

# Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Media Theorist



First published in Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's *Sketches of Southern Life* (1872), the poem "Learning to Read" is one of six to feature the voice of Mrs. Chloe Fleet, or "Aunt Chloe," a witty and deeply moral formerly enslaved woman in her sixties. On its surface, "Learning to Read" charts nineteenth-century African Americans' efforts to develop literacy under slavery, as well as their later experiences with formal education during Reconstruction. Yet while Aunt Chloe and the poem's other enslaved characters are learning to read *words*, Harper makes clear that they are already experts in another mode of reading—one attuned to the material details of texts and the cultural meanings such details encode. In "Learning to Read," Aunt Chloe does not just describe lessons in reading; she teaches them, too.

To read like Aunt Chloe is to engage with what bibliographers and media scholars call "format," or the ways texts look, feel, and propose to operate as material objects. Formats not only influence the shape and size of printed works, but can also accrue cultural significance and affect how readers interpret the texts they encounter. Different formats issue different

instructions for use: a pocket-sized paperback and a table-sized, leather-bound book do not anticipate the same reading environments, object lifespans, audiences, or even genres. However, formats can also be misleading. In “Learning to Read,” Harper prompts critical attention to textual materiality by depicting enslaved characters who advance their own literacy by exploiting white cultural expectations about the proper look of reading material. (Figure 1)



Figure 1: Portrait of Frances Harper with books. Gibson, J. W. (John William) (b. 1841), Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Aunt Chloe begins her account by explaining that learning to read under slavery demands a general craftiness of approach. Her description of literacy as something “some of us would try to steal” echoes narratives by formerly enslaved authors such as Frederick Douglass and William Wells Brown, who trope the acquisition of literacy as a trickster’s game. In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass recalls “using my young white playmates . . . as teachers” by bribing them with bread in exchange for lessons from “a copy of Webster’s spelling book in my pocket.” Brown, whose ingredients for reading include a “spelling-book” and a “stick of barley sugar,” also describes using bribery to learn his ABCs, and learns to write by challenging schoolboys to writing contests on outdoor fences. Such accounts emphasize that learning to read as an enslaved (or in Brown’s case, recently enslaved) person requires imagination and constant reinvention—of fence into slate, of play into study.

For Douglass and Brown, learning to read requires the possession of books. Yet as Aunt Chloe makes clear, the “book” is an object class that enslavers are eager to prevent enslaved people from encountering. She comments that “Our masters always tried to hide / Book learning from our eyes,” using a phrase—“Book learning”—that evokes dialect speech but also highlights the particular technology of the book, which she frames as property her white enslavers claim for themselves. Unlike Douglass and Brown, Aunt Chloe and her

fellow enslaved people must attempt to gain literacy without bound books. Instead, they “try to steal / A little from the book,” as if books were the enslaver’s stores and learning to read a fugitive act of gleaning.

The book as object is often associated with the performance of mastery. Beth McCoy and Jasmine Montgomery have gone so far as to argue that the “Western book,” with its hierarchical, ordering material logic, is “antiblack.” In “Learning to Read,” Harper suggests that the master views the bound book as one of his tools. Yet she also demonstrates how this assumption works to enslaved people’s advantage. The character “Uncle Caldwell,” for example, secures reading material by physically deconstructing his book:

I remember Uncle Caldwell,  
Who took pot liquor fat  
And greased the pages of his book,  
And hid it in his hat.  
  
And had his master ever seen  
The leaves upon his head,  
He’d have thought them greasy papers,  
But nothing to be read.

In an 1867 issue of the *American Missionary* magazine, a Methodist preacher identified only as “Uncle Charles” recalls learning to read while enslaved using a “primer” that he “used to carry . . . in my hat.” Whether Harper knew of this account or others like it, her take on this scene emphasizes the lengths to which Uncle Caldwell goes to conceal his reading. By transforming a bound book into a collection of “greasy papers,” Uncle Caldwell deploys expectations about format to invite white misreading of his actions. Nineteenth-century audiences frequently used printed pages for purposes other than reading, including for insulating clothing. The greased, unbound papers that Uncle Caldwell carries thus ask to be viewed as disposable waste rather than components of a book. For Uncle Caldwell himself, however, the pages are texts rich with meaning; the “leaves upon his head” evoke not trash worn by a person whom white society deems disposable, but the laurel crown of a scholar. (Figure 2)



Figure 2: Man with top hat sitting next to boys holding and reading books. The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Photography Collection, The New York Public Library. [New York Public Library Digital Collections](#).

