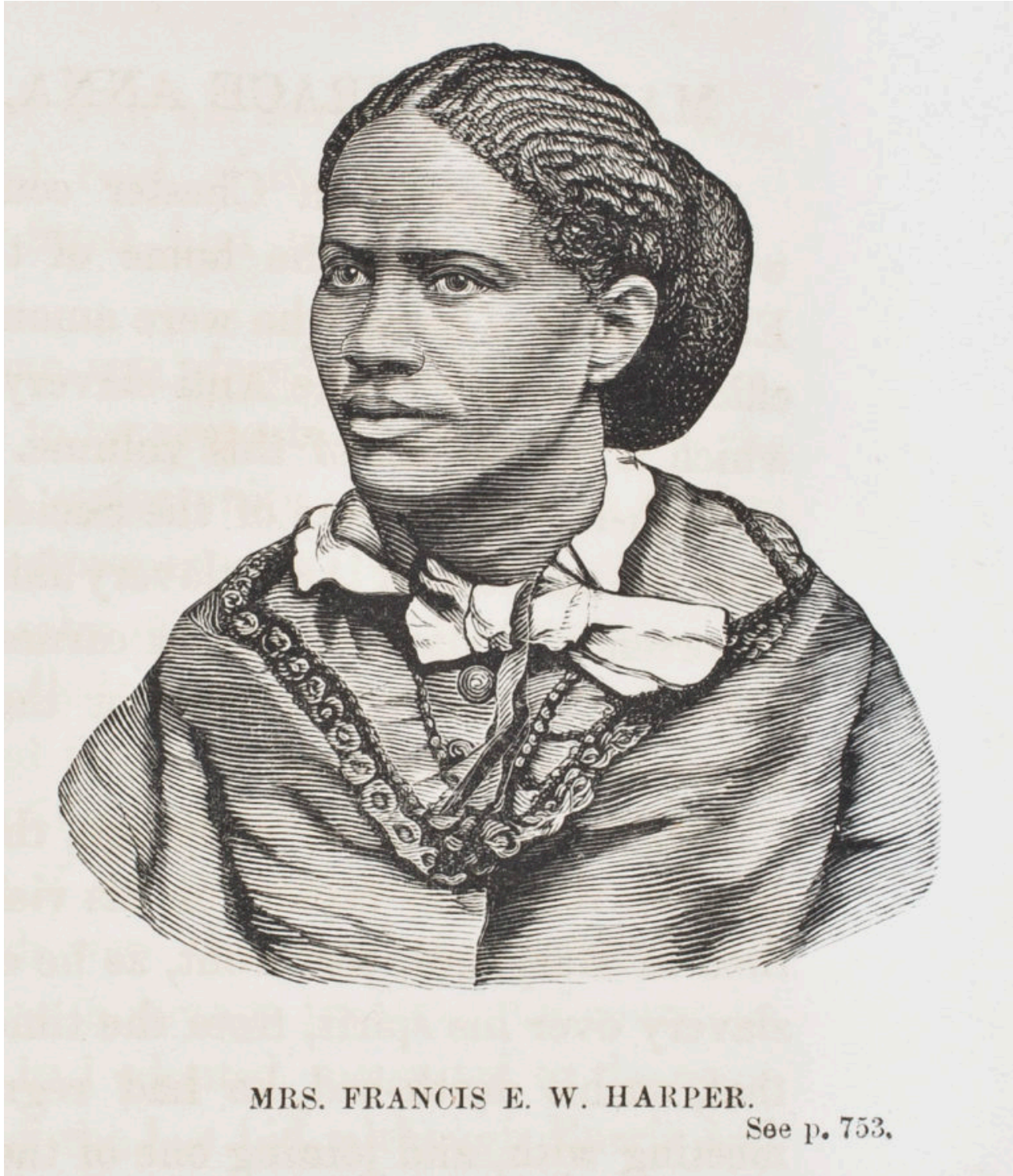


Leaves, Trees, and Forests: Frances
Ellen Watkins's Forest Leaves and
Recovery



After perhaps my tenth reading of the e-mails about the rediscovery of Frances Ellen Watkins's *Forest Leaves* from Britt Rusert, Anna Mae Duane, and then Johanna Ortner, I find myself actually and pretty much unconsciously pricing airfares. I want to hold *Forest Leaves* in my hands. That, my lizard brain is telling me, will make it real.



Portrait, "Mrs. Frances E.W. Harper," engraving from *The Underground Railroad: A Record of Facts, Authentic Narratives, Letters, &c., Narrating the Hardships, Hair-Breadth Escapes and Death Struggles of the Slaves in their Efforts for Freedom, as Related by Themselves and Others, or Witnessed by the Author*, by William Still (Philadelphia, 1872). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

I don't simply mean "real" in the sense of the authentication dance some folks deeply involved in African American literary history know well. I've done that necessary and always uneasy detective-style archaeology to be able to say that, yes, authoritatively, we can say that this person actually wrote these words; I know that, even when done with care and respect, this dance sometimes veers close to abolitionists clumsily prefacing texts written by formerly enslaved men and women.

