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“Dreaded Eloquence”: The Origins and Rise of African American Literary Societies and Libraries

Elizabeth McHenry

ELIZABETH MCHENRY is a visiting professor at the College of the Holy Cross, Worcester, Mass., and a fellow at the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute at Harvard.

In the late 1820s and early 1830s, free blacks in the urban North formed literary societies as a place in which to read and experiment with rhetorical strategies. Embracing the Enlightenment stress on the importance of the life of the mind, they turned to reading as an invaluable method of acquiring knowledge, and to writing as a means of asserting identity, recording information, and communicating with an increasingly literate black public. These individuals were vividly aware of the centrality of written texts of national construction, such as the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution, to their status in the new republic. Through their own reading and writing, they sought effective avenues of public access as well as ways to voice their demands for full citizenship and equal participation in the life of the republic. Their organized literary activities were a means of educating individuals who would consider themselves capable, respected citizens.

How did early African Americans in northern cities come to see writing as a means of forming durable communities and asserting their right to American citizenship? How did marginal literary coalitions serve to support efforts to build black communities and strengthen the resolve of the members of these communities to be recognized in the national public sphere? In what way were African American literary societies both agents and products of an empowered black community? This essay addresses these questions and the phenomenon of African American literary societies as they developed from black mutual aid societies in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

The point of departure is the case of David Walker, a black man who in 1829 published and distributed a document that arrested the attention of white Americans. Walker's *Appeal* illustrates that free blacks living in communities in the urban North in the first decades of the nineteenth century understood text, identity, and public access to be linked. If written texts like the Declaration of Independence could be central to their oppression, might they also be used to express the injustice of their exclusion from the rights of citizenship? Might African Americans use literary representation to reimagine their identities and their position in American society?

WRITING, IDENTITY AND PUBLIC ACCESS:
THE CASE OF DAVID WALKER'S *Appeal*

Published privately in Boston in 1829 by its author, David Walker's *Appeal, in Four Articles; Together with a Preamble to the Colored Citizen of the World, but in Particular, and Very Expressly to Those of the United States of America* delivered a furious indictment of American slavery and racism. The author's audacious message and his uncompromising style shocked white Americans: even more shocking to them was the author's ability to get his words into the hands of their primary audience, the "colored citizens" of the South. Within weeks of being printed, copies of the first edition were found circulating among blacks in Savannah, Georgia. In succeeding months authorities seized additional copies in port cities from Virginia to Louisiana. Legislators in Georgia and Louisiana became so alarmed that they banned the distribution of all antislavery literature and abruptly enacted laws to control and prevent black literacy. Similar legislation narrowly passed the Virginia house of delegates but expired in the state senate; North Carolina enacted its own versions of these restrictions in the fall of 1830. Horrified northern journalists joined in denouncing what the editor of the Boston *Centinel* called "one of the most wicked and inflammatory productions ever issued from the press."¹ Although impressed by the author's implacable hatred of slavery, even the antislavery spokesperson William Lloyd Garrison found the pamphlet's "spirit and tendency" to be lamentably violent and provocative.²

The content of Walker's pamphlet, which called for a series of violent black uprisings, was not alone responsible for its incendiary nature. Also disturbing to his antebellum audience was the very fact of the document's existence. Unquestionably, it was the product of an educated and active mind. Offhand references throughout the text to learned works of history, to such figures as the eighteenth-century British essayist Addison, and to American legislative debates, constituted undeniable evidence of Walker's extensive reading of both religious and secular works. His precise outlining of the evils of the institution of slavery and the racist ideas used to justify it, and his tactic of systematically "expos[ing] them in their turn," attested to Walker's skill as a rhetorician (DW 2). His recounting of the political and civic injustices inflicted on people of African descent in the United States created a sound if uneven argument impossible for his white readers to reconcile with their perception of the status or abilities of a black man.³

In the third of the three editions of 1829, Walker drew explicit attention to what made his *Appeal* unforgivable for early nineteenth-century white readers. In an amendment to the fourth article of the text, Walker poses this rhetorical question:

¹ Quoted in the *Richmond Enquirer*, 28 January 1830.

² "Walker's Appeal No. 1," *Liberator*, 8 January 1831, 6. In the wake of Walker's "mysterious" death in August of 1830, Garrison began a dialogue on the subject of David Walker and his pamphlet in the inaugural issues of the *Liberator*. Although Garrison's first response was to condemn the "general spirit" of the text, later comments imply his support for the "many valuable truths and seasonable warnings" found in its pages (*Liberator*, 29 January 1831, 17). Garrison published many perspectives on Walker's *Appeal*, including those from southern newspapers.

Additional insight into Walker's text and its reception in the South can be derived from Clement Eaton, "A Dangerous Pamphlet in the Old South," *Journal of Southern History* 2 (1936): 323–34; Jane and William Pease, "Walker's Appeal Comes to Charleston: A Note and Documents," *Journal of Negro History* 59 (1974): 287–92. References to Walker's *Appeal* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1965) will be cited as DW.

³ See the letter published in the 29 January 1831 issue of *Liberator*.

“Why do the Slave-holders or Tyrants of America and their advocates fight so hard to keep my brethren from receiving and reading my Book of Appeal . . . ? . . . Why are the Americans so fearfully terrified respecting my Book?” Walker answers his own question later in the same amendment, referring to the very end of the *Appeal* where he quotes extensively from the Declaration of Independence: “Perhaps the Americans do their very best to keep my Brethren from receiving and reading my ‘Appeal’ for fear they will find in it an extract which I made from their Declaration of Independence, which says, ‘we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal,’ etc., etc., etc.” (DW, 72).

This direct reference to the Declaration of Independence is indeed the master stroke of Walker’s document: by recalling the founders’ words about the rights and responsibilities of “all men,” he signals the hypocrisy of the American republic. Although the framers focused the Declaration of Independence around the words “All Men Are Created Equal,” they failed to include *all men* in their distinction. In fact, nowhere in the Declaration of Independence or the United States Constitution do the authors refer to the people of African descent living in the new republic; the words “slave” or “slavery” are conspicuously absent from these documents. Instead, the issue of slavery—by all measure incompatible with the ideals of freedom and human equality expressed by the documents’ framers—was cleverly disguised by what John Quincy Adams came to call “circumlocutions.”⁴

By highlighting the disparity between the condition of people of African descent in the United States and the “inalienable rights” and republican principles laid out in the Declaration of Independence, David Walker demonstrated a certainty and sophistication wholly unexpected from a black man. What is ironic about the *Appeal* is that while Walker condemns the hypocrisy of America and considers white Americans responsible for corrupting the principles on which the nation was founded, his most bitter passages repudiate neither his native country—the United States—nor the republican principles on which the country was formed. Although he blames white Americans entirely for their racist attitudes and hypocritical failure to recognize those of African descent as their equals, he simultaneously heralds the words and principles laid out by the Declaration of Independence, wondering why white Americans do not seem to “understand [their] own language” (DW, 75). The extended argument on the issue of colonization, which forms the fourth article of the *Appeal*, emphasizes the extent to which, however alienated he felt from the workings of the United States, Walker saw himself and sought to be considered by others as a citizen. His response to the “scheme” of “drain[ing] . . . off” (DW, 46) the black population via African colonization underscores that Walker considered Americans of African descent more deserving of recognition and full citizenship than white Americans. Quoting one of Philadelphia’s oldest black religious leaders, Richard Allen, Walker asserts that blacks were “the first tillers of the land” (DW, 57): “This land which we have

⁴ In his 1841 defense of the claim to freedom made by the slaves who had revolted on the *Amistad*, Adams observed that “circumlocutions are the fig leaves under which these parts of the body politic [the words slave and slavery] are decently covered”; John Quincy Adams, *Argument of John Quincy Adams Before the Supreme Court of the United States, Appellants v. Cinque, and Other Africans, Captured on the Schooner Amistad* (1841; rpt. New York: New American Library, 1969), 39. For modern accounts

of the ambiguities and contradictions of the Constitution, see Robert A. Ferguson, “‘We Hold These Truths’: Strategies of Control in the Literature of the Founders,” *Reconstructing American Literary History*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986); and Priscilla Wald, *Constituting Americans: Cultural Anxiety and Narrative Form* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).

watered with our tears and with our blood, is now our mother country, and we are well satisfied to stay . . ." (DW, 58).

Throughout the *Appeal*, Walker contrasts the sense of allegiance blacks feel toward their "mother country" with their perceived distance or separation from it: rather than deserving citizens they are treated by white Americans as "brutes," "talking apes" (DW, 62), and "orang outangs" (DW, 10) who "ought to be SLAVES to the American people and their children forever" (DW 7). The terms identified rhetorically by David Walker in his 1829 *Appeal* are analogous to those defined by the Supreme Court almost three decades later in the case of *Scott v. Sanford*, more commonly known as *Dred Scott*. Were black people, the court would ask in 1857, "citizens or persons" or were they nonpersons, pieces of property no different from mules or horses? In contrast to the Court's finding that, free or slave, blacks could not be citizens of the United States within the meaning of the Constitution and were therefore entitled to "no rights which a white man was bound to respect," Walker observed in his *Appeal* that Americans of African descent were in fact the true "Americans" and more deserving of citizenship than their white countrymen. Given this status, albeit unacknowledged, Walker reminded blacks that they should be guided by the principles of civic responsibility: according to the Declaration of Independence, it was their "right" and "duty" to oppose unjust treatment and to stand as "new guards for their future security" (DW, 75). Although deprived as a group of the *rights* of citizenship, Walker's call for uprising is a call for blacks to nevertheless uphold the *responsibilities* of citizenship by protecting the republican principles on which the country was founded.⁵

In particular, free blacks maintained faith in the nation's founding documents; they were intent on asserting their right to citizenship according to these texts. Black Americans did not wait for legislative rulings to confirm their American identities. Increasingly, they claimed what they understood as their birthright in much the same way David Walker did: they adopted the language and habits of citizens. By illustrating their respect for the responsibilities of citizenship, free black Americans hoped to convince the white population that they were also deserving of its rights. They held up the revolutionary ideals of freedom, equality, and social justice to illustrate that their treatment was "in direct violation of the letter and spirit of [the] Constitution."⁶ David Walker was not alone in his belief that white Americans could be taught a truer understanding of the words of the nation's founding documents. Walker had hope for the future: "What a happy country this will be," he advised his readers toward the end of the *Appeal*, "if the whites will listen" (DW, 70).

Rather than leave or reject racist American culture, Walker calls for African Americans to find ways to engage and question it in order to assert their status as citizens. One way of doing this was by making public the privately held sentiments of the black population with the most freedom: those living in the northern, urban cities of Philadelphia, New York, and Boston. By "making public," I refer specifically to the two public spheres accessed by David Walker through the publication of the *Appeal*. Walker's *Appeal* was able to address not only his principal audience,

⁵ For interpretive accounts of the appeals made by black petitioners to white Americans to live up to the promises of their revolutionary rhetoric, see Vincent Harding, "Wrestling Toward the Dawn: The Afro-American Freedom Movement and the Changing Constitution," *Journal of American History* 74 (1987): 718–39; and Gary Nash,

"Black Americans in a White Republic" in *Race and Revolution* (Madison, WI: Madison House Publishers, 1990), 57–87.

⁶ James Forten, *Letters from a Man of Colour* (Philadelphia, 1813), 1.

the public constituted by the black community, free or slave: to the extent that whites noticed Walker's text and took action to suppress it, he engaged the national public as well. While it is true that, as a black man, Walker's participation in the national public sphere would have been severely limited, it was not altogether nonexistent. As Leonard Curry emphasizes in his study of free blacks in antebellum urban America: "However much they were repressed, segregated, and restricted, urban blacks were, nevertheless, undeniably *there*. . . . They could not . . . be wholly excluded" from the workings of the white population.⁷ Denied civic and political rights, Walker's means of access to this national public sphere—and its civic debate on the status of blacks in the democracy—was his literary text.⁸

The *Appeal* signals a historical moment when, despite their limited access to literary works and virtual exclusion from the means of literary production in the first decades of the nineteenth century, free blacks turned to reading and writing as one way of creating a public dialogue over the issue of their citizenship. In the late 1820s and throughout the 1830s, African Americans who were financially able to do so built and sustained institutions around reading, writing, and literary discussion. Throughout the antebellum period, these literary societies served as intellectual centers for an increasingly unified and politically conscious ethnic group. By reading and by writing about themselves, African Americans sought to become part of a historical tradition. They used these forums for collective reading, writing, and discussion to do as Walker had: combat charges of racial inferiority, validate their call for social justice, and alert their audience to the disparity between American ideals and racial inequality. Through these institutions, African Americans took the lead in calling for a *substantive* democracy: as Vincent Harding reminds us, they stood, in the early nineteenth century, as "the foremost proponents of freedom and justice in the nation, demanding of the Constitution more than its slave-holding creators dared to dream, wrestling it toward an integrity that the [Founding] Fathers would not give it."⁹

African American literary societies and the struggle for self-definition and authorial presence that they supported is a virtually unknown part of the African American literary tradition. As Walker's *Appeal* reminds us, the stories of free, northern blacks who used reading and writing to voice an American optimism provide a crucial counterweight to the history of southern slaves and the literary tradition of the slave narrative. The rise of African American literary societies in northern, urban, black communities in the late 1820s and throughout the 1830s suggests that they became important institutions precisely because they both

⁷ Leonard P. Curry, *The Free Black in Urban America, 1800–1850* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 216. My notion of the "public sphere" has been shaped by recent scholarship that has responded to Jürgen Habermas's formulation of the term. Habermas identified the bourgeois public sphere as a "space" in which citizens interact with one another in reasoned discourse. Recent criticism of this formulation has focused on Habermas's failure to recognize the possibility of alternative, non-bourgeois public spheres. Within a society stratified along lines of race, class, and gender numerous publics, or "counter-publics," might exist, signalling the variety of public arenas in which people participate. For an especially convincing reformulation of Habermas's concept of a "single, comprehensive, overarching public,"

see Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text* 25/26 (1990): 56–80.

⁸ It was even transported to port cities of the southern states. On 27 March 1830, police in Charleston, South Carolina arrested Edward Smith, a white steward who had arrived on a ship from Boston, for distributing copies of the *Appeal*. The original transcript of Smith's confession to local authorities is kept in the South Carolina Archives in Columbia, South Carolina. The document is reprinted in William H. Pease and Jane H. Pease, "Walker's *Appeal* Comes to Charleston," 287–92.

⁹ Vincent Harding, "Wrestling Toward the Dawn: The Afro-American Freedom Movement and the Changing Constitution," *Journal of American History* 74 (1987): 719.

encouraged discussion and created a forum for debate on issues of racial and American identity. Their evolution records the developing understanding and shifting uses of literary discourse by northern, free blacks for expression, interaction, and social protest in antebellum America.

"STRANGERS AND OUTCASTS IN A STRANGE LAND"

The genesis of African American literary societies lies not in the early nineteenth century but rather, the late eighteenth century. In the years leading up to the American Revolution, reading, writing, and print were increasingly seen to be technologies of power. Colonists turned to written texts in the form of pamphlets and broadsides as a medium of public expression. Through these documents, revolutionary leaders were able to generate and spread the language and spirit of revolution. The ability to read and write took on special significance in the emerging nation: "literacy" became a marker for citizenship. Because writing became, in the words of historian Michael Warner, the "dominant mode of the political," the ability to read and understand these written texts became the responsibility of every (white) man committed to independence.¹⁰ That the United States formed itself through one written document, the Declaration of Independence, and then negotiated the terms of its existence through another, the Constitution, secured the status of writing and publication as a condition of legitimacy in the new nation. "No generation," legal historian Robert A. Ferguson has suggested of the Declaration and Constitutions' framers, "has looked more carefully to the written word for identity": they relied upon their "faith in the text" to "stabilize the uncertain world in which they live[d]." ¹¹ To rhetoric the Founders assigned the most complex tasks of the new country: declaring political independence from England and creating a unified body out of the former British colonies. They believed that if rhetoric could organize individuals into a collective and move them to reshape their condition, it could also lend durability to their experience.

These early efforts at nation-building provided free blacks in the urban North with a lesson: although excluded from the literary practices and processes that established the republic, they could not help but be exposed to and receive underlying beliefs about the *purposes* for which literary skills could be used. After the Revolution, when manumissions and schedules to abolish slavery continued to expand communities of free African Americans, the need to create independent organizations put this lesson to use.¹² In an effort to band together to promote their own interests and to support each other financially, free blacks began to organize themselves into mutual aid societies in the last decades of the eighteenth century.

¹⁰ Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 67.

¹¹ Ferguson, "We Hold These Truths": Strategies of Control in the Literature of the Founders," 2.

¹² Studies of these communities and their emergence after the Revolutionary War include Ira Berlin, "Time, Space, and the Evolution of Afro-American Society in British Mainland North America," *American Historical Review* 85 (1980): 44–78; James Horton, *Free People of Color: Inside the African American Community* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993); Leon Litwack, *North of Slavery: The Negro In the Free States, 1790–1860* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961); and Jane H. Pease and

William H. Pease, *They Who Would Be Free: Blacks' Search for Freedom, 1830–1861* (New York: Atheneum, 1974). For community-specific studies, see Gary Nash, *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988); Julie Winch, *Philadelphia's Black Elite* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988); George A. Levesque, *Black Boston: Negro Life and Culture in the Antebellum City* (New York: Garland, 1994); *The Negro in New York: An Informal Social History*, eds. Roi Ottley and William Weatherby (New York: Oceana Publications, 1967); and Letitia Woods Brown, *Free Negroes in the District of Columbia, 1790–1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972).

Although mutual aid societies would also become important institutions among free black women in the early nineteenth century, the earliest and largest mutual aid societies were composed exclusively of men. The first for which records exist was formed in Newport, Rhode Island, in 1770. A similar organization was begun in 1787 in Philadelphia, the city with the largest population of free blacks, and in Boston a society was formed in 1796. These “Free African Societies,” as they were called,¹³ as well as the hundreds of smaller mutual aid societies that developed in the first half of the nineteenth century, all worked on much the same principle.¹⁴ Members paid a sum to join and a monthly fee, which was held “for the mutual benefit of each other.” The society was then able to “hand forth to the needy” a certain amount each week or at a time of crisis, “provided this necessity [was] not brought on them by their own imprudence.”¹⁵

The significance of these societies was not primarily in their role as relief organizations, although records indicate that mutual aid societies acquired tremendous amounts of money, which were contributed in various ways to both individual and community needs. Their very existence—the first independent institutions formed and run by blacks themselves—was crucial to creating the nationalist imagination that allowed free blacks to recognize themselves as a community. The extant constitutions of the Philadelphia and Boston Free African Societies underscore the extent to which, from their use of Preambles to their Articles of Association and Constitutions, black leaders turned to the rhetorical structures used by white Americans to establish their own autonomous government. Implicit in their efforts to “declare” these organizations was a desire for independent recognition. Consider the Articles of Association of the Free African Society of Philadelphia (1787):

We, the free Africans and their descendants, of the City of Philadelphia . . . do unanimously agree, for the benefit of each other. . . . (Douglass, 15)

or the Preamble to the Constitution of Boston’s African Society, written in 1796:

We, the African Members, form ourselves into a Society, under the above name, for the mutual benefit of each other, which may from time to time offer; behaving ourselves at the same time as true and faithful citizens of the Commonwealth in which we live; and that we take no one into the Society, who shall commit any injustice or outrage against the laws of their country.”¹⁶

By shaping texts that echo the “official” documents of United States government—in the case of the Boston Society, the “official” text is the United States Constitution, which was ratified in 1787—the “African members” produce a document that is “almost the same, but not quite.”¹⁷ My understanding of this distinction is

¹³ Horton, in his study of free blacks in eighteenth and early nineteenth-century America, *Free People of Color*, 153, states that “throughout the first generation of the nineteenth century, ‘African’ remained the name of choice for most black groups.”

¹⁴ An 1849 inquiry into the condition of Philadelphia’s blacks indicated the great popularity but transitory nature of mutual aid societies in the first half of the nineteenth century. It compared an 1849 list of African American mutual aid societies with one of 1847 and found that the number had increased from 80 to 106. However, of the 80, more than half had disappeared or taken new names. See *Statistical Inquiry into the Condition of the People of Color*

of Philadelphia (Philadelphia: Society of Friends, 1849), 22–23.

¹⁵ William Douglass, *Annals of the First African Church in the United States of America, Now Styled The African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas* (Philadelphia: King & Baird, 1862), 16. References to this text will be cited as “Douglass.”

¹⁶ “Laws of the African Society” (1796). Rpt. in *Early Negro Writing*, ed. Dorothy Porter (Boston: Beacon, 1971), 9.

¹⁷ Homi K. Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 86. The other quotations in this paragraph are also from p. 86.

informed by the work of Homi Bhabha, who in *The Location of Culture* suggests the complicated ways in which “mimicry” is “at once resemblance and menace.” Like the colonists of the revolutionary period, these free Africans employed written constitutions to give themselves recognition and, at least in their own community, authority. In this case, however, their process of representation “is itself a process of disavowal.” While modeled on those of the United States, the documents that define the free African societies stand in opposition to American nationalism. Recognizing the paraphernalia of authority inherent in the United States Constitution, it appropriates and challenges it by conferring similar privileges on a segment of society that, according to the drafters of the “official” Constitution, has no claim to that authority.

Once organized, the first mutual aid societies in Newport, Philadelphia, and Boston functioned as units of solidarity. The societies identified and promoted black leaders. They sponsored petitions and letters to the public addressing concerns of the African American community. The issues most important to members are documented in the societies’ minutes: how they felt about themselves and how best to contend with their position in society; how financial assistance might be given to struggling members; how to develop the religious life of the community; how to address the question of emigration to Africa; and, increasingly, how to improve educational opportunities for themselves and their children.

The records of Newport’s Free African Union Society and of Philadelphia’s Free African Society confirm that the members of both societies were eager to compare their experiences as “strangers and outcasts in a strange land” (Douglass, 26). A visit by Mr. Henry Stewart, an active member of the Philadelphia organization, to the Newport and Boston societies in 1789 suggests the importance of such exchanges to forming a network of support for free blacks in the northeastern cities. All accounts indicate that Mr. Stewart was received hospitably when he arrived in Newport, where he made contact with the Newport Free African Society. Before leaving Newport he secured the following recommendation to serve as an introduction to the Boston Society:

Mr. Henry Stewart, one of the members of the Freeholders, African Society, established in the city of Philadelphia for the benefit of the sick of said society, and other commendable purposes, has been with us a traveler, and has behaved himself as a truly worthy member, and as such we recommend him to all our friends, more particularly to the African Company now in the town of Boston.¹⁸

This letter of introduction combined with Mr. Stewart’s report to the “Boston Company” on the nature of the Newport society prompted communication between Boston and Newport: “These lines come to acquaint you that we have your recommended brother, Mr. Henry Stewart, and [are] happy to hear that you have such a society built on so laudable a foundation.” The letter continues by informing its recipients of the activities of the Boston society: “We here are not idle, but are doing what we can to promote the interests and good of our dear brethren that stand in so much need at such a time as this” (Newport, 25–26).

Stewart’s visit also prompted the African Union Society to write directly to the Philadelphia society, telling their membership that during Stewart’s visit they had

¹⁸ *The Proceedings of the Free African Union Society and The African Benevolent Society, Newport, Rhode Island, 1780–1824*, ed. William H. Robinson (Providence: The Urban

League, 1976), 22. Subsequent references to this text will be flagged “Newport” and cited parenthetically in the text.

“had the pleasure of being informed of [the Philadelphia society’s] formation” (Douglass, 25). Although the greetings exchanged by the societies in Newport and Philadelphia were typically warm, their correspondence suggests the diversity of opinions held by early African Americans. In a letter to the Philadelphia Free African Society, the members of the Newport Free African Union Society expressed their stand in favor of African colonization, citing Africa as a place where blacks might be “more happy than they can be here” (Douglass, 26). In response to their inquiry about the Philadelphia society’s position on the issue of Colonization, the members replied without enthusiasm: “With regard to the emigration to Africa you mention, we have at present little to communicate on that head” (Douglass, 28). More interested in remaining in the United States and proving “every pious man is a good citizen of the whole world” than being returned to Africa, the Philadelphia society presented its argument for working toward a day when “captivity shall cease, and buying and selling mankind have an end” in the United States (Douglass, 28, 29).

The commitment expressed by Philadelphia’s Free African Society to establish themselves as upstanding members of the community and to work together for the public good is in fact central to their rules of organization and conduct. Originally organized by two black leaders, Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, who “beheld with sorrow . . . [the] irreligious and uncivilized state” of free blacks in Philadelphia, the society instituted a code of conduct that would disseminate positive images of African Americans as upstanding citizens (Douglass, 15). “No drunkard or disorderly person” could be admitted as a member, and if any member “should prove disorderly after having been received, the said disorderly person [was to be] disjointed from . . . [the society], without having any of his subscription money returned” (Douglass, 16). Strict rules monitored the payment of dues and attendance at society meetings. Members were instructed to “lay aside all superfluity of naughtiness, especially gaming and feasting” (Douglass, 31), and were visited regularly by “overseers” to ensure that “no breach of good order was observed” (Douglass, 41). Given its historical association with the institution of slavery, the title “overseer” seems an appropriate if odd designation. As historian Julie Winch argues, the rules of the Free African Society “gradually moved from regulating the lives of its members to defining the standards of behavior which were acceptable for the community as a whole.”¹⁹ Members of the society placed increasing faith in the belief that “imprudent conduct stops the mouths of our real friends, who would ardently plead our cause,” and “enables our enemies to declare we are not fit for freedom” (Douglass, 32).

Efforts to prove themselves “respectable” in the eyes of the white community did not, however, prevent the Free African societies from asserting their separate identity by directing themselves to the needs of the black community. Records of the Newport Free African Union Society and Philadelphia and Boston’s Free African societies indicate that insuring proper burial for the deceased was a motivating force behind the organization of mutual aid societies. One of the first collective efforts of Philadelphia’s Free African Society was to petition the City of Philadelphia to allow that “the burial-ground called the Potter’s field, [be] in part appropriated for the burial of black persons” (Douglass, 34). The term “potter’s field” was used to designate a burial place for “strangers” or those not accepted in other

¹⁹ Winch, *Philadelphia’s Black Elite*, 6.

places. Contrary to the implications of these spaces, the members “[desire] to have the said burial ground under the care of [the Free African Society],” and their willingness “to pay the same rent that hath been offered by any other person, and a year’s advance as soon as said ground is enclosed” suggest the importance of proper burial and lasting memorials to the maintenance of their fragile community (Douglass, 34).²⁰

That the treatment of the deceased had special significance to early African Americans was related to their African religious heritage, which emphasized the interdependence of the living and the dead. But, given the difficult and uncertain conditions of their lives, free blacks’ concern for proper burial was a means of seeking some degree of dignity, security, and remembrance—if only in the form of a respectable *place* to be buried. The relegation of blacks to potter’s fields and strangers’ burial grounds was in keeping with efforts of slaveholders to strip slaves of all legitimate familial ties and community relationships when enslaved; in the antebellum North, it suggested the indifference with which people of African descent were viewed. Through the efforts of mutual aid societies, free blacks were able to develop and protect areas in which to remember their relatives. Determined that their lives would be marked by respect, they sustained a belief that respect for the dead would help define the humanity of the living.²¹

Paradoxically, the development of independent African American institutions and the movement toward self-determination they represented was met by the rapid deterioration of conditions for free blacks in northern cities at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Instead of recognition for their impressive accomplishments, black Americans faced revitalized charges of innate black inferiority and the escalation of exclusionist policies. Although technically “free,” blacks were increasingly subject to open hostility and discrimination, and the passing of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1793 had increased incidents of kidnapping. While the first decades of the nineteenth century saw the expansion of suffrage to all white men, free blacks gradually lost the right to vote that had, during the late eighteenth century, been granted to them in most of the northern states. In the urban North, competition with foreign immigrants for jobs often left black Americans without work. Emerging Jacksonian capitalism contributed to unprecedented economic upheaval and accompanying social chaos. Rapid economic development and the resulting fluctuation of status among the white population created new anxieties, which were relieved through increased racial tension: by seeing themselves as better than blacks, white Americans ensured their superiority over at least one segment of society. In this hardening racist atmosphere, almost every social and educational institution and mechanism of support in the northern cities was closed to free blacks. Religious and secular organizations alike were unwilling to accept African American membership or participation, or to extend their beneficent support to free blacks in need of assistance.²²

²⁰ For a more detailed treatment of black death and burial rituals in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see Angelika Kruger-Kahloulou in *Markers: the Annual Journal of the Association for Gravestone Studies* 4 (1989): 33–102.

²¹ Alexis de Tocqueville remarked the inhumane treatment given to blacks even in death. “When the Negro dies, his bones are cast aside, and the distinction of conditions prevail even in the equality of death. Thus, a Negro is free, but he can share neither the rights, nor the pleasures, nor

the labor, nor the afflictions, nor the tomb of him whose equal he has been declared to be; and he cannot meet him upon fair terms in life or in death.” *Democracy in America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), 2: 27.

²² My general understanding of the Jacksonian era has been particularly enhanced by Harry Watson’s work on the subject. See especially *Liberty and Power: The Politics of Jacksonian America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990).

Mutual aid societies were essential to fostering economic *security*, but there was also a need for public voice, particularly public voice seen as “learned.” As early as 1809, select mutual aid societies began to call for the revision and expansion of their functions to include more deliberate writing and public presentation of their condition. In an address to the New York African Society for Mutual Relief in 1809 William Hamilton commended an essay co-written by two “colored” men of the community, not only for its important subject, the abolition of the slave trade, but also for being an example of the kind of writing in demand. He urged others to write equally carefully-constructed and powerful essays: “If we continue to produce specimens like these,” he said, “we shall soon put our enemies to the blush; abashed and confounded they shall quit the field, and no longer urge their superiority of souls.”²³ Hamilton’s use of the word “specimens” emphasizes his valorization of the language if not methods of the sciences and of literature. He goes on to express concern that “we have not produced any to excel in arts and sciences,” challenging his audience with the following rhetorical question: “what station above the common employment of craftsmen and labourers would we fill, did we possess both learning and abilities?” (WH, 36) Although the subject of mutual aid remains the focal point of the evening’s address, the benefits of “being united in social bodies” for seeking an education and executing change—and not just surviving—is at the heart of the speaker’s words (WH, 37).

Free blacks expressed increasing consciousness that they were living in “the golden age of Literature” and subscribed to the theory that interaction with “the Literature of the day . . . brings in regular succession the condensed learning of past ages; and all the erudition of the present.”²⁴ In the midst of a dominant society for whom knowledge of the arts, sciences, and literature was highly valued, blacks increasingly believed that they needed to read widely and produce documents that were sophisticated in their presentation, as well as in their content. “The age in which we live is fastidious in its taste,” acknowledged William Whipper in an address to an early literary society in Philadelphia in 1828. “The orator [and writer] must display the pomp of words, the magnificence of the tropes and figures, or he will be considered unfit for the duties of his profession.” But, he continued, “such high-wrought artificial [presentations] are like beautiful paint upon windows, they rather obscure than admit the light of the sun. Truth should always be exhibited in such a dress as may be best suited to the state of the audience, accompanied with every principle of science and reason” (WW, 107).

In 1821 the *New York Journal* reported that “a library is about to be established at Boston, for the exclusive use of people of Color.”²⁵ Scattered throughout newspapers of the 1820s are similar notices, but the first society for which there is a relatively extensive record is Philadelphia’s Colored Reading Society, organized in 1828. African American mutual aid and artisan societies continued to function as working class support systems: by 1849, Philadelphia had 106 mutual aid societies, to which more than half of the African American population belonged.²⁶ Coalitions established around reading and writing were both formal and informal, large

²³ William Hamilton, *An Address to the New York African Society, for Mutual Relief, delivered In the Universalist Church, January 2, 1809* (rpt. in Porter, *Early Negro Writing*), 37. References to this text will be cited as WH.

²⁴ William Whipper, *An Address Delivered in Wesley Church on the Evening of June 12, Before the Colored Reading Society*

of Philadelphia, For Mental Improvement (1828; rpt. in Porter, *Early Negro Writing*), 107. References to this text will be cited as WW.

²⁵ “Library for blacks.” Rpt. in the *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, September 1821, 291.

and small, discussion groups, libraries and reading rooms. Some instructed beginning readers, while others supported those more advanced. Literary societies planned reading lists and schedules; they provided regular opportunities to “publish” original literary creations and audiences to encourage, discuss, and criticize the ideas and presentation. The societies helped train future orators and leaders by sponsoring debates on issues of importance to the black community. In supporting the development of a literate public they furthered the evolution of a black public sphere and politically conscious society.

“DREADED ELOQUENCE”

The mechanics of societies organized around reading and literature were much the same as those of mutual aid societies, so much so that the Constitution of the Colored Reading Society of Philadelphia reads simply: “All persons initiated into this Society shall become members in the same mode as is customary in all benevolent institutions, with the same strictness and regard to the moral qualifications as is necessary in all institutions to secure their welfare” (WW 107). Members of the Society were to pay one dollar as an initiation fee and a monthly membership fee of twenty-five cents.²⁷ The by-laws of the club made it clear that their focus would be literary and not more generally beneficent: “All monies received by this Society,” read items 4 and 5 from the Constitution:

is to be expended in useful books, such as the Society may from time to time appropriate. [5th] All books initiated into this Society shall be placed in the care of the Librarian belonging to said institution, and it shall be his duty to deliver to said members alternatively, such books as they shall demand, with strict regard that no member shall keep said book out of the library longer than one week, without paying the fine prescribed in the constitution. (WW, 107–8)

The members of the society agreed to “meet once a week to return and receive books, to read, and express whatever sentiments they may have conceived if they think proper, and transact the necessary business relative to this institution” (WW, 108).

The guiding principle of Philadelphia’s Colored Reading Society was that “the station of a scholar highly versed in classic lore . . . is indeed higher than any other occupied by man” (WW, 109). Members of the Reading Society adopted a “course of study” that would allow them “to fix the attention, to strengthen the memory, and to form habits of analyzing, comparing, abstracting, and correct reasoning” (WW, 110). They believed that classical texts would best help in achieving these goals: from these texts a “fund of ideas [are] acquired on a variety of subjects; the taste is greatly improved by conversing with the best models; the imagination is

²⁶ *A Statistical Inquiry into the Condition of the People of Color of Philadelphia*, 22–23.

²⁷ Although the Constitution of the Colored Reading Society of Philadelphia does not specify its initiation and membership fees, my figures are based on a composite of the fees of similar societies organized around the same date. The cost of one dollar at initiation and twenty-five cents as a monthly fee was standard in the earliest African-American literary societies formed in the northern cities. These figures, however, are difficult to place into context without some indication of the average income

of free blacks during this time. Studies of the economic condition of African Americans in antebellum America reveal relatively little about the actual wages earned by free blacks in their various occupations: my research in this area is ongoing. Property-holding statistics, such as those compiled by Leonard Curry in the Appendix of *The Free Black in Urban America, 1800–1850*, suggest that very few blacks were financially secure; as a rule, blacks were restricted to the fields of domestic service and common labor.

enriched by the fine scenery with which the classics abound; and an acquaintance is formed with human nature, together with the history, customs and manners of antiquity" (WW, 111). By working toward these goals collectively, members could help one another "discipline the mind" (WW, 110). The society subscribed to at least two important journals of the time, the first African American newspaper, *Freedom's Journal*, and *The Genius of Universal Emancipation*.²⁸ Through their reading and discussion the members could "[analyze] and [compare] [their] ideas on different subjects," contemporary and historical (WW, 110). Members of the society also addressed the community, informing them of their activities and supporting the pursuit of education generally.

Like that of most early literary societies, the fate of the Colored Reading Society is uncertain. When Joseph Wilson outlined the most prominent of the active literary societies of Philadelphia in 1841 in *Sketches of the Higher Classes of Colored Society*, the Colored Reading Society is not mentioned.²⁹ One of its founding members, William Whipper, was part of a group that began the Philadelphia Library Company of Colored Persons in 1833, which suggests that the Library Company absorbed the membership of the Colored Reading Society. Modeled after the Library Company of Philadelphia begun by Benjamin Franklin in 1731 for "literary and scientific discussion, the reading of original essays, poems, and so forth,"³⁰ the membership of the Library Company of Colored Persons was composed of free black males. From its first announcement (figure 1), the Library Company of Colored Persons boasted it was neither "sectarian" nor "a mere fractional effort, the design of any single society among us." Rather, the Library Company was formed in recognition of the "necessity of promoting among our rising youth, a proper cultivation for literary pursuits and improvement of the faculties and powers of their minds," and designed "to embrace the entire population of the City of Philadelphia."³¹ The members' request for "such books or other donations as will facilitate the object of this institution" accompanied the public announcement of their organization. Books were to be made accessible at minimal cost. Members could read on their own or participate in a reading schedule; in addition, in order to promote research, discussion, and debate, the Library Company sponsored a weekly lecture series, which ran from October through May. The Colored Library Company was still a strong institution in 1837, when James Forten cited it at a meeting of the American Moral Reform Society as an example of the stature of learning among the colored population of Philadelphia. "Our Library Association is gaining strength every day," he reported. "We have a well supplied stock of books collected from the most useful and varied productions of the age."³² By 1838, the Library Company had more than 600 volumes in their collection and at least 150 members.

Founded in 1833, New York's Phoenix Society, which included a broader segment of the African American community than the Colored Reading Society, was

²⁸ "Original Communications," *Freedom's Journal*, 20 June 1828, 98.

²⁹ Joseph Wilson, *Sketches of the Higher Classes of Colored Society in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Merrihew and Thompson, 1841), 27.

³⁰ George Maurice Abbot, *A Short History of the Library Company of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1913), 3.

³¹ "Philadelphia Library Company of Colored Persons,"

Hazard's Register of Pennsylvania, 16 March 1833, 186 (page is numbered incorrectly in original; it should be 176).

³² *Minutes and Proceedings of the First Annual Meeting of the American Moral Reform Society, Held at Philadelphia*, (Philadelphia: Merrihew and Gunn, 1837); rpt. in Porter, *Early Negro Writing*, 238.

LIBRARY OF THE PEOPLE OF COLOR.

We, the people of color of this city, being deeply impressed with the necessity of promoting among our rising youth, a proper cultivation for literary pursuits and the improvement of the faculties and powers of their minds, deem it necessary to state for the information of our friends wherever situate, that we have succeeded in organizing an institution under the title of "the Philadelphia Library Company of Colored persons."

It will be perceived that this is not a mere fractional effort, the design of any single society among us, of which we are proud it can with truth be said there are many, all having originated for our mutual benefit and improvement; neither is it sectarian, but its features are such as to embrace the entire population of the City of Philadelphia, as its name imports.

In accordance with which we most respectfully appeal to the friends of science and of the people of color, for such books or other donations as will facilitate the object of this institution.

The following individuals are duly authorized to solicit and receive such donations on behalf of said Company, as a liberal and enlightened public may feel disposed to bestow viz:—

Robert C. Gordon, jr., 212 S. Seventh st.
 Frederick A. Hinton, 82 S. Fourth st.
 Daniel B. Brownhill, 15 Arch st.
 James Needham, 12 N. Fourth st.
 Thomas Butler, 6 S. Eighth st.
 William S. Gordon, 99 Callowhill street.
 Robert Purvis, 11 Jefferson row, Lombard st.
 Daniel Colly, Ninth above Coates st.
 James C. Morel, 1 Passyunk Road.
 Morris Brown, jr., 241 Shippen st.

Columbia, March 9th, 1833.

Figure 1. A notice of the Library of the People of Color from Hazard's Register of Pennsylvania, 16 March 1833.

founded on the theory that the "condition" of African Americans could "only be meliorated by their being improved in morals, literature, and mechanic arts."³³ The Directors called on "every person of color to unite himself, or herself, to [the Phoenix Society], and faithfully endeavor to promote its objects" (Phoenix, 141). To facilitate this, the Society had a unique policy on fees: the Constitution stipulated that membership would be open to "all persons who contribute to its funds quarterly, any sum of money they may think proper." Despite this provision, the directors set ambitious goals: the first of these was to "immediately" raise "at least Ten Thousand Dollars" for the "establishment and sustaining of a Manual Labour School" (Phoenix, 142). The ultimate goal of the Phoenix Society was to transform New York City's entire black population into a "useful portion of the community" (Phoenix, 141); their first step was to divide the black communities into "wards" and to form committees to "make a register of every colored person [and] if they read, write and cipher" (Phoenix, 144). By making contacts throughout the community they would "induce" not only children but also adults to attend school. They planned to "establish circulating libraries in each ward for the use of people of colour on very moderate pay,—to establish mental feasts, and also lyceums for speaking and for lectures on sciences" (Phoenix, 144).

It took only eight months for the Phoenix Society to begin fulfilling its goals. In a letter dated 7 December 1833 and printed in the *Colonizationist and Journal of Freedom*, Samuel Cornish outlined the goals and activities of the "library and Reading Room lately opened by the executive committee of the Phoenix Society."

³³ *Address and Constitution of the Phoenix Society of New York, and of the Auxiliary Ward Associations* (1833; rpt. in Porter

Early Negro Writing), 141. References to this text will be cited as "Phoenix."

“The objects of the institution are generally improvement and the training of our youth to habits of reading and reflection,” he explained. In addition to a “course of lectures . . . on morals, economy, and the arts and sciences generally,” the Society conducted three “class[es] of readers,” each consisting of “25 or 30 or more.” Each class was to have “selected its course of reading and appointed the readers, whose duty it shall be to read for one hour. All classes shall note prominent parts, and then retire into the adjacent room to converse on the subjects, together with occurrences of the day, calculated to cultivate the mind and improve the heart.”³⁴

References such as this one to the appointment of readers, as well as descriptions of societies whose focus was memorization and public reading rather than strictly individual literary study, indicate the importance placed on the practices of reading aloud and recitation by some early African American literary societies. By the early nineteenth century, reading aloud had long been a prominent feature of European and European-American reading circles. In the case of the earliest African American literary societies, the emphasis on the performative aspect of literary learning and on the sharing of texts indicates that membership in a literary society and basic literacy—the ability to read—did not necessarily go together. Some societies, such as Boston’s Minors’ Exhibition Society, were founded expressly “for the laudable purpose of improving [young black people’s] minds by committing to memory and reciting select articles of prose and poetry.”³⁵ Reading texts aloud fostered an environment in which a truly democratic “sharing” of texts could take place, and ensured that cohesive groups could be formed from individuals with widely divergent literacy skills. Because the process of silent reading of the text was not privileged over its oral performance, subsequent discussions could involve those who listened to the text’s performance as well as those with the ability to read it for themselves. In this sense, “cultivating the mind,” had less to do with basic literary skills than it did *exposure* to literary texts and the discussions which they prompted.

Cornish’s letter to the *Colonizationist and Journal of Freedom* includes an appeal for “donations from the favored people of New York, in books, maps, papers, money, etc., for the benefit of our feeble institution.” The acknowledgement of a number of donations in a February, 1834 issue of *The Emancipator* indicates that this appeal was well-received.³⁶ Nevertheless, the Phoenix Society seems to have been unable to maintain its momentum. Although their rooms continued to serve for a time as a community space, the school closed.³⁷ The society itself seems to

³⁴ Samuel Cornish, “A Library for the People of Color,” *Colonizationist and Journal of Freedom* (Boston: George W. Light, February, 1834): 306–7.

³⁵ The following report of a “Boston Minors’ Exhibition” appears in the 21 May 1831 issue of the *Liberator*. “We were highly gratified, (with other gentlemen and ladies,) on witnessing [the Boston Minors’] third Exhibition at the meeting house in Belknap-street on Monday evening last. The pieces were selected with remarkable discrimination, and spoken with accuracy and effect: some of the dialogues went off in a very clever style. Considering that these youthful performers are entirely self-instructed, they give promise of future advancement.”

³⁶ Samuel Cornish, letter to the editor, 31 January 1834. Reprinted in *The Emancipator*, February 1834.

³⁷ The *Weekly Advocate* (later renamed *The Colored American*) printed an “extra” edition 22 February 1837 to report a meeting held by the black community at the

“Phenix [sic] rooms.” The purpose of the meeting was to discuss recent events affecting free people of color in the state of New York. Their discussion led to a draft of a petition calling for (1) the repeal of laws authorizing the holding of persons to service as slaves in the state of New York; (2) the right to trial by jury be granted to persons of color within the state arrested and claimed as fugitive slaves; and (3) an alteration of the constitution, so as to give the right of voting to all male citizens of the state on the same terms, without distinction of color. Members of the black community were “requested to go to the Phenix [sic] rooms which will be open for that purpose every day for a few days, from 3 o’clock till 9 in the evening, and put their names to the petition.”

The Colored American 1 July 1837 edition reports the closing of the “Phoenix school”: its trustees were no longer “able to pay the rent.” The school, which consisted of “thirty five or more young misses—all of respectable

have undergone a transformation, which included the changing of its name from The Phoenix Society to The Phoenixonian Literary Society. The Phoenixonian Literary Society had different goals than those of the Phoenix Society; they sponsored a lecture series each year to which the public was invited. Lectures were given by members as well as guests from other cities. Topics included "Astronomy," "Duty of Young Men," "Patriots of the American Revolution," and "Music—Its Practical Influence on Society."³⁸ The society's restructuring may have occurred in 1838, when it celebrated its fifth anniversary. The anniversary celebration was something of a disappointment to one attendee, who arrived to find "but few of [the society's] members, and several ladies." "Surprised at the emptiness of the hall," he was told that "a new Society has appointed a meeting in the neighborhood of the Hall, at the same hour, and that this arrangement had detained many of the members, and disappointed many persons who were deeply interested in both meetings." Of the meeting, the spectator commented: "Though we were well entertained, the audience did not enjoy so great an intellectual feast as they anticipated that the society would furnish." The disappointing anniversary meeting occurred at a particularly unfortunate time, lending reinforcement to the "impression . . . among the public, that this Society has gone by the board."³⁹ In fact, the Society held regular business meetings and supported an especially diverse lecture series through 1841, when it celebrated its eighth anniversary.⁴⁰

For African Americans in the early nineteenth century, these societies offered a protected, collective environment in which to develop a literary background as well as the oral and written skills needed to express and represent themselves with confidence. Nowhere is this made clearer than in the description of the Female Literary Association, an association for which William Lloyd Garrison expressed particularly high praise in the pages of the *Liberator*. In an address to its members on the occasion of the first anniversary of their coalition, words written "by a member" and later published by the *Liberator* in 1832 draw a parallel between the role of the literary society for its members and the "vault" Demosthenes builds to provide him with the needed privacy to overcome the defects of his speech. "On his first attempt to speak in public, he was hissed." Still, Demosthenes develops the will to overcome his ridicule in a vault he builds where "he might practice without disturbance." By referring to this particular story in her anniversary address, the writer of these words insists that the "brilliant success" that resulted from Demosthenes' "seclusion" is also available through the protective "vault" created by the women's literary society itself. She equates the words Demosthenes masters during his time spent in the vault with powerful weapons: as the "first orator of the age," his "eloquence was more dreaded . . . than all the fleets and armies of Athens."⁴¹

African American women found literary societies to be especially important and popular resources. In 1831 the number of female mutual aid societies in the city of

families, and in the most interesting, and important stage of female education," may have been the last of the Phoenix Society's educational network as it was originally conceived.

³⁸ *The Colored American*, 13 February 1841, no pagination.

³⁹ *The Colored American*, 21 July 1838, 87.

⁴⁰ This society may well have remained active after this date. It survived until at least its eighth anniversary. An announcement of the eighth anniversary celebration of The Phoenixonian Literary Society and an invitation to the

public to attend is included in *The Colored American*, 3 July 1841. After 1841, the activities of all African American literary societies become much more difficult to follow. One reason for this is that *The Colored American*, a great supporter of African American literary societies, stopped publication in 1841.

⁴¹ "Address to the Female Literary Association of Philadelphia, on their First Anniversary, By a Member," *Liberator*, 13 October 1832, 163.

Philadelphia outnumbered male mutual aid societies by 27 to 16.⁴² Black women, working in even lower-paying situations than black men, were in need of the financial safety-net mutual aid societies provided. This numerical balance may also have been true of literary societies. Although “deprived of the advantages” of formal schooling, black women had a desire to educate themselves. Evidence suggests that women’s literary societies from 1830 to 1850 may have outnumbered men’s, even though they did not exceed them in size or prominence.⁴³ Whereas men’s literary societies typically consisted of a large membership and sponsored public lectures and debates, women’s societies were more likely to assemble in small groups in a member’s home. In contrast to the formal documents that represent many of the men’s literary societies, one-line announcements in journals of the day are often all that remain to record early African American women’s literary societies. One such small entry in the 24 August 1827 issue of *Freedom’s Journal* reads, “A Society of Young Ladies has been formed at Lynn, Mass., to meet once a week, to read in turn to the society, works adapted to virtuous and literary improvement.”⁴⁴

Two black women’s literary societies from the early nineteenth century stand as exceptions to this pattern. Organized in the fall of 1831, the Female Literary Association of Philadelphia almost immediately attracted the attention of abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison. In June 1832, he reported in the “Ladies Department” of the *Liberator* his visit to “a society of colored ladies, called the FEMALE LITERARY ASSOCIATION,” in Philadelphia. “The members assemble every Tuesday evening,” he told his readers, “for the purpose of mutual improvement in moral and literary pursuits. Nearly all of them write, almost weekly, original pieces, which are put anonymously into a box, and afterward criticized by a committee.” “If the traducers of the colored race could be acquainted with the moral worth, just refinement, and large intelligence of this association,” Garrison concludes, “their mouths would hereafter be dumb.” His impression of the literary society results not only from the “intellectual promise” he perceives from the group’s conversation; he is equally impressed by the very fact of their coalition. “Having been permitted to bring with him several of [their] pieces [of writing],” Garrison “commence[d] their publication [in the *Liberator*], not only for their merit, but in order to induce the colored ladies of other places to go and do likewise.”⁴⁵

No less than their male counterparts, the members of the Female Literary Association of Philadelphia felt it a “duty incumbent upon us, as women—as daughters of a despised race—to use our utmost endeavors to enlighten the understanding, and to cultivate the talents entrusted to our keeping.”⁴⁶ They saw collective reading and writing as a way to “break down the strong barrier of prejudice, and raise

⁴² “To the Public,” *Hazard’s Register*, 12 March 1831, 163–164.

⁴³ Reporting on a meeting at African Meeting House in New Haven, Conn., one attendee made the following observation, which was recorded in a letter to the editor of *Freedom’s Journal* and printed in the 17 August 1827 issue: “Sorry am I to say, that the number assembled was very few. Females, be it written to their credit, composed a large majority; in fact, the spirit of enquiry among them, whether derived from their mother Eve or not, is always greater than among an equal number of males. Hence we find so many more of them engaged in the active duties of Societies, which have not only the moral

improvement of man in view, but whose aim is also, to disseminate the charities and necessities of life among the poor and sick” (91).

⁴⁴ “Summary,” *Freedom’s Journal*, 24 August 1827, 95.

⁴⁵ Garrison’s comments appeared in the 30 June 1832 edition of the *Liberator*, 103. At the time of his visit the society was “composed of about twenty members”; Garrison noted that the membership was “increasing, and full of intellectual promise.”

⁴⁶ The constitution of the Female Literary Association was printed in the *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, December 1832, 29–30. Subsequent quotations in this paragraph are from this text.

ourselves to an equality with those of our fellow beings who differ from us in complexion, but who are, with ourselves, children of one Eternal Parent." Like the men's societies, the Female Literary Society was governed by the offices of President, Vice President, Secretary, and Treasurer. An Agent and Purchasing Committee were "chosen annually," to "procure suitable books" and journals for the society; the librarian's responsibility was to ensure the books were properly returned to the library at the end of each meeting. Because one of the central activities of this society's membership was writing, the society appointed a Committee of Examination whose task it was "to inspect and read to the Association such papers as might be [anonymously] placed in the box." The society operated on an annual subscription basis, and the cost for one year's membership was \$1.50.

The constitution of Boston's Afric-American Female Intelligence Society suggests a similar scope and principles of organization. Motivated by "a natural feeling for the welfare of our friends," the society's membership "thought fit to associate for the diffusion of knowledge, the suppression of vice and immorality, and for cherishing such virtues as will render us happy and useful to society." The society collected twenty-five cents at the first meeting of the year and then \$0.12 ½ at every monthly meeting thereafter: the money was used "for the purchasing of books, the hiring of a room, and other contingencies." Although their central focus was reportedly literary, the group maintained a fund for the benefit of "any member of [the] society, of one year's standing . . . who may be taken sick."⁴⁷

Paradigms of nineteenth century American life that associate the activities of men with the public sphere and women with the domestic provide an inadequate framework for understanding the importance of literary societies for African American women. In many respects, the conditions under which black men and women lived made their agendas and means of pursuing them more similar than different: it was these similarities that prompted Frances E. W. Harper in 1869 to argue that "when it [is] a question of race we let the lesser question of sex go."⁴⁸ Black women as well as black men were called on to articulate their responses to racist ideology. Historical associations of the black female body with unbridled sexuality made black women particularly susceptible to the public perception of being shiftless. This image, which radically refigured black women as Other, was debasing both psychologically and materially.⁴⁹ But while this particular interpretation of black womanhood probably heightened black women's racial identity and made them keenly aware of the great work to be done in the struggle for equality, their gender

⁴⁷ The constitution of Boston's Afric-American Female Intelligence Society was printed in the *Liberator*, 7 January 1832, 2.

The largest women's literary societies in the 1830s and 1840s seem to have consisted of about 30 members. In *Sketches of the Higher Classes of Colored Society in Philadelphia*, Joseph Wilson outlines the organization and activities of the Minerva Literary Society, an association formed by thirty African American "ladies" in October, 1834. In Boston, the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society, founded in 1832, maintained a comparable membership during this period. Similar New York societies mentioned by Wilson included the Ladies Literary Society (1834) and the Female Literary Society (1836).

⁴⁸ Quoted in "Annual Meeting of the American Equal Rights Association: Second Day's Proceedings," *The Revolution*, 27 May 1869, 321–22. For a cogent discussion

of the role of African American women in the context of the project of racial uplift, see Linda Perkins, "Black Women and Racial 'Uplift' Prior to Emancipation" in Linda Perkins, *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally*, ed. Filomina Steady (Cambridge, Mass.: Schenkman Publishing, 1981), 317–34.

⁴⁹ Sander Gilman, "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth Century Art, Medicine and Literature," in *"Race," Writing and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 223–61, traces the linkage between the icon of the Hottentot female and the image of the black female as the source of unrestrained sexuality, corruption, and disease. Gilman uses various disciplines to examine the merging and manifestation of this theme with perceptions of the black female as Other in the nineteenth century.

also limited their activities. Black as well as white women were taught to cultivate dispositions that were amiable and meek, and made to understand that “the voice of woman should not be heard in public debates.”⁵⁰

Rather than find themselves silenced by this cultural norm, however, black women sought “other ways in which [a woman’s] influence would be beneficial.”⁵¹ Literary study, deemed essential to moral uplift, became an acceptable means of countering the image of black women as less capable than all other Americans, for it embraced the images of feminine virtue and civic participation associated with the literary. Convinced that “the degraded station that we occupy in society is in great measure attributable to our want of education,” the members of black women’s literary societies believed that “cultivating [their] intellect” was essential to their efforts to “contradict the constant assertions of our enemies that so low is our situation we can never rise to an equality with those of a fairer complexion. . . .”⁵² According to the Preamble to the Consitution of Boston’s Garrison Society, organized in 1833, members devoted their weekly meetings “to studying history, reading useful and interesting books, writing, [and] conversing on the sufferings of our enslaved sisters.” They subscribed to the *Liberator* and maintained a committee whose responsibility it was to supervise the purchase of books. Even societies characterizing themselves as “religious” saw the reading of texts other than the Bible as advantageous and made it a part of their activities: the Colored Female Religious and Moral Society of Salem, for instance, which was originally organized in 1818 and characterized in 1833 as in the process of “resuscitation,” began every meeting with “reading in some profitable book, till all have come who are expected.”⁵³

When the study of polite literature remained a domestic activity, black men seem to have supported black women’s efforts to establish literary societies. A woman’s reading was considered an important if relatively passive form of intellectual exercise; it was considered an essential component of her image of refinement and of her role as caregiver to future generations. Through her “vigorous action,” black children would believe themselves to be “not inferior in intellect, but . . . as capable of improvement as any people under heaven.”⁵⁴ This influence would not only be felt in the domestic sphere: women were responsible for extending the proper values and moral order that shaped their homes and families to the larger community. Through their efforts, black women would enable Americans of African descent to become “highly distinguished and intelligent people.”⁵⁵

⁵⁰ L.H., “Duty of Females,” 124. Although Dorothy Porter asserts (by including the piece “Duty of Females” by L.H. in *Early Negro Writing*), that the author of these words, L.H., is a woman of color, I disagree. Although L.H. appears sympathetic to the plight of black Americans, she never aligns herself with them in the way that other writers of the period do. In comparison with the writing of Maria Stewart, for example, whose writing is filled with references to “we” and “our people,” L.H. actually distances herself from the black population. Consider her reference in “Duty of Females” to the part women can play in the education of free colored people: “It is the intelligence of [free people of color] which will advance *their* cause; and it is *their* ignorance which will retard it” (125, emphasis mine). See “Duty of Females”; rpt. in Porter, *Early Negro Writing*, 123–26. The piece is originally published in the *Liberator*, 5 May 1832, 70.

⁵¹ “Duty of Females,” 124.

⁵² “Preamble,” Constitution of the Garrison Society, “Ladies Department,” *Liberator*, 16 February 1833, 26. The Garrison Society should not be confused with the Garrison Literary and Benevolent Association. Organized in New York City in 1834, the Garrison Association’s membership consisted of boys and men, aged 4–20. For an announcement of this society’s formation and its Constitution, see the *Liberator*, 19 April 1834, 63.

⁵³ “By-Laws,” Constitution of the Colored Female Religious and Moral Society of Salem, “Ladies Department,” *Liberator*, 16 February 1833, 26.

⁵⁴ Address delivered at an exhibition of the Young Ladies Literary Society, 27 December 1837. Printed in *The Colored American*, 3 February 1838, as “Extract.”

⁵⁵ Maria Stewart, “An Address, Delivered Before the African American Female Intelligence Society, of Boston,” in

This endorsement of reading and writing as “acceptable” domestic activity has played a part in overshadowing the ways organized literary activities contributed to black women’s changing understanding of the limitations of gender. Before formal educational opportunities became available for black women, literary societies served as “school[s] for the encouragement and promotion of polite literature.”⁵⁶ They were invaluable means of educating black women beyond what was considered their “proper sphere,” preparing them instead to participate in the “gentleman’s course” of study at schools like Oberlin in the 1860s.⁵⁷ In addition, the coalitions served as the institutional bases from which black women could distinguish themselves by assuming responsibility for the authoring of their own presentation. Literary activities helped free black women—both individually and collectively—imagine and re-imagine themselves and their role in American society.

What is perhaps most striking about early African American women’s literary societies is their self-conscious support of their members’ literal authorship: extant records of many African American women’s societies indicate their emphasis on literary production as well as literary consumption. Although most often presented anonymously, publications by “A Young Lady of Color” or “A Colored Lady” stand as evidence of the wide variety of writing by members of these societies. Garrison’s promise to publish, in forthcoming editions of the *Liberator*, the poems and occasional pieces that he collected from members of the Female Literary Society provides some indication that the “young lady of color” whose poetry is signed only “Ada,” is a member of this organization. Ada’s work begins to appear regularly in the “Literary” column of the *Liberator* just after Garrison’s 1832 visit to the Philadelphia society; her poetry is featured through the paper’s 1839 volume (figure 2). Socially-imposed constraints of both race and gender would have forbidden Ada to engage in public and political discussion. However, poems that appear in the *Liberator* show that Ada circumvented these norms through publication.⁵⁸

Literary associations allowed women to occupy what Carla Peterson has called a “state of liminality” which Peterson, quoting Victor Turner, argues situated them “betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, [and] convention.”⁵⁹ In her writings, black antebellum writer and orator Maria Stewart implied a similarly ambiguous position. Stewart believed women could and should express themselves in public; for a short period of time, she boldly addressed audiences in Boston on behalf of her race and of women, but oral and written expression remained for her imbedded in gender distinction. To write was to inhabit

Productions of Mrs. Maria Stewart, Presented to the First African Baptist Church and Society (Boston: Friends of Freedom and Virtue, 1835), 60.

⁵⁶ Wilson, *Sketches of the Higher Classes of Colored Society in Philadelphia*, 108.

⁵⁷ Anna Julia Cooper’s comments on the controversial admission of “ladies” to the “gentleman’s course” of education in her essay “The Higher Education of Women” (1892) suggest something of the anxieties that surrounded the introduction of women to higher education during this time. “It was thought to be an experiment—a rather dangerous experiment—and was adopted with fear and trembling by the good fathers, who looked as if they had been caught secretly mixing explosive compounds and were guiltily expecting every moment to see the foundations under them shaken and rent and their fair superstructure shattered into fragments” (49). Surely the preparation

offered by literary societies reassured black women in their intellectual ability and contributed to the confidence and courage needed to pursue higher education in this hostile environment. See *A Voice from the South* (1892); rpt. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.

⁵⁸ Two representative poems by Ada, which appear in the *Liberator* are “My Country” (7 January 1834) and “An Appeal to Woman” (1 February 1834). At least one of Ada’s poems, “An Appeal to Woman,” provoked response. James Scott’s “Reply to Ada,” originally published in the *Providence Journal*, was reprinted in the 22 February 1834 issue of the *Liberator*; see also “Reply to Ada” by Augusta in the *Liberator*, 1 March 1834.

⁵⁹ Carla L. Peterson, *Doers of the Word: African American Women Speakers and Writers in the North, 1830–1880* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 18.

[From the Lowell Observer.]

The following lines were written by a young and intelligent lady of color, who, with the other members of the family to which she belongs, has by her perseverance in study, &c. forced the respect even of those who would wish to crush the people of color to the earth. May her appeal not be in vain!

AN APPEAL TO WOMAN.

Oh, woman, woman, in thy brightest hour
Of conscious worth, of pride, of conscious power,
Oh, nobly dare to act a Christian's part,
That well befits a lovely woman's heart!
Dare to be good, as thou canst dare be great;
Despise the taunts of envy, scorn and hate;
Our 'skins may differ,' but from thee we claim
A sister's privilege, in a sister's name.

We are thy sisters,—God has truly said,
That of one blood, the nations he has made.
Oh, christian woman, in a christian land,
Canst thou unblushing read this great command?
Suffer the wrongs which wring our inmost heart
To draw one throb of pity on thy part;
Our 'skins may differ,' but from thee we claim
A sister's privilege, in a sister's name.

Oh, woman!—though upon thy fairer brow
The hues of roses and of lilies glow—
These soon must wither in their kindred earth,
From whence the fair and dark have equal birth.
Let a bright halo o'er thy virtues shed
A lustre, that shall live when thou art dead;
Let coming ages learn to bless thy name
Upon the altar of immortal fame. ADA.

Figure 2. Ada's "An Appeal to Women" from Garrison's *Liberator*, 1 February 1834.

gender in a particular, contradictory way. Literary activity altered the very character of a woman's nature: through their writing and other forms of public address, women could "possess the spirit of men, bold and enterprising, fearless and undaunted."⁶⁰ Although their literary activities ushered black women into an implicitly male community that was constituted in writing, their "membership" in this community was based on the emphasis—not the elimination—of gender. Even in print, where it would have been possible to publish texts unmediated by designations of gender, women's writing was distinguished by labels: their writing appeared in the "Ladies Department" or was signed "a colored lady," or "a female of color."

Maria Stewart believed that these conventional associations need not be entirely restrictive: throughout her unusual career as a public speaker, she maintained her belief that the most effective race leader would be one who "joined the charms and accomplishments of a woman to all the knowledge of a man."⁶¹ Calling attention to the disapproval that met her own attempt to incorporate herself into the public, civic debate of the time, she criticized black men for their regulation of

⁶⁰ Maria Stewart, *Liberator*, "Mrs. Stewart's [sic] Essays," 2.

⁶¹ Stewart, "A Lecture by Maria W. Stewart, given at Franklin Hall, Boston, September 21 1832," rpt. in *The Productions of Mrs. Maria Stewart* as "Mrs. Stewart's Fare-

well Address To Her Friends in the City of Boston," 78.

⁶² Stewart, "An Address, Delivered at the African Masonic Hall, Boston, February 27, 1833," rpt. in *Productions of Mrs. Maria Stewart*, 64.

women's activities: when it came to public expression, they were reluctant to "let [women's] voices be heard, nor their hands be raised in [sic] behalf of their color."⁶² Regardless of the soundness of her skills or her dedication to the welfare of the community, it was considered inappropriate for a woman to speak out so boldly.⁶³ Stewart left Boston in 1833, but not without asserting the potential "power of [a woman's] eloquence" and defending a woman's right to active engagement with the world.⁶⁴ She moved to New York, where she joined one of the city's "female literary societies" and was described as "full of literary aspirations and the ambitions of authorship." Although she never again addressed the public as she had in Boston, Stewart continued to "publish" her "compositions and declarations"—by reading them aloud at meetings of the literary society.⁶⁵

"THE CHARACTER AND CONDITION OF THE COUNTRY"

So prevalent and impressive were the meetings of black women's literary societies in 1834 that they were used by one writer to epitomize the benefits for the whole population, black or white, of what were increasingly called "mental feasts." Defining a "mental feast" as "a convocation of rational beings, who come together . . . to enjoy the sublime and exalted pleasures of intellectual cultivation and improvement," the writer of the *Liberator's* occasional column "Moral" suggested that the "mental feasts" organized by black women were the sorts of activities that ought to be pursued by more members of the community. While reserving high praise for "our colored female friends, in divers places, [who] have adopted the practice of holding mental feasts," the author did not disguise the segment of the population to whom his observations were primarily directed. "While many of their fairer and more privileged sisters are spending their precious time at the theatre or the ball-room, they, more rational and wise, are cultivating those qualities of the soul which are indispensable," he wrote. To black women's "more privileged sisters" he wrote, "Let the fair daughters of the Columbia take example from those, whom too many have regarded as unworthy of their notice. . . ." One week after his meditation on "mental feasts," the same author focused his column again on the educational activities of black women. In a letter addressed "To the Societies of Colored Females for Mutual Improvement," he called the members of these societies "more rational and wise" for their "ardent pursuit" of intellectual stimulation than those women who spend their time cultivating their "personal charms." He praised them for their efforts to "direct [their] thoughts and [their] exertions to the improvement of the mind."⁶⁶

The "phenomenon" of the organized, educational activities of black women attracted considerable attention from those skeptical of a black woman's ability to engage in respectable practices and "civilized" activity. Numerous commentaries in contemporary publications suggest that the meetings of African American

⁶³ According to one race leader of the time, William C. Nell, "even [Stewart's] Boston circle of friends" opposed her public activities; see letter from William C. Nell, *Liberator*, 5 March 1852, 39.

⁶⁴ Stewart, "Mrs. Stewart's Farewell Address To Her Friends in the City of Boston," rpt. in *Productions of Mrs. Maria Stewart*, 78.

⁶⁵ Reverend Alexander Crummell, quoted in *We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Dorothy

Sterling (New York: Norton, 1984), 158. Crummell, who knew Stewart in New York, reported that "she became a member of a 'Female Literary Society,' and I remember listening, on more than a few occasions, to some of her compositions and declamations" (Sterling 159).

⁶⁶ Roland, "Moral," *Liberator*, 1 March 1834, 36; "To the Societies of Colored Females for Mutual Improvement," *Liberator*, 8 March 1834, 38.

women's literary societies often included a steady stream of observers who later documented their impression of the proceedings. Calling himself a frequent visitor to the Female and Minervian Literary Societies in Philadelphia, one such observer reported that he was "highly delighted" with the meetings he attended: "My anticipations were more than realized, to see and hear my oppressed sisters (who the colonizationists have the audacity to assert can never be elevated in this country) read and recite pieces, some of which were original, and which would have done credit to the fairest female in America—the republican land of liberty!" He concluded his observations by urging black women to "establish societies," and "give them strict attention." Encouragement like this contributed to the association of literary activities and membership in literary societies with a gendered notion of civic participation, in which reading and writing in organized groups was central to the "enlighten[ment] of [the female] mind" as well as the proper "adornment of the female character."⁶⁷

Throughout the 1830s, black leaders continued to promote their conviction that literary coalitions would shape their membership into educated individuals who would be considered exemplary, respected citizens. At the first meeting of the American Moral Reform Association in 1837, James Forten declared this to be the goal of African American literary societies:

As soon as we engage in any enterprise having for its foundation the mighty principles of mental illumination, we are at once noticed and respected. Thus we see that, whatever tends to disseminate the principles of education, tends to raise us above the tide of popular prejudice; and whatever tends to raise us above the chilling influence of prejudice, must of reason tend to elevate our condition. . . . Such, I conceive, our Literary Institutions to have the power of doing.⁶⁸

In preparation for the meeting, Forten had distributed a circular in June, 1837 that he hoped would give him an accurate count of the active black literary societies from Nashville, Tennessee to New Bedford, Massachusetts. Although only a small number of the existing societies replied, Forten indicated their significance beyond the reported numbers by focusing much of his address on the work of the colored population's "many Literary institutions." Calling the development of African American literary societies in the free North "an intellectual and moral reformation," Forten explained the importance of literary activities to the future of the race:

I know of but few better ways to effect this [reformation] than by reading, by examining, by close comparisons and thorough investigations, by exercising the great faculty of thinking; for, if a man can be brought to think, he soon discovers that his highest enjoyment consists in the improvement of the mind; it is this that will give him rich ideas, and teach him, also, that his limbs were never made to wear the chains of servitude; and he will see too that equal rights were intended for all."⁶⁹

As they built institutions from which to become increasingly vocal and active in the public sphere, free blacks increasingly expressed their belief that their reading and writing would lead to the formation of American roots. They could build no physical monuments or even transport African culture to their new shores as ways of taking possession of the United States. They looked instead to upholding the

⁶⁷ J.C.B., "Literary Societies," *Liberator*, 30 August 1834, 139.

⁶⁸ James Forten, Jr. *An Address Delivered before the American Moral Reform Society, August 17th, 1837* (rpt. in Porter,

Early Negro Writing), 238.

⁶⁹ James Forten, Jr. *An Address Delivered before the American Moral Reform Society, August 17th, 1837* (rpt. in Porter, *Early Negro Writing*), 238.

spirit of the nation's founding documents and to creating their own intellectual monuments and monuments of language. Participation in literary societies came to be seen a means of doing so and consequently of changing the status and condition of African Americans in the United States, the means of doing so came to be seen to be participation in literary societies. One proponent of African American involvement in literary coalitions went so far as to refer to the societies as "durable monuments" in a letter to *The Colored American*. He urged the more educated members of the black community to serve as the leaders of such societies, substantiating the vitality of their role in this way:

Mr. [Thomas] Jefferson, we know, complained that he had never heard of a colored man who expressed a thought above narration. On this and other facts of the kind he hazarded the conclusion that colored men are inferior to white. Others contend that colored men never improve their talents and privileges, and especially, that if they have any knowledge of superior education, they cannot teach others. Will not the educated and the privileged ones among us think of these charges, and leave their intellectual monuments?⁷⁰

Literary societies quickly became crucial to African Americans' assertions of their right to a place in the democracy. "We consider these institutions as of more importance than any others in the present age of societies and Associations," announced one assessment of African American literary societies in 1839. The editorial continued by underlining the importance of literary institutions to the development of confident individuals:

[Literary societies] have a tendency, when properly conducted to unite talent and abilities which would otherwise be lost and the commendable spirit of competition which generally exists, engenders and fosters a taste for literary pursuits. A person [may] possess the necessary qualifications to become a public speaker, or the talent, which, if encouraged, and properly applied would eventually make him a good writer, but for the [existence?] of an association with kindred spirits he is deprived of the opportunity of exercising his natural abilities, he requires a field for practice where he can measure his talents and acquirements with others, so that he may judge his own [tendency?] by the merit of those with whom he [is] in competition, and when he is aware wherein he lacks, he can by study and perseverance easily attain an eminence equal with those who were formally his superiors.⁷¹

Although it is impossible to recreate the discussion that took place in the earliest African American literary societies, the "intellectual monuments" erected by their membership can be seen in documents created by African Americans that were published as newspaper articles, pamphlets, petitions, and addresses. Literary interaction allowed African Americans to develop sophisticated uses of language that announce their knowledge about dominant discourse and social and political "rules" while simultaneously subverting, overcoming, and sidestepping them. Language was used to disguise from unknowing audiences "unacceptable" ideas and yet to convey to kindred spirits a commonality of intentions. Strategies of representation included the ability of black authors to "signify" or, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has suggested, to embody a "black double-voicedness" that seems to reiterate texts from Western literary tradition but does so with a "signal difference" that is located in the author's use of black cultural forms.⁷²

⁷⁰ *The Colored American*, 2 June 1838, 59.

⁷¹ *The Colored American*, 5 October 1839, no pagination.

⁷² Henry Louis Gates, Jr. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 51.

Without question, literary societies and their activities functioned as vehicles of self-empowerment for their African American members. In a nation increasingly divided over issues of race and gender, they provided forums where issues of importance to the black community might be discussed. These discussions had definite goals: "As [members] of a despised race [it becomes a duty] to cultivate the talents entrusted to our keeping, that by doing so, we may break down the strong barrier of prejudice."⁷³ One way literary societies contributed to this effort was by conferring to their membership the confidence to interact in the world of print that surrounded them. It was not simply "immensely important that the public should see what blacks can do," as abolitionist Theodore Weld argued in 1834: more to the point, it was immensely important that the public see black people engaged in the particular activities and discourse valorized by the white majority. Literary societies positioned them well to be "their own letters of introduction on the score of energy, decision, perseverance, and high attempt."⁷⁴

Although the societies alone could not break the barrier of prejudice, they were able, to some extent, to penetrate the national consciousness and to attract the attention of whites interested in black progress. In an 1833 edition of the *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, an anonymous resident of Philadelphia who had attended a meeting of an African American literary society had this to say: "Discussions were conducted with a degree of spirit and propriety and displayed a cogency and acuteness of reasoning, and an elevation and elegance of language for which he was little prepared." Speaking more generally, the editorial continued: "[The societies] are numerous, united and bitterly conscious of their degradation and their power. To this let the pride, the independence and ambition which [learning] ever imparts be added, and the consequences[,] though beyond the reach of conjecture, would doubtless be such as to involve the character, and condition of the whole country."⁷⁵ Surely African Americans *did* mean to change the character and condition of the country through their literary societies: their reading and writing was motivated by a desire to expand ideas of liberty and justice and to communicate an identity that was black, American, and above all, human. Literary societies provided the literal and psychological space where their membership might develop the ability and confidence to speak for themselves rather than be spoken for. In this, despite their obvious allegiance to the assumptions and dominant ideologies established by early nineteenth-century white culture, African American literary societies had the potential to serve the free black population as points of access to social and political arenas from they were otherwise excluded.

⁷³ "Female Literary Association," *Liberator*, 3 December 1831, 196.

⁷⁴ "Letter from Theodore D. Weld," *Liberator*, 12 April 1834, 57.

⁷⁵ "Editorial." *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, 3 (1833), 90.