic violence towards native tribes. “Who wrongs the red man, wrongs the race of man,” intones White Loon. In these last two lines of dialogue, the hermit seems to resume his previous role as spokesman for the Indian – an impression strengthened by his odd parting shot about his wigwam, a line which, besides reinforcing his “white Indian”-ness, leaves us with a final accentuation of his madness, as he laughs and gibbers into the sunset.

Yet Leeona seems most struck by some uncanny element in the hermit's aspect, an unnamed and perhaps unnameable force which she can only approximate in a series of dim metaphors. She considers his inner self as a “human waste” containing a “mansion” housing a “dark mystery”; as a formerly lighted shelter now inhabited by an “owly phantom,” and considers his mind as “inhabited by visions fell.” One interpretation, of course, is that Leeona is only describing White Loon's madness and confusion. But this explanation seems somewhat inadequate. Leeona uses mysterious, gothic language in an apparent attempt to capture her fleeting, half-understood intuitions regarding White Loon. She refers to the affliction as a “dreadful secret,” indicating a force at work which is unsettling and obscure to common experience.

What is this uncanny, this mysterious force at work in White Loon's soul? I would argue that the madness of White Loon, and the horrible burden powering it, corresponds to the moral and spiritual debt incurred by the Anglo-Saxon race against the non-white peoples of the world. Let us turn, again, to the “Bugle Note” of 1891, to a passage in which Whitman makes plain his appraisal of the direction taken by the Anglo tribe:

The dead squaws and children of Wounded Knee, and their homeless wandering Survivors, in the bleak and wretched waste of the Dakotas, ought to be at least, a Hint to us, that the torch of sentiment is well nigh extinguished in the Anglo-Saxon breast.

White Loon, as we encounter him at the end, seems strikingly akin to a conflation of the ideas expressed in the “Bugle Note” – he is a “homeless wandering survivor” of an assaulted Indian community, as well as the bearer of an “Anglo-Saxon breast” in which “the torch of sentiment if well-nigh extinguished” (or, to recapitulate Leona’s phrase, a “once love-lighted breast” in which “the owly phantom builds her broody nest.”)

We might remember that Whitman has expended considerable narrative energy on White Loon. Although the “Nanawawa” subplot, as we have seen, scarcely intersects with the main narrative, it does effectively establish the character of White Loon as a shattered, Cain-like wanderer bearing the sorrows of his race’s sins. In later drafts of *NAM*, Whitman removes almost all of the “Nanawawa” material, leaving only two scenes: White Loon mutely grieving over Nanawawa’s body, and White Loon’s encounter with Leona.

As Whitman announces in the preface and affirms by the general tenor of the poem, Whitman’s artistic interest lies not with a denunciation of white America but rather with a new articulation of black heroism. In this light, White Loon’s descent into depravity must be considered, along with the comparable moral implosions of Maxey and Aylor, in relationship to the character and nature of Rodney – and perhaps of Leona as well. White Loon’s importance in the narrative, we might conjecture, is contained in his relationship to Rodney – he exists primarily as a foil or counterweight to Rodney. As White Loon stands among the Sacs – an outsider and a captive who nevertheless absorbs and reflects back the best virtues and truest spirit of the people who hold him prisoner –

so stands Rodney among both the white pioneers of Saville and the slaves at the Aylor estate. White Loon is, in effect, the first and most important of a number of doubles for Rodney. Some of these doubles perform actions crucial to the plot, others take the stage for purely thematic ends, but all of them serve the purpose of magnifying and illuminating the character of Rodney. This sequence of doublings is, in fact, the poet's primary means of characterization.

White Loon shares many of Rodney's heroic virtues, but he meets a very different destiny. Although he seems to have set himself in place as the worthy heir to Pasepaho, White Loon fails to be worthy of his inheritance. Doomed by the heritage of violence brought by his white ancestors, he has become stranded, unable to claim either culture. He has become fractured within himself; unable to pull back from a morbid sentimentalism that leaves him no path toward the future; a cast-off, a hermit. Rodney, by contrast, pointedly works to hold both whites and blacks to a lofty standard of moral and ethical conduct, and, although doubtless he is easily moved, hardship and trouble do nothing to break his resolve or drown him in grief or regret.