I mean "real" in that holding this document in my hands will remind me that by luck or by chance or by faith someone (someones!) saved this collection of a young Black woman's poetry. "Real" in that it will also force me to think again about how so many others (but, I wonder, just *how* many?) never knew about it, forgot about it, dismissed it, or willfully erased it from the record. "Real" in that it will make me ask again about how both social structures and individual privileges and choices shaped the circumstances of its near-loss.

And "real" in that dizzying, ghostly sense I've felt sometimes over the years, a sense of glimpsing what's beyond our current knowing. (The moment that leaps

to mind: closing my eyes and bowing my head after staring openmouthed at a “lost” chapter from Harper’s *Sowing and Reaping* in the American Antiquarian Society’s reading room.) “Real” in its powerful reminder that we must continually explore how much we do *not* know and *why* we do not know it.

That sense of reality is, of course, especially necessary here. *Forest Leaves* was so far from view that many scholars wondered aloud if it was apocryphal.

Some of the ways its rediscovery will change our conversations are obvious. Its individual leaves offer not only “new” locations of known poems but sometimes whole “new” poems. Among the former, the inclusion of “Ruth and Naomi” (a decade earlier than most critics’ placement) reshapes our sense of Harper’s approaches to the intersections of faith and gender. Among the latter, I’m especially excited about the range of Harper’s early poetry—from the romantic “Let Me Love Thee” to diverse faith-centered poems.

In addition to demanding close and careful reading, these new poems also push us to think more about the stories and experiences that shaped them. I find myself, for example, wondering about the mother imagined in “Yearnings for Home,” especially given the very little we know of Harper’s mother. (We’ve only recently learned—from a Dec. 15, 1871, Freedmen’s Bank record—that her first name was Sidney. Her maiden name, her husband’s first name, and the circumstances of their deaths when Frances Watkins was very young all remain unknown.)

The short “An Acrostic,” which veers toward sickbed/deathbed poetry, draws me especially because it shares a powerful faith and love that combine to offer hope to the “sister” whose name is spelled out in the first letters of the poem’s lines, Adel Martin. How, I’m wondering, did this poetic figure, literally sitting so close to the margins of nineteenth-century American poetry, connect to the Adel Martin listed in the 1850 Census of Baltimore’s Fourteenth Ward, whom the white census-taker quickly ticked off as 20 years old, an “F” (“female”) and an “M” (“mulatto”)? Listed as a “teacher”—like Harper’s uncle William Watkins and his four grown sons only a few blocks away in the Sixteenth Ward—this Adel Martin lived with her father Henry (a porter), mother Mary, and younger brother Alexander (also a porter).

I’m thinking not only about the poems, but their people, their places, their connections.

More broadly, the rediscovery of *Forest Leaves* extends our sense of Harper’s poetry back almost a decade, making her even more fully a chronological coadjutor of Frederick Douglass and Walt Whitman but also of figures like Ann Plato. It means that we need to rethink our common placement of the genesis of Harper’s earliest work in 1850s abolitionist circuits, and that, as Ortner suggests, we need to look much harder at free Black schools like that of Harper’s uncle, at Black churches and community groups, and at locations like antebellum Baltimore. It raises again fascinating questions, both aesthetic and

material, about how (and how effectively) a free Black woman in that spatial and temporal location was able to enter print, to engage with American poetry, to be heard—and, of course, it demands that we think about who heard her and who didn't and how and why.

I'm thus hoping that *Forest Leaves* finds its way into not only upper-division courses on African American literature, but American literature surveys and a host of settings beyond the academy. As much as we place *Forest Leaves* in rich dialogue with African American culture, we also need to think much more about the almost-conversations between Harper's poetry and that by authors like Whitman, Dickinson, Sigourney, and Whittier and to more deeply study the factors in and after the nineteenth century that have stopped or lessened exploration of those intersections.

In this same vein, the listing of "James Young, Printer" begs us to ask whether Harper's first extended poetic effort, in some ways like Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* more than a decade later, was a (partially) self-funded or patronage-funded entry into print. In this, we'll want to think much about how different that entry was in both production circumstances and intended/potential audience from her abolitionist-stamped, Garrison-prefaced, Boston-published 1854 *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects*, which garnered notice from both *Frederick Douglass' Paper* and the *Provincial Freeman* and included poems that also appeared in *The Liberator*.

