Hope, Sound, and the Materiality of Print in Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's Periodical Poems

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In 1861, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper wrote to Thomas Hamilton, former editor of the *Anglo-African Magazine*, about the need for a Black literature that would address the full range of lived experience: “If our talents are to be recognized we must write less of issues that are particular and more of feelings that are general. We are blessed with hearts and brains that compass more than ourselves in our present plight.”¹ She urges Black authors to claim situated expertise over ways of being in the world, drawing on the affective and cognitive knowledge—“hearts and brains”—developed in but uncontained by liberation struggle. Hamilton would have shared this sentiment, having published Black poetry, fiction, and nonfiction on topics ranging from astronomy to speculative visual arts to women’s unhappiness in marriage.² After the *Anglo-African Magazine* folded in 1860, its newspaper counterpart, the *Weekly Anglo-African*, continued this literary agenda, exemplifying the eclecticism of the Black periodical press, whose mission always exceeded resistance to oppression.³ Watkins Harper, who published in both venues, insists that this expansive Black letters be oriented toward the future and founded upon hope: “We must look to the future which,
God willing, will be better than the present or the past, and delve into the heart of the world.”

Watkins Harper’s exhortations to African American authors theorize her own stance as a writer who pays close attention to the situated workings of affect, centering hope as a feeling and a future-oriented practice. That she formulates this concise manifesto in a letter to a magazine editor reflects the key role of early African American periodicals as vehicles of the Black literary tradition and her own career. Before the Civil War, most of her periodical contributions were poems. She published them in Black venues, including *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, the *Aliened American*, the *Provincial Freeman*, the *Christian Recorder*, and the monthly and weekly versions of the *Anglo-African*, as well as white abolitionist organs like the *Liberator*, the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, and the *Anti-Slavery Bugle*. Meredith McGill and Tabitha Lowery have importantly begun to analyze Watkins Harper’s pre- and post-Civil War poems in the context of the printed page of the periodical. Joining this scholarship, my essay examines some of Watkins Harper’s antebellum and post-Emancipation poems about “feelings that are general”—hope and disappointment, joy and sorrow, faith and longing—as aesthetic artifacts in a dynamic relationship with their print context. Reading her formal artistry with an attention usually reserved for highbrow Anglo American poetry, I argue that Watkins Harper mobilizes sound and the materiality of print to develop what I term an *affective grammar of hope*, which emerges from the interactions among verbal meaning, poetic form, and the printed page. While form performatively enacts the poems’ message of hope, the newspaper context activates their political meanings by restoring historical specificity to the poems’ larger existential or spiritual questions.

The term affective grammar of hope has a dual genealogy. According to cultural theorist Sianne Ngai, an affective
grammar describes how a feeling’s emotional and cognitive components structure its relationship to an object. In turn, for Black feminist scholars Hortense Spillers, Tina Campt, and Alexander Weheliye, a grammar is a set of rules that underlie the racialized subject’s mode of being in the world and account for liberatory possibilities amid oppression. Informed by these two concepts, an affective grammar of hope is situated and historically specific; it describes the structure of hope as experienced by an embodied, racialized nineteenth-century subject. My understanding of hope as both an emotion and a cognitive act draws on German Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch’s analysis of its affective dynamics in time. Bloch, who considered hope the foundation for social change, has been embraced by Black performance studies and queer of color critique scholars for his theory of utopia in relation to “historically situated struggles.” Like utopia, hope is historically situated, its object and methodology shaped by the unfulfilled needs of a specific individual or collective at a given moment in time. Watkins Harper’s affective grammar of hope is rooted in Black Americans’ lived experience of dispossession but oriented toward a future without inequality, violence, or fear; it combines memory of suffering with protest against injustice and anticipation of imminent change, providing a methodology for active work in the present. In the context of the printed page, her poems’ emphasis on hope foregrounds the Black newspaper’s orientation toward what Robin D. G. Kelley calls “the world not yet born.” Hope provides an affective suture between the poem’s individual reader, the collective envisioned in the poem, and the collective mobilized by the newspaper.