Sir Maxey, like White Loon, is at first presented to the reader as a noble and admirable leader of the Saville settlers. He is introduced as "mild Sir Maxey of lineal fame," a man who carries the "trace / of deep reflection in his general mien." Yet his nobility of character is also a kind of defect; his gentility, the narrator implies, makes him unfit for dangerous or violent circumstances: "So sensitive his elevated mind, / For combat and disaster too refined, / At bloody sights a horror seized his breath, / And fears swum thro' his veins at thought of death" (127-131). And indeed, Maxey's "sensitive" cast of mind reveals itself in damning ways. He halts the hunting party so that he can admire Nanawawa's beauty, resulting in her death. His "horror" at "bloody sights" results in his panicked flight from the Sacs (an action intended to contrast him to Rodney, who

stands his ground and fights). In other words, Whitman suggests, Maxey's social position and breeding belie his character – his good breeding has softened his character, ultimately making him a hypocrite.

Similarly, Mosher Aylor, the most outlandish villain of the narrative, is painted as the degenerate progeny of a formerly noble house. The Aylor family, as a direct result of their slaveholding, has been overcome by "Avarice" and "Anger." Consequently, their estate declines from one generation to the next: "From bad to worse the Aylor house went down" (235). According to the cabin slaves who report this history to the narrator, Mosher is the last living descendant, and the worst so far: "An orphan heir to violence and shame, / Now one lone Aylor, Mosher is his name, / Holds undisputed all his lawful claim. / The hand of love and beauty both he scorns, / With broken vows, his wanton rites adorns, / And in his mansion's every nook and hall, / With open lewdness holds high carnival" (243-249).

By the time White Loon lumbers, caveman-like, back into the purview of the narrative, Whitman has established a pattern: a series of Anglo-American figures, each of them representing a different mythic type in the American imagination, fall short of their professed ideals, each of them becoming a sort of monster.

The juxtaposed figures of White Loon and Rodney, then, create a kind of thematic counterpoint in *Not A Man*, in which White Loon represents the fractured collapse of Euro-American idealism and Rodney represents a chivalric black masculinity which, Whitman suggests, will be the new face of American heroism. However, there is a third figure woven into the counterpoint: the narrator, "Whitman," a complicated persona whose interjections and materializations into Rodney's world form the structural backbone of the work as a whole.

“THOSE WHO READ WILL FEEL ACQUAINTED WITH ME”: A.A. WHITMAN’S POETIC PERSONA

In the preface to *Not a Man*, Whitman avows that he is publishing the work primarily to bring attention and honor to his school, Wilberforce University. He professes a secondary goal, however: “Secondly,” he writes, “my object in publishing is, to introduce myself to the people. Those who read will feel acquainted with me.” Whitman had good reason to feel confident that his book would work as a letter of personal introduction to the readership he desired. His first two books continually place the author himself at the center of the reader’s attention. In some editions of his poetry, he includes a jaunty author sketch as the frontispiece. Each of his volumes includes an introduction-cum-manifesto in which Whitman expounds a philosophy of “Poetry” and positions his own work within the context of American culture and race relations. And then there are the poems themselves, which prominently feature Whitman the narrator – a confident, rather digressive persona who frequently interrupts the narrative action to offer commentary, reminiscences and homilies, and who even materializes occasionally to wander through the scenes and observe the characters’ adventures first-hand. Whitman’s insertions of himself into the narrative are strange, and sometimes even jarring. Yet these appearances of the narrator-character reframe the poem’s attitudes towards myth and history, while challenging the boundaries between literature, nostalgia, and voyeurism.

Whitman’s narrator does not immediately emerge as a character in his own right. The “Preface,” although expository, has a rather impersonal quality in keeping with the conventions of an epic opening. When the poet says, “The black man has a cause, deny who dares / And him to vindicate my muse prepares,” the personal pronoun does not really convey the idea of a distinctive individual. But in the opening of “Saville,” the third chapter of *Not a Man*, the narrator begins to assume distinctiveness and autonomy.