But Harper's title begs us to remember forests, too, beyond these (wondrous) leaves and trees. The collection's very existence is another weight added to what's become an argument by accretion from scholars of early Black print: that some African Americans engaged in deep and only barely understood ways with print culture. It means, for example, that we must gently remind colleagues that we won't know "what was African American literature" until we do much, much more looking. What other works by Harper have we not yet recovered? And what about texts by the growing chorus surrounding her?

This rediscovery is also a fresh reminder of the wide applicability of Frances Smith Foster's words (on the recovery of women's literature):

[F]irst I had to learn what women had actually written, what these women had written about and why, and what were the best methods by which we could best evaluate their writing. That in and of itself was a lifetime project, but added to that was the problem of how to make available to others the writing that I found inspirational, instructive, and absolutely necessary to understanding literature, history, and myself.

Paired with Foster's last sentence here, the choice to republish *Forest Leaves* in a free, online scholarly venue calls on us to talk much more honestly and directly about the politics of access. Some of Harper's other work remains behind paywalls, available only to tiny segments of the academy, almost completely left out of "big data" projects, and perhaps still unknown. More

texts may exist in a range of repositories, and some may be found through expanding, correcting, and sharing cataloging information and metadata as well as rededicating resources to preservation efforts, especially at HBCUs, churches, and local organizations. My first e-mail to Johanna Ortner said, in part, "Your account reminds me of how often I have to tell myself not to accept the phrase 'not extant' and how often we must check and recheck possible locations for thought-to-be lost texts." While I find great joy in the fact that she practiced this kind of hard re-looking, I continue to mourn the fact that we have created and perpetuated academic and information systems that demand such efforts.

Finally, this specific recovery offers an occasion to talk more about "recovery" writ large. I tend to emphasize a sense of "recovery" that is tied to the reclaiming of African American literature and history that has been lost or stolen, carelessly or willfully removed from our cultural record, but this discovery reminds me that recovery can also signify the (re)finding of material in plain sight, material not previously given the kind of "hard re-looking" discussed above.

I've heard rumblings from folks who worry that the phrase "the recovery of Black literature" suggests that the object was/is passive and has a sickness, a disease from which it might "recover." This usage starts with the deeply true kernel of pain but then, I think, characterizes it incorrectly. Acknowledging the myriad ways white America has hurt and continues to hurt Black folks, including Black folks involved with print, is an essential first and ongoing step in African Americanist inquiry; recognizing that, as one of many modes of life-sustaining resistance, some African Americans created and shared works of great beauty and even joy *in spite of* and *in the midst of* that ongoing hurt should spark not only hope but concrete work for change. Calling the hurt a sickness or a disease conveniently removes fault and silently obliterates possibilities for truth, repentance, and reconciliation. There were and are agents who have wounded and continue to wound African Americans and African American culture, sometimes with deadly force. If there is recovery here, it is from inflicted damage.

We must remember, too, that such inflicted damage, like all violence, irrevocably hurts all involved. In this sense, *American* literature, culture, and ideals stand wounded because America has regularly asserted that some lives and literatures—especially Black lives and literatures—matter less than others.

This, it seems to me, is at the root of not only the loss and theft of Black cultural pasts but also the failures of scholars to actively look (again) and think through what we still have. And it is, of course, a central reason why a host of policies and practices allow assaults on African American life and culture without thought or care. In the broadest possible way, as John Ernest told me once, "I suppose . . . recovery means recovery of our basic mission as scholars, which means that we look for answers . . . and we do not take things at face value. . . . Recovery can also refer to a process by which we piece

together the historical or interpretive frameworks we need for understanding. . . .”

This is what we do, what we must do—because, in short, there’s so much that needs “recovery” and needs it desperately.

Further Reading

Frances Smith Foster’s quoted language is from “The Personal is Political, the Past Has Potential, and Other Thoughts on Studying Women’s Literature—Then and Now,” *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* 26:1 (Spring 2007): 29-38. Among several works by Foster that have shaped my thinking, see also “How Do You Solve a Problem Like Theresa?” *African American Review* 40:4 (2006): 631-645, and “A Narrative of the Interesting Origins and (Somewhat) Surprising Developments of African-American Print Culture,” *American Literary History* 17:4 (2005): 714-740. Crucial questions are also asked by Carla Peterson, “Capitalism, Black (Under)Development, and the Production of the African-American Novel in the 1850s,” *American Literary History* 4:4 (Winter 1992): 559-583; John Ernest, *Chaotic Justice: Rethinking African American Literary History* (Chapel Hill, 2009); Lois Brown, “Death-Defying Testimony: Women’s Private Lives and the Politics of Public Documents,” *Legacy* 27:1 (2010): 130-139; and the cluster of essays including and surrounding P. Gabrielle Foreman’s “A Riff, A Call, and A Response” in *Legacy* 30:2 (2013): 306-322 and *Legacy* 31:1 (2014): 58-77.

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