Harper's decentering of the bound book throughout "Learning to Read" emphasizes that the reading experience need not always turn on mastery and cohesiveness, nor must it always look the same for each person. Aunt Chloe notes that the enslaved people who "steal / A little from the book" must "put the words together / And learn by hook or crook." This image of "put[ting] the words together" depicts reading as a creative act of both dismantling and reauthoring. It also recalls a creative teaching strategy that the Mohegan minister Samson Occom describes using to instruct Indian children in his "A Short Narrative of My Life" (1768). To better serve children whose "Eyes can't distinguish" printed letters, Occom writes out "an Alphabet on Small bits of paper, and glue[s] them on Small Chips of Cedar," which he places on a classroom bench for students to pick up, move, and organize into words. In Occom's classroom, breaking away from book does not impede learning but rather enables him to meet his students' needs.

The experience of "Mr. Turner's Ben," another character in Harper's poem who learns to read without a book, likewise demonstrates that cultivating the skills required for literacy need not even involve text on a page. Aunt Chloe states that Ben "heard the children spell, / And picked the words right up by heart, / And learned to read 'em well." Without access to a book, Ben must hone his ability to listen carefully and memorize what he is hearing. His learning process challenges the perceived dominance of written language over oral literacy. For Ben it is not interacting with a spelling book but learning "by heart," or internalizing knowledge, that eventually enables him to read words "well." (Figure 3)



Figure 3: Sketch of a classroom lesson in a New York State “Colored School,” 1870. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Photographs and Prints Division, New York Public Library. [New York Public Library Digital Collections](#).

Harper herself was attuned to the close relationship between spoken and written words, and she employed both modes of communication as an author seeking to broaden her reach. Scholars including Frances Smith Foster have demonstrated that nineteenth-century African American print culture invited participation from nonreading listeners as well as people who could read and write. Harper and other nineteenth-century Black authors built community by giving public recitations of their texts—recitations that invited comment from nonreaders—in addition to circulating printed copies. One has only to read aloud a poem such as “Learning to Read,” with its lilting rhyme and cadence, to understand that Harper designed her works to be heard as well as read.

Harper’s attention to spoken language does not mean that she ignored the significance of setting her words in print. She published in a wide range of print formats, including newspapers, pamphlets, and books. Meredith McGill has shown that Harper also frequently republished her works in different formats and leveraged cultural assumptions about format to alter the perceived meaning as well as genre of her writing. (For example, as McGill demonstrates, when Harper’s poetry appears in pamphlet rather than book form, it asks to be read not as lyric but as collective exhortation.)

Such attention to the materiality of print on Harper’s part—and the importance of newspapers and pamphlets to her career more generally—is good reason to think beyond “the book.” Yet is also true that unbound, non-book artifacts were vulnerable to destruction and wear. As an author writes in *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, “newspapers . . . [are] ephemeral caskets, whose destruction entail the destruction of the gems which they contain.” By contrast, as scholars including P. Gabrielle Foreman have argued, texts published in “book form” evoked cultural associations with permanence and enduring value. (Figure 4)



Figure 4: Man and girl in school at Harper's Ferry. The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Photography Collection, The New York Public Library. [New York Public Library Digital Collections](#).

Perhaps it is due to Harper's understanding of unbound print's heightened ephemerality that she does not fully reject the book as object in "Learning to Read." A bound volume finally appears near the end of the poem in the form of Aunt's Chloe's Bible—a quintessential work of enduring value. Ignoring those who say she is too old to start reading, Aunt Chloe sets out to learn "to read my Bible" in her purposeful manner:

I got a pair of glasses,  
And straight to work I went,  
And never stopped till I could read  
The hymns and Testament.

Then I got a little cabin  
A place to call my own—  
And I felt independent  
As the queen upon her throne.

In these stanzas, book possession and the act of reading become signs of Aunt Chloe's freedom and self-ownership. Although this last scene is set after the Civil War, it is Aunt Chloe who teaches herself to read, not the "Yankee teachers" whose arrival to "set up school" she mentions earlier in the poem. Her refusal to wait for white approval to begin reading gestures to the wartime

and post-war labor of Black educational activists, who set up schools and managed robust educational networks in the U.S. South prior to the arrival of white missionaries. Countering white northern narratives in which formerly enslaved African Americans must be lifted from ignorance, Aunt Chloe shows that with the right resources she is perfectly capable of determining her own path. (Figure 5)

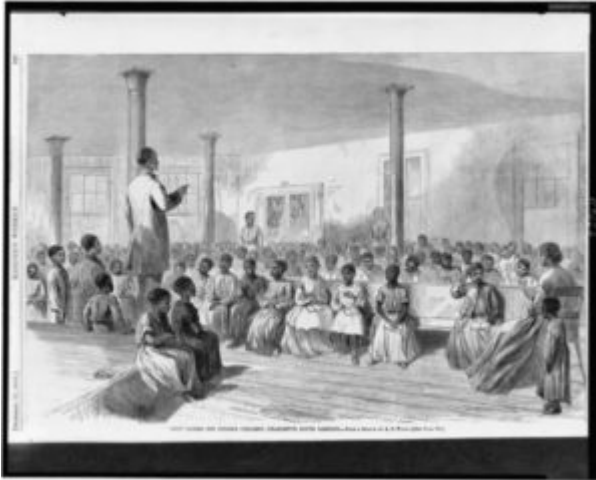


Figure 5: Zion school. Alfred R. Waud, Artist, “Zion” School for Colored Children, Charleston, South Carolina / From a Sketch by A. R. Waud. South Carolina Charleston, 1866 Photograph. [Library of Congress](#).

As Harper would write in a letter published by William Still in his revised *Underground Rail Road Records* (1883), “a room to myself is a luxury that I do not always enjoy.” Armed with her book, glasses, and a room of her “own,” Aunt Chloe models a world in which material security does not hamper Black women’s intellectual pursuits. In the poem’s final image, she reads her Bible in her “little cabin,” enjoying the stability and privacy previously denied Uncle Caldwell in his own quest to read. If Uncle Caldwell’s hat-concealed pages register the scarcity and trickster strategies that characterize reading under slavery, Aunt Chloe’s bound Bible projects a desired reading future in which she no longer must hide but can lay claim to her place at the table.

### **Further Reading:**

For a comprehensive introduction to Harper and her writings, see Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, *A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader*, ed. Frances Smith Foster (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1990). Other primary sources referenced in this article include Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), republished in Henry Louis Gates Jr., ed., *Douglass Autobiographies* (New York: Library of America, 1994), passage quoted on p. 224; William Wells Brown, “Narrative of the Life and Escape of William Wells Brown” (1853), republished in M. Guilia Fabi, ed., *Clotel; or, The President’s Daughter* (New York: Penguin, 2004), passage quoted on p. 22; Samson Occom, “A Short Narrative of My Life” (1768), republished in Carla Mulford, ed., *Early American Writings* (New York: Oxford University Press,

2002), passage quoted on p. 870; "North Carolina," *The American Missionary* 11 (Sept. 1867): 194-95; William Still, *Still's Underground Rail Road Records* (Philadelphia: William Still, 1883), passage quoted on p. 777. Digitized copies of *Frederick Douglass' Paper* can be accessed via the [Library of Congress](#).

On Frances Harper's relationship with varied print formats, see Meredith McGill, "Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and the Circuits of Abolitionist Poetry," in *Early African American Print Culture*, ed. Lara Langer Cohen and Jordan Alexander Stein (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press in Cooperation with the Library Company of Philadelphia, 2012), 53-74 (see especially 62). For other critical treatments of "Learning to Read," see Melba Joyce Boyd, *Discarded Legacy: Politics and Poetics in the Life of Frances E.W. Harper, 1825-1911* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), 163-64.

On the book as "antiblack object," see Beth A. McCoy and Jasmine Y. Montgomery, "Dionne Brand's *A Map to the Door of No Return* and the Antiblackness of the Book as an Object," in *Against a Sharp White Background: Infrastructures of African American Print*, ed. Brigitte Fielder and Jonathan Senchyne (University of Wisconsin Press, 2019), 131-46. On the relationship between African American literature and unbound print, see P. Gabrielle Foreman, "The *Christian Recorder*, Broken Families, and Educated Nations in Julia C. Collins's Civil War Novel *The Curse of Caste*," *African American Review* 40 (Winter 2006): 705-16; Eric Gardner, *Black Print Unbound: The Christian Recorder, African American Literature, and Periodical Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); and Michaël Roy, "The Slave Narrative Unbound," in *Against a Sharp White Background*, 259-76.

On the ways nineteenth-century Black activists fostered their own schooling networks and advanced education during and after the Civil War, see Hilary Green, *Educational Reconstruction: African American Schools in the Urban South, 1865-1890* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016); and Kabria Baumgartner, *In Pursuit of Knowledge: Black Women and Educational Activism in Antebellum America* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), whose concept of "purposeful womanhood" offers a generative frame for interpreting Aunt Chloe's knowledge seeking activities. On alternative ways of knowing and modes of literacy acquisition practiced by enslaved people, including eavesdropping and "stealing" an education, see Heather Andrea Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

Other important critical work on nineteenth-century African American print culture that has informed my thinking here includes Frances Smith Foster, "A Narrative of the Interesting Origins and (Somewhat) Surprising Developments of African-American Print Culture," *American Literary History* 17 (Winter 2005): 714-40; Carla L. Peterson, *Doers of the Word: African-American Women Speakers and Writers in the North (1830-1880)* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998); Elizabeth McHenry, *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002); and



Derrick Spires, *The Practice of Citizenship: Black Politics and Print Culture in the Early United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019).

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