In that chapter, the narrator opens by inviting the reader to travel with him, to come along and revisit familiar scenes from a vanished past. “I turn with reverential step and slow,” he declares, “To trace the scenes my recollections know” (7-8). As he turns back to perambulate through these “recollections,” the present and future melt away, leaving the narrator standing in an idyllic past:

Dear to me yet, and every day more dear,
Familiar sounds revive upon my ear;
Familiar scenes come to me o’er the past,
And I, recoiling from the Future vast,
Revisit in my dreams and solitude,
The pleasant places of thy borders rude.
Thus, when from tempest-brooding heav’ns I fly,
When life’s meridian’s in a pensive sky,
Back to the charms of other days I come,
And seem a traveler returning home. (17-26)

The poet’s sentiments here are conventional-sounding in some respects; in others ways they are strange and contradictory. Although Whitman has framed his narrative as an account of the unacknowledged role played by valiant black men in American *history*, the poet continually blurs the line between history and myth. If we attend closely to the passage above, Whitman is subtly suggesting that the scenes and scenarios of the past can only be experienced through the conduit of dreams and imagination. By entering the scene to describe the “familiar sounds” and “familiar scenes” which his “recollections know,” the speaker seems to imply for a moment that the coming scenes have a basis in his own experience. But these images which are “every day more dear” to the poet clearly cannot represent memories from his personal past. The narrator, who later mentions his

childhood in Kentucky, has certainly never seen the “warring totems” or lived the “cumbrous backwoods life” he describes in the “Saville” chapter. Yet he can still turn to the sights and sounds of Saville in his “dreams and solitude” because these experiences reside in the fantasy life of the American imagination. The narrator, “recoiling from the Future vast,” finds solace by travelling into the collective past of national myth. And though this past is a dream and an idealization, it still somehow offers the possibility of “returning home,” offering a refuge and a sense of belonging.

The idea of “recollections” from an imagined past, although obviously impossible, is also normative – as Homi Bhaba and other theorists of national belonging have pointed out, national citizenship often involves the inculcation of non-factual or artificial memories of past scenes and events. For Whitman’s narrator, no contradiction is apparent – he foregrounds these paradoxes of the national imaginary while experiencing the process as intuitive, organic. The heroic frontier tableaux in his mind’s eye are, for him, both un-experienced and familiar, an escapist refuge and a “home.” Whitman’s outlook, in certain respects, serves as a counter or foil to Simpson’s song “The Fugitive’s Dream,” explored in the previous chapter. In Simpson’s lyric, the narrator returns in a dream to his past in slavery, only to find that the master has called the hounds and barred the exit: nostalgia works as a trap. For Whitman’s speaker, by contrast, the imaginative ground delineated by nostalgia presents a troubled but ultimately malleable source of identity. The collective past – those “familiar scenes” that the narrator visits in his “dreams and solitude” – will, the poet hopes, be revised and remolded over the course of his narrative performance. By restaging American nostalgic fantasy, Whitman hopes to transform it, re-inserting African-Americans and other elided historical subjects into the gaps left by their erasure and ultimately contributing to a broadened, racially-integrated national self-imagination.

In ways both large and small, Whitman's narrator continually suggests the interpermeability of historical reality and imaginative creation. To take another example from the poem's preliminaries, a later passage in the "Saville" chapter describes a day in the life of a frontier couple. In one long stanza, an unnamed yeoman "ventures forth for food." But most of the stanza is spent describing the frontiersman's evening back at home, during which he discusses the day's events with his wife and recreates the previous twenty-four hours as a bedtime story:

The window lashed, and stoutly barred the door,
The day's adventures are recounted o'er.
The bear is now pursued over fallen logs,
Opposed by these, and pressed by eager dogs,
The herd's seen pouring thro' the startled dell.
The fleet stag's shot and hung up where he fell.
Thus on, the current of narration flows,
Deeper and deeper wearing as it goes,
Till heavy slumber settles on their eyes;
Converse moves sluggish, thoughts slower arise,
And faint and flick'ring, sink the rays,
That wander from the fagot's dying blaze.
Till embers pale surviving – nothing more,
Light them to rest to dream their chattings o'er. (225-34)

These lines appear in a section which attempts to establish frontier society as a model of virtuous, plain living – a model Whitman wished to recommend to the black community as an alternative to urban migration. But something else is at work in the passage above – not only does it present a fantasy of frontier life, it also offers a miniature allegory of

storytelling. Whitman shows us the transmission of a day's events, events which progress from experience into narrative. By using the word "now" and an insistent present tense ("the bear is now pursued," "the herd's seen pouring"; "the fleet stag's shot"), the narrator emphasizes that the adventures of the unnamed pioneer are restaged, made present again by the act of narration. Just as the fire becomes a "dying blaze" and then "embers," reality becomes transformed into story, and story then subsides into the purely interior space of dream.

By materializing within the story, Whitman establishes the conceit that he, like the yeoman storyteller of the passage above, is reporting things that *he has seen himself*. (This conceit accords with the poet's self-portrayal as a seer who relates stories that have been shown to him by the "muse of history.") These "soliloquy" moments, when the narrator takes center stage and discusses his own involvement in the action, conform to a consistent structural pattern: each time the narrative moves into a new setting, Whitman appears on scene to offer introductory commentary. The first section of the story, as we have seen, opens with Whitman approaching frontier Saville like "a traveler returning home." The second, and more elaborate, participatory appearance of the narrator occurs much later, as Whitman finds himself in Memphis.

The frontier plot, with its echoes of *Hiawatha* and the Leatherstocking tales, has come to a conclusion with the rescue of Dora and the return of Rodney to Fort Dearbourne. Mid-chapter, just after describing Dora's reunion with her father, the narrator rather abruptly switches the scene from Saville to Memphis:

Where Memphis, robed in glitt'ring wealth doth rise,
The boast of Tennessee, the pride of Southern skies.
Turn there thy foot, thou who hast wandered long
Thro' life's sad ways, and by the haunts of wrong;

Thou who hast heard of mammon hardened souls,
Who drank iniquity from brimming bowls,
Or who hast dreamt of Slavery's grinding car,
Mounted by Crime, and dragged by dogs of war . . . (154-161)

In these lines, the narrator extends an invitation of sorts, imploring the reader to “turn there thy foot.” But he does not make it immediately clear *why*, exactly, he wants to lead the reader to Memphis or what relevance that city has to Rodney’s story, although the answer seems to have something to do with “wrong” and slavery. Notice that the narrator again invokes the idea of a shared national space of the imagination, appealing to readers who have “dreamt” of slavery or “heard of mammon hardened souls” who profited by it, and suggesting that their dreams and gleanings will have prepared them to follow him to the Memphis of *NAM*.

The narrator, having travelled in his imagination to Memphis, suddenly finds himself – apparently to his own surprise – in a prison block attached to a slave auction:

Pause at the door! The keeper comes! I hear
His footsteps on the stony floor anear!
The slow key grates, bolts move, oppressed I feel.
The sullen prison opes its jaws of steel;
And in the Hell of Slavery aghast I reel. (168-72)

With these lines, Whitman steps fully into the world of the narrative, emphatically indicating his own status as a participating character in *NAM*. The effect is surprising, and not fully anticipated by any previous moment in the poem – although he has emerged as a distinctive persona, the narrator has not yet claimed to have been *present* at any of the scenes he has described. And in the passage quoted above, the narrator’s own position with regard to the action remains murky. Like every other first-person narrative intrusion

in *Not a Man*, this passage features Whitman dropping into the scene without warning or audience preparation. What is happening here? Is the narrator a prisoner? A visitor? Has he just been thrown into a cell, or is he perhaps listening from inside the prison as the “keeper” approaches? And who, we might begin to wonder, is this “I” who suddenly finds himself standing inside the holding cell of a Memphis slave pen? Is he Whitman, the young A.M.E. reverend? Or some other poetic construct “Whitman,” a free-roaming voice who (like that *other* Whitman) participates imaginatively in first one and then another scene of American life? Or is he some third, fictional “I” who happens to have been present at all the places at which the narrative touches down – a wide-ranging sojourner like our hero Rodney? We don’t know, and the narrator declines (now and later) to clarify the matter. In any case, Whitman proceeds to walk through the holding area, silently observing the captive slaves awaiting auction:

Among the sable inmates now I wend
My way, and they in fervent aspect bend
Their faces in the dust, cry, “Massa!” “Lord!”

But their bright tearful eyes speak more than cry or word. (173-6)

Just as the scenes of frontier life are alien to the narrator’s personal experience yet accessible through the conduits of history and fiction, so this scene in Memphis seems to be constructed out of scenes from slave narratives and abolitionist literature. The narrator does not “wend [his] way” through this scene alone, however. He asks the reader to engage in an independent act of imaginative participation, and to mentally revisit scenes which now lie decades in the past:

Ah! Christian, canst thou bear it? Turn thine eyes
To where yon sorrow burdened mother lies!
She upward looks, and wrings her anguish, see!

Say to her, "Woman, oh, what aileth thee?"

And thou shalt hear the tearful answer sad,

"Two children, once to cheer my life I had. . .

.....

But oh, my sweet faced darling!" loud she cries,

"My babe! Dear Willie! Oh, my two-month's old!

Was from my bosom snatched away, by cold

And cruel hands---methinks I hear his cry---

To pine without a mother's care and die!

.....

This is the slave pen, reader, this the place

Where boasting Slav'ry drives the sable race (179-84, 188-92, 199-200)

This passage, with its sentimental overtones, is not unfamiliar; similar passages can be found in black and abolitionist literature of the 1840s and 50s. But for the most part, those similar scenes were written before the Civil War, aimed at persuading audiences that slavery was an intolerable evil. This passage, on the other hand, was written and published more than twenty years after emancipation. Perhaps Whitman sees the Memphis slave pen, like the Saville frontier, as simply another formative scene of American life, a scene that he wants to open up to fictive recreation through poetry.

As the story progresses, the narrator's materializations in the plot become, in some respects, more bizarre. After the tale turns from the auction block, the same scene moves to Florida, to the mansion of a family called the Aylors. Once again, as the scene shifts, the narrator corporealizes, stepping in to offer personal reminiscences of the Aylor mansion and its environs:

There stood the Aylor house, when in its prime,

A brave old structure of that princely time.

.....

How often have I, turning to its bowers,
In dreams sat down and wasted pleasant hours.
How often traced its various changing scenes
Of blossom'd fields, bright lanes, and rolling greens!
This goodly mansion hath an olden fame,
And memories that earn full many a name
In honors bright and not a few in shame

.....

. . . and full many an ebon patriarch,
Of Afric's humble tribe, who wear the mark
Of bondage, tell in tales of cabin lore,
Sad things that run the eye with pity o'er.

Thus of the Aylor line we are informed (85-6, 89-95, 98-102)

The speaker then proceeds to share the Aylor family history, as recollected by the “ebon patriarchs” who transmitted the story to him. A casual reader might gloss quickly over the brief four lines here in which the speaker resumes the first person, but this, I believe, would be a mistake. It may seem that this material serves a strictly functional narrative purpose acting as a transition from the Memphis auction scenes to the Florida plantation scenes. But the reminiscences of the narrator are not necessary to achieve this end; the history of the Aylors could easily be related straight-forwardly from a privileged third-person omniscient perspective, as many other backstories and historical events are related in *Not a Man*. No, the narrator's presence here cannot be incidental, especially considering that here, for the first time, the narrator takes on explicitly fictional qualities,

separating himself firmly from any simple conflation of the poem's "I" with Allison Albery Whitman. For the first time, the speaker gives us a simple fact – his long familiarity with the Aylor house – that is incompatible with the life of Whitman. The poet, then, must have had a strong reason for wanting to connect his narrator closely to the Aylor house. What might have been his reasons?

Whitman might have wished to give a depiction of oral transmission in process. By so doing, he grounds the legitimacy of his account, not in family chronicles or formal histories, but in the stories and memories passed down by the slaves living on the Aylor estate; an oral history written from below. And the history revealed in those sources is a damning one: a kind of nobility in declension, as noble generations of Aylors give way, over the years, to debauched and depraved generations. Within the melodramatic, action-hero frame of his tale, Whitman is giving us a villain viewed from the perspective of the slave quarters. This was not new, of course; the whole Aylor section resembles *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, just as the Saville section resembled the *Leatherstocking Tales*. But by including the chain of transmission in the poem, Whitman makes a kind of historiographical point. There are other documents and sources than those sanctioned by the privileged classes, Whitman insists. In the context of a work devoted to constructing a usable, mythic African-American history, Whitman subtly reminds his audience of the sites of resistance to official narratives by framing his narrator as someone who heard at least portions of his tale from the oral histories of slaves themselves.

Whitman is also being a bit slippery here; note that once again, he strolls into the frame "dreaming" of the place he describes. Could Whitman be suggesting that plantation scenes – like the covered wagon scene at the book's beginning – have been visited by all of us, in the dreams that are the collective national imagination? Whitman had in fact been a slave himself in his boyhood, but it is unlikely that the smallholding

farmer who held him before emancipation would have had anything resembling the estate of the Aylors. Whitman himself approaches the plantation scenes through the filter of typical or popular conceptions about plantation life.

The fifth, and strangest, physical materialization of the speaker into the poem comes later, as Rodney and Leeona attempt to escape the Aylor estate. In this fifth and final appearance, we are not at the beginning of a narrative thread or in a new locale. On the contrary, the narrator here enters the story at its point of greatest tension, just after Leeona has been assaulted and raped by Mosher Aylor. From the point of view of narrative structure, this is one of the strangest moments in the poem. Reluctant to deal too directly with the sordid and scandalous details regarding Aylor's sexual assault, the narrator brings the story to an abrupt halt:

Here, reader, lies a lab'rynth on our way,
Thro' which perchance 'twould weary you to stray;
Or yet perhaps with some unwonted slight,
Or sound, mar all thy bosom's visions bright.
Our steps, therefore, around it now proceed,
Where to remoter realms our lovers lead.
But as we pass, there lingers on the ear,
A strong man's mournings for his lover dear.
For Rodney hears that his fair 'Ona's dead,
And sleepless anguish bows his manly head.
The nightly forests hear his wand'ring cries,
And with her stony speech his cave replies. (99-110)

The moment is a strange and arresting one. The preceding pages have been unapologetically sensationalistic, particularly as regards the portrayals of Leeona.

Whatever the nature of the “lab’rynth,” it seems unlikely that simple decorum restrains the speaker here – Whitman seems to encourage a kind of voyeurism with respect to his heroine. What, precisely, prompts his detour? This question, of course, provides the driving suspense of the moment; as the camera pulls away, the reader is left to wonder what horror is being spared him. The effect in this passage is a kind of dissolving away into numbness. As the narrator escorts us around the “lab’rynth” to “remoter realms,” the fervid, penny-dreadful melodrama of the rape scene gives way to the sound of Rodney’s voice wailing in lamentation, and then to the echoes of that voice issuing from a cave. The effect is a kind of narrative fade-to-white, or as though the story itself mimics a trauma formation, suppressing the painful details of the assault, replacing those details with the sound of untethered screaming while taking refuge in a digression.

That digression, curiously, takes the form of the fifth intervention by the narrator. The violence and screams of the preceding pages are immediately replaced by an atmosphere of stillness and calm – curiously, and not altogether appropriately, tinged with sensuality:

‘Twas even in Florida serene and bright,
And gently sighed the wind as sighs a maid
When watching in an early moon’s round light,
Her lover’s footsteps in the shade.
.....
And, save the lonely note of nightingale,
The churlish outbursts of the farm boy’s vale,
The horn owl’s shout, and swamp bird’s lone reply,
No evening sound disturbed the sleepy sky.
Now near a dark and solemn wood,

Close by the Aylor house I stood. (111-14, 117-22)

The tonal juxtaposition here is extreme; Whitman moves immediately from the assault of Leeona to this passage, with its erotic overtones. The wind sighs like a lover, the air is perfumed with flowers, and the moon peels from behind the clouds “as a maid will half conceal / To show her beauty.” Into this silence, with its lush nocturnal atmosphere, steps our speaker. The reader can hardly fail to miss another abrupt shift; as the speaker assumes the first person, he moves into a lilting rhymed tetrameter. “Lilting” is one way to put it; “driving” would be another. The meter can certainly create a pronounced sense of forward momentum. Here, as the narrator emerges from the “dark and solemn wood” and advances towards the Aylor mansion, the tetrameter enhances the mood of dramatic suspense. At first, nothing seems to happen; the narrator further describes the serenity of the evening, particularly noting the moon, which “ascended then her peaceful throne / Of green hills, and supremely shone.” Then the narrative recommences the way it terminated, with a disembodied scream:

I heard a wail of woman’s woe;
Now loud it bursted, and now low,
Suppressed, as if in sudden flow,
A hand had checked its bitter gush;
There followed an expressive hush,
When, in the mansion’s silent hall
I saw a female proud and tall

.....

Her long hair streamed below her waist
In wild waves; and her bosom chaste

Arose in pensive sweetness, bare,
Beneath a face that pale with care,
Some monster trouble seemed to dare.

.....

I nearer to the woman stole,
And lo! She was the fair Creole!
For unobserved, I reached the hall,
And leaned against the shadowed wall,
Just as the moon was fairly seen,

Breaking white banks of clouds from 'tween. (138-44, 156-61)

These lines are not, it must be admitted, among Whitman's finest; the passage is fairly riddled with awkwardnesses and infelicities. Yet within the poem, they are contextually fascinating – horrifying, almost. It is difficult, in fact, to come to an understanding of the very strange dramatic situation with which we are presented in these lines. The narrator of the poem is spying on his heroine from the shadows. Why is this happening?

Part of the answer, I would argue, must be sought in a pattern of voyeuristic gazing in Whitman's work. Within *Not a Man* itself, this is the fourth prominently featured act of secret gazing. The first gaze, directed by Sir Maxey and his men at Nanawawa just before her murder, initiates the first main thrust of the plot: the Indian attack on Saville and Rodney's subsequent heroism. The second and third such gazes, occurring around the same time and directed at Leeona by Rodney and Aylor, respectively, initiates the second main thrust of the plot: Rodney's love for Leeona, and the ensuing struggle with her master. The final portion begins in the passage quoted above, with the narrator directing his gaze towards Leeona (and, momentarily, Rodney). It would seem, upon close investigation, that *Not a Man* is a rather elaborately and

eccentrically demarcated architecture. Each of the four sections begins with a historical-geographical preamble, a first-person narrative intervention climaxing with the physical materialization of the narrator, and an act of voyeuristic looking. This prominence of staring to both the events and formal structure of the narrative suggests a thematic preoccupation which invites deeper investigation.

At this point, it's worth returning to the letter which Whitman wrote to Longfellow, a letter which itself introduces a strange scene of ritual gazing: "I go to the library every day," Whitman remarks, "to gaze upon your picture." By describing this repeating moment to Longfellow, Whitman seems to create a strange kind of circle, inviting the elder poet to (imaginatively) watch Whitman (imaginatively) watching him. *Not a Man and Yet a Man*, comparably, creates any number of voyeuristic circles: as readers of the poem, the characters watch each other, the narrator watches the characters, and we watch the narrator watching the characters. Meanwhile, on the level of prosody and plot, Whitman invites us to watch him wrestle with Longfellow and Cooper, as he plays out his rivalries and tries simultaneously to describe, and to *be*, the "Negro of the Future," a black poet-hero who finds his own voice by re-staging, and ultimately reclaiming, the American mythic past.

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