At the level of poetic form, this affective suture is enacted by sound: rhythm, rhyme, and other forms of sonic patterning. Scholars have discussed Watkins Harper’s antebellum poems in terms of her manipulation of the ballad and critical treatment of race and corporeality. Carla
Peterson argues that Watkins Harper uses “narrativization [and the] formal limitations of the ballad stanza” to control passion, while Carolyn Sorisio points out that she “deflect[s] the public’s gaze” from the suffering African American body. However, Watkins Harper’s aural aesthetics have received little attention, likely because her commonplace meters and conventional rhymes are rarely seen as artful.

But aurality in its various dimensions—from music to soundscape to poetic sound—is crucial to Watkins Harper’s poetic practice. Her engagement with music, as Ivy Wilson has shown, is typical of nineteenth-century African American poetry. Similarly, other Black authors share her attunement to soundscapes. As Fred Moten and Jennifer Stoever argue, Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs develop aural epistemologies of enslavement that contest its visual regimes. Watkins Harper’s sonic imagination encompasses enslavement but extends to the soundscapes of Black life in nominal freedom, and her aural sensibility includes a deep interest in the sonic texture of poetry as an instrument of exhortation, inspiration, and healing. Asserting the power of sound to influence emotions and actions, she harnesses rhythm, rhyme, and sonic imagery—that is, literary representations of sound—for the political work of hope. Focusing on aurality, then, allows us to see how Harper mobilizes sound to cultivate hope and advance Black activist agendas.

Yet, to cultivate hope is also to contend with disappointment, another “structuring affect” in the nineteenth-century archive of Black freedom. To invoke early African American writers’ favored metaphors of light and darkness, hope carries disappointment as its shadow, a murky tract of frustrated expectations, unfulfilled desires, unrealized goals, failed endeavors. For free Black northerners, maintaining hope despite multiple disappointments required faith in the creative potential of collective struggle and a steadfast attachment to what Kelley...
terms “freedom dreams.” Kelley’s description of progressive social movements’ “effort to see the future in the present” as “poetry” or ‘poetic knowledge’” and his insistence on the crucial role of the imagination in Black liberation struggles encourage us to see Watkins Harper’s cultivation of hope as a poiesis, a practice of visionary world-making. On the other hand, the affective complexity of hope complicates how we might understand expressions of Black resistance and suffering in this period. Reading Watkins Harper’s poems through the lens of hope, with dual attention to their formal qualities and print context, discloses a complex affective dynamic of protest and affirmation, rejection of injustice and anticipation of “genuine freedom.”

To illuminate the situatedness of Watkins Harper’s hope, I first turn to the extensive discourse on hope in antebellum African American print culture, which shows that early Black intellectuals understood hope as an eschatological orientation toward salvation and a material orientation toward a better world, theorizing it in relation to Black “freedom-making.” Building from this context, I discuss Watkins Harper’s theory of hope and the affective power of sound developed in her poetry and short prose. The close readings that follow analyze how aurality and print context inform hope’s affective grammar in Watkins Harper’s two antebellum newspaper poems: “Eliza Harris” (1853) and “The Burial of Moses” (1856), one of which centers material, the other, eschatological hope. While these poems’ texts exemplify Watkins Harper’s intricate use of aurality to represent, enact, and generate hope, the print context of the newspaper shapes and expands the poems’ meanings. I end with a discussion of rhyme and repetition in Watkins Harper’s newspaper poem on Emancipation, “The New Liberty Bell” (1863), and its Reconstruction-era revision for book publication, considering what happens to hope when its fulfillment proves illusory.
Mapping Hope’s Affective Grammar in Early Black Print

Watkins Harper’s conception of hope is part of an extensive discourse on this affect among early Black intellectuals. My summary of this discourse, below, does not aim to be exhaustive; rather, it illustrates the prominence of hope in antebellum Black thought and its multiple meanings grounded in situated lived experience, from eschatology and quiescence to survival and defiance to revolution, moral reform, and political solidarity. Bloch’s analysis of hope’s affective structure and relationship to time helps illuminate these earlier formulations. Bloch describes hope as an “expectant emotion,” in contrast to “filled emotions” such as envy and admiration. While filled emotions assume a world that does not change, expectant emotions posit a world that develops in time and thus envision a “real future,” radically different from the present. Hope’s discontent with the oppressive present fuels its emancipatory potential. Encompassing discontent, hope disrupts the binaries of pleasure-displeasure and inclination-rejection: euphoric with an undercurrent of dysphoria, it moves simultaneously toward a better world and away from a world of deprivation. This orientation toward a better world links hope’s visions of the future with their realization in the future, thus aligning hope with temporality. Nonetheless, for Bloch, hope is not guided by the temporal question, “When will this happen?” but rather by the ontological and epistemological questions, “What future do we desire?” and “How do we get there?” which require “a directing act of a cognitive kind” to envision the future and the paths to its realization. This cognitive aspect of hope provides a methodology for the work of liberation.

Early Black intellectuals understood hope in two interrelated, often overlapping ways, both reflected in
Watkins Harper’s poetry as well: as an eschatological orientation toward salvation and a material orientation toward a better world. Like Bloch, they recognized both the emotional and the cognitive aspects of hope, its pleasurable feeling and its expectation of a better world. Eschatological hope, rooted in certainty of Christ’s resurrection, was crucial to early African American religious discourse and animated Black women preachers’ itinerant ministries. Jarena Lee, the first woman preacher in the A.M.E. Church, argued for women’s right to assume this role by invoking Mary’s original message of hope: “Did not Mary first preach the risen Saviour . . . hangs not all our hope on this, as argued by St. Paul?” While Lee refers to hope as a cognitive expectation of eternal life, Zilpha Elaw describes her feelings of hope as a measure of her ministry’s success: “My own soul was filled with heavenly hope, which maketh not ashamed,” she wrote of preaching on Cape Cod. “My hope bloomed with the glories of immortality and eternal life: it was the anchor of my soul, sure and steadfast.” For Elaw, hope was a mystical experience akin to ecstasy, a freedom-making practice in a world structured by racial violence. Hope’s stakes were highest at the moment of death, when it became an affective signifier of salvation. Lee describes her spiritual struggle to instill hope in a young man on his deathbed: confronting “a horror in the room, a darkness of a mental kind,” she prayed fervently until the man’s face assumed “an expression of joy . . . full of hope and immortality.”

As free Black northerners navigated a hostile world, their experiences of eschatological hope were not always jubilant or linked to spiritual triumph. Writing in the 1830s amid the rise of antiblack mob violence in northern cities, founder of the A.M.E. Church Richard Allen stressed that hope grants strength to endure suffering: “O, my God! in all my dangers temporal and spiritual I will hope in thee who art Almighty power, and therefore able to relieve me . . . I am sure that my tears shall one day be turned into
joy.” This hope, dulled by emotional pain, is not joyful but consoles the subject with its expectation of eventual deliverance, whether in this life or after death. As one of the main Christian virtues, eschatological hope was also an object of rigorous exegesis. Anticipating Bloch, Afro-Protestant theologian G. G. Samson argued in the Christian Recorder on the eve of the Civil War that in its attachment to the future, hope engages both cognitive and emotional faculties: “hope rests on what is yet probable in the future ... Hope implies expectation; and in this respect is an exercise of the intellect. . . . Again, hope implies desire; it is [also] an exercise of the emotions.”

While eschatological hope formed the foundation of individual piety, material hope for freedom, often subtended by faith in God’s omnipotence, inspired African Americans to envision a better future, motivating individual and collective action to effect change. In narratives of self-emancipation, hope empowers enslaved people to plan and make their escape. Harriet Jacobs credits her resilience to being “naturally hopeful,” a disposition she learned from her beloved grandmother. Douglass asserts that hope saved him from death: “I often found myself regretting my own existence . . . and but for the hope of being free, I have no doubt but that I should have killed myself, or done something for which I should have been killed.”

However, no matter how tenuous, hope orients the individual toward liberation: “I . . . set forth in sorrowful earnest,” Pennington recalls. “Only now and then I was cheered by the wild hope, that I should somewhere and
at some time be free.” Pennington’s “wild hope” is simultaneously an emotion—an intense burst of expectant desire that momentarily alleviates his sorrow—and a cognitive act of envisioning the future that enables him to persevere. Early Black intellectuals affirmed that hope gives meaning to life because it directs individuals and collectives toward a future they can shape. Their attacks on enslavement often stressed that it destroys hope. Protesting the capture of Henry Long under the Fugitive Slave Act, Douglass wrote: “But a few days ago, he walked abroad in the streets of New York in the full enjoyment of freedom, his mind occupied with thoughts, hopes and aspirations becoming the mind of a virtuous freeman. But, in a moment . . . his hopes and aspirations, plans and purposes, have been cut off and destroyed.” In this formulation, hope distinguishes freedom from enslavement.

Black radical activists often linked material with eschatological hope, arguing that the divine promise of liberation would be fulfilled through revolutionary action. In his attack on the white-led colonization scheme that would remove Black Americans to Africa, David Walker augured God’s direct intervention on their behalf: “I hope the residue of the coloured people, will stand still and see the salvation of God and the miracle which he will work for our delivery from wretchedness under the Christians!!!!!!!” Henry Highland Garnet used the religious language of redemption to declare that in conditions of severe oppression, hope’s methodology must include violence: “there is not much hope of Redemption without the shedding of blood.”

Others believed hope could provide a methodology for deep moral reform. Shortly before the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act, North Star contributor C.M.C. lamented white-led abolitionism’s failure to end enslavement but celebrated hope’s ability to envision new ways of being together: “hope’s prophetic vision . . . shows us the reorganization of a
true society, wherein are blended in perfect harmony, man, nature and God.”34 A few months into the Civil War, which the Black periodical press celebrated as a divinely ordained revolution, future editor of the Christian Recorder James P. Lynch argued that hope builds political solidarity among African Americans: “The fact that our people generally have looked upon their own condition as a hopeless one, accounts for the want of common sympathy. . . . As hope begins to dawn upon our people, they get more united.”35 C.M.C. and Lynch affirm collective hope’s dual movement of guiding people toward a better future while forging horizontal connections in the present.

One of the staunchest advocates of hope was Watkins Harper’s cousin William J. Watkins, who described himself as “constitutionally hopeful.”36 Their shared commitment to hope was likely shaped by growing up together in the house of prominent Baltimore educator and activist William Watkins and attending his Academy for Negro Youth. William J. Watkins’ correspondences to Frederick Douglass’ Paper offer a situated reflection on hope—concretely oriented toward emancipation—as the affective basis of individual and collective activist praxis that must be maintained despite devastating setbacks. “Let us hope amid the gloom,” he exhorted fellow Black northerners after the Fugitive Slave Act effectively extended enslavement to the northern states. “We can’t accomplish much while tottering upon the brink of despair.” He signed off with his customary valediction, “Yours in Hope.”37 Watkins insisted that hope is not a mere affective disposition but must be informed by cognitive judgment. In an 1853 lecture, he celebrated the growth of the antislavery movement in the wake of the Fugitive Slave Act as evidence that hope for emancipation is justified: “we have no right to hope, unless we can give a reason for the hope that is within us . . . a contemplation of the past, and its contrast with the present, inspires us with hope for the future.”38 His rebuttal of African American
emigration condemned its proponents for their failure of hope: “[they] are confounded with that despondency and despair which preclude the possibility of their working for their elevation here, with that hopeful ardor which is the life-blood of the anti-slavery enterprise.”39 Hope, for Watkins, is an affective and intellectual obligation as it fuels the Black quotidian practices of freedom-making and the project to end enslavement through moral suasion. Overall, the prominence of hope in antebellum African American discourse demonstrates that, for Black intellectuals, activism had to be affectively sustainable. Visionary and pragmatic, unifying and expansive, hope inspired visions of a liberated future and motivated action toward change.

Watkins Harper’s theorizations of hope and poetic sound

Watkins Harper’s poetry contributes to this nuanced reflection on hope, mobilizing sound and the printed page to cultivate hope as an affect and a methodology for action. As I demonstrate in the remaining part of this essay, her approach to hope evolves over time: the antebellum poems rarely refer to hope but often rely on its affective grammar, balancing protest against deprivation with anticipation of imminent freedom. By contrast, the post-Emancipation poems often reference hope, first celebrating its fulfillment, then acknowledging its disappointment during Reconstruction.

As a young woman, Watkins Harper pondered the viability of hope as an affective stance, an agent of change, and the foundation of her activism. Her first pamphlet volume Forest Leaves (late 1840s), published before she started contributing to newspapers and recently rediscovered by Johanna Ortner, includes two poems about hope that offer rare explicit theorizations of its affect and methodology: “That Blessed Hope” and “For She Said if I May but Touch
of His Clothes I Shall Be Whole,” the latter better known under its later title “Saved by Faith.” Both poems were reprinted with minor revisions in *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects* (1854, 1857), reaffirming the centrality of hope to her worldview. Young Watkins Harper understands hope simultaneously as an eschatological orientation toward salvation and a material orientation toward social change. “That Blessed Hope” reflects on the struggle to reconcile eschatological hope with suffering:

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Oh touch it not that hope so blest
Which cheers the fainting heart,
And points it to the coming rest
Where sorrow has no part.
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Despite its uncharacteristic idiom of weariness, the poem affirms hope as a collective endeavor of oppressed people who must encourage one another:

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Help me to love this blessed hope;
Help amid this world of strife
To long for Christ to reign.
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This collective nature of hope is enacted by the hymn form, which invokes communal singing in church through the common meter (8686), mostly monosyllabic words, and the familiar language of Christian piety.

While “That Blessed Hope” locates hope in a community of believers, “For She Said” theorizes the workings of individual hope. It retells the biblical story of the woman who stopped bleeding when she touched the hem of Jesus’ garment. The poem’s focus on the woman’s body as a site of healing reflects Watkins Harper’s commitment to “seeing the Black female body as a form of possibility and not a burden.” Exhausted by twelve years of illness, the woman is “nerv’d by blended hope and fear” to reach out for healing. The poem merges eschatological and
material hope, for although the healing results from Jesus’
divine power, it follows the woman’s bold act. By supplying
the psychological detail absent from the biblical account,
Watkins Harper analyzes the interior process that motivates
a dispossessed person to take action. The woman’s “woe” is
overcome by the “joyous thought” of a better life within
reach:

If to touch him I draw near,
All my suffering shall depart.\textsuperscript{45}

She acts on her vision of a radically different future and her
knowledge of how to bring it into being.

Through this biblical retelling, Watkins Harper links
political activism to hope entwined with religious faith. The
speculative act of imagining a better future—in this case,
the suffering woman’s vision of freedom—represents hope’s
cognitive aspect, its ability to anticipate change and provide
a methodology for effecting it. This anticipation engenders
the feeling of hope with its dual affective movement of
inclination and rejection, toward the desired change and
away from deprivation. While the cognitive aspect of hope
shapes the poem’s thematic content, hope’s emotional
orientation toward the future is performatively enacted
at the level of sound. The insistent forward movement of
trochees, sequenced into four-beat, seven-syllable lines with
alternate rhymes (abab), reflects hope’s movement toward
its object as it propels the poem toward prosodic closure.

Arguably, prosody can enact the affective movement
of hope because they share a similar relationship to time,
defined by an interplay of memory and anticipation. Prosody
organizes time, orienting it toward the future: another
iteration of the rhythmic pattern, the closure of a rhyming
pair. The common meter of “That Blessed Hope” develops
in time, through the reader’s perception of repetition in a
cycle of memory, anticipation, and fulfillment. Once the
meter is established, our memory of the iambic pattern
makes us expect a continued sequence of iambic in four- and three-beat lines; the fulfillment of this expectation reinforces both the memory and the anticipation of the pattern. Like prosody, hope is oriented toward the future but rooted in the past, shaping the object of anticipation in relation to memory. Hope’s ability to transform visions of the future into embodied actions links it to rhythm, which similarly transforms the abstract into the concrete because it “gives thought sensuous embodiment in the corporeal being of language.” Rhythm, Caroline Levine concludes, is “a category that always already refuses the distinction between aesthetic form and other forms of lived experience” because it organizes both artistic expression and everyday life.

Sociologists have stressed the ubiquity of rhythm in human experience. Henri Lefebvre argues that “everywhere where there is interaction between a place, a time and an expenditure of energy, there is rhythm.” When social rhythm is an instrument of oppression—like the punitive, strictly enforced schedules of enslaved plantation labor—any disruption of that rhythm, whether through everyday behavior or artistic expression, becomes a world-making practice of resistance. Beginning with enslaved people’s rhythmic collective singing described in Douglass’ *Narrative* (1845), African Americans have used art and its rhythms to express themselves, protest oppression, and transform time, orienting it toward freedom. Hope similarly has a rhythm because it involves interaction between the place of oppression, the future time of freedom, and the energy expended in moving from one toward the other. It ebbs and flows, grows and declines, oscillates between movement “away from” and “toward” with various degrees of euphoria and dysphoria. This rhythmic nature further aligns hope with prosody.

I do not suggest that prosody is inherently hopeful or that any specific prosodic pattern connotes hope regardless
of a poem’s verbal meaning. Rather, prosody gains affective value from thematic content while guiding our attention by means of stress, rhyme, and other sonic echoes; for example, anapestic tetrameter “can seem either active or passively elegiac.”

Thus, in Harper’s poems about enslavement, prosody amplifies discontent. The pounding iambics in her well-known ballad “The Slave Mother”—first published in the 1854 *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects*—both augment the anguish of the mother’s shriek and enact the cruelty of separating her from her child:

> Heard you that shriek? It rose  
> So wildly on the air,  
> It seemed as if a burden’d heart  
> Was breaking in despair.

While the opening stanza posits the extraverbal shriek as a form of affective communication, the abrupt monosyllables of the initial three-beat line perform slavery’s violent rending of time, forcing the reader to witness the mother’s pain.

By contrast, in poems that improvise a better world—such as “For She Said” with its falling trochaic meter—prosody amplifies hope, enacting its future orientation and euphoric affect through the forward movement of rhythm and rhyme. The prosodic closure of “For She Said” coincides with Jesus’ affirmation of the woman’s healing, which retrospectively aligns her intention with his:

> Kindly, gently, Jesus said,  
> Words like balm unto her soul,  
> Peace upon her life be shed,  
> Child, thy faith has made thee whole.

The final rhyming pair, *soul-whole*, underscores this alignment of the human and the divine, the material and the eschatological, suggesting to readers who shared Watkins Harper’s deep Christian faith that God approves of bold
actions fueled by hope because they move the broken world toward wholeness.

Like Watkins Harper’s theory of hope in “That Blessed Hope” and “For She Said,” her theoretical reflections on poetry consider the affective and moral realms in relation to oppression, revealing a dual commitment to aurality and didacticism. She explores the sonic texture of poetry as an instrument of exhortation, inspiration, and healing. Before the Civil War, Watkins Harper often links poetry with devotional practice and moral virtue. In “The Burial of Moses” (1856), she equates poetry with writing by divine inspiration, calling Moses “the most gifted Poet / that ever breath’d a word,” while in the short story “The Two Offers” (1859) she declares that “the grandest poem [is] the poetry of a true and noble life.” Similarly, her essay “Christianity,” appended to Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects, describes literature as “idle tales compared to the truths of Christianity.” These statements imply that poetry should teach readers how to live a Christian life.

However, “Christianity” also asserts that poetry brings relief from pain and does so through aesthetic form: “Poetry has culled her fairest flowers and wreathed her softest, to bind her Author’s ‘bleeding brow.’” The floral metaphors signal the importance of aurality: if poetry’s “fairest flowers” index the beauty of images and sentiments, “her softest” imply verse so melodious that it alleviates Jesus’ suffering. From her oratorical practice, Watkins Harper knew that sound could either facilitate or obstruct the reception of her message. As a lecturer on the abolitionist lecture circuit, she learned that her success as a Black woman addressing racially mixed audiences depended on what reviewers called her “soft musical voice,” a signifier of non-threatening femininity that tempered the radical content of her speeches.

While “Christianity” implies Watkins Harper’s belief in the transformative power of musical sound, her later
writings explicitly stress its influence on readers. In one of her “Fancy Sketches” in the Christian Recorder (1873), the protagonist Jenny, an aspiring poet, wants to harness the musicality of poetry for racial uplift: “[I] would if I could amid life’s sad discords introduce the most entrancing strains of melody. I would teach men and women to love noble deeds by setting them to the music, of fitly spoken words.” While Jenny’s goal is to comfort her “weary” readers, inspiring them to cultivate virtue, she achieves it through aesthetic form: the rich aural texture of poetry that enables it to produce heightened emotion and “fitly spoken” poetic language, at once festive and artfully precise—that is, organized for figures of speech. By producing pleasure, these formal qualities bring comfort amid pain and render attractive the “noble deeds” described in the poems. Watkins Harper reiterates this sentiment in her late poem “Songs for the People”:

Our world, so worn and weary,
   Needs music, pure and strong,
To hush the jangle and discords
   Of sorrow, pain, and wrong.

Under Jim Crow, the music of poetry does not merely drown the jarring sounds of oppression but silences them altogether, creating a harmonious soundscape instead.

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THE RHYTHMS OF HOPE: “ELIZA HARRIS” IN FREDERICK DOUGLASS’ PAPER

Such belief in the transformative power of poetry may have motivated Watkins Harper to write “Eliza Harris,” a ballad retelling the scene of Eliza’s escape in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1852). The poem appeared in Frederick Douglass’ Paper on 23 December 1853, a week after its publication in Garrison’s Liberator; a few months earlier she apparently also sent it to William
Howard Day’s newly founded *Aliened American*. Douglass’ editorial framing firmly situates the ballad within the network of Black activism. As her debut in the newspaper’s pages, “Eliza Harris” is preceded by the note, “The following effusion is from the pen of a young lady of color, a resident of Baltimore, Maryland. It speaks for itself.” The author’s name, Frances E. Watkins, is set prominently below the poem’s title—unlike in the *Liberator*, where it is deemphasized underneath the poem. The poet’s identity as a young Black woman, her place of residence, and her name indicate kinship with leading Baltimore abolitionists William Watkins and William J. Watkins, while the title links the ballad to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, which was being extensively discussed in the paper’s pages, mostly in positive terms. “Eliza Harris” contributes to this conversation by reimagining one of the novel’s most iconic scenes.

Watkins Harper’s retelling of Eliza’s escape foregrounds the hope that motivates her heroism. Although the ballad narrates events in the past, it is oriented toward the future Eliza creates for herself and her son: “she’ll give him his freedom or find him a grave.” This future orientation aligns the poem with the affective grammar of hope. Although the ballad is saturated with dysphoric affects—despair, anguish, care, woe—Eliza’s will to survive is inherently hopeful, exemplifying both the difficulty and the persistence of hope under extreme oppression. Her crossing dramatizes the simultaneity of hope’s two movements, away from enslavement and toward freedom. While Stowe evokes sympathetic identification with Eliza through the sentimental strategies of vivid imagery, dramatic detail, and a sensational description of Eliza’s emotional and physical pain, the ballad genre allows Watkins Harper to supplement visual description with an emphatic aurality, harnessing sound patterning and sonic imagery to enact hope as a methodology for action.
Last page of *Frederick Douglass' Paper* (Rochester, NY), 23 December 1853, with “Eliza Harris” by Frances E. Watkins. Library of Congress.
Like a fawn from the arrow, startled and wild,
A woman swept by us, bearing a child;
In her eye was the night of a settled despair,
And her brow was o’ershadowed with anguish
and care.

She was nearing the river; in reaching the brink,
She heeded no danger, she paused not to drink,\(^{66}\)
For she is a mother, her child is a slave,
And she’ll give him his freedom or find him
a grave.\(^{67}\)

Strikingly, the vision of a better future surfaces only once in
the poem, at the end of the second stanza: “she’ll give him
his freedom or find him a grave.” The chiastic alliteration
of this phrase reflects the proximity of a fugitive’s survival
to death, suggesting that the struggle between hope and
despair is ongoing and that hope’s victory may be won,
to use Fred Moten’s phrase, “by a measure so small that
it constitutes measure’s eclipse.”\(^{68}\) The poem registers this
tension by foregrounding the different affects that motivate
Eliza’s actions: in the moment, she is “nerved by despair
and strengthened by woe”; in retrospect, her escape is a feat
of motherly love:

Oh! love from its tenderness, gathering might,
Had strengthened her soul for the dangers
of flight.

(“EH”)

Although the feeling of hope is dimmed by the horror
of being pursued, hope nonetheless provides an affective
suture between Eliza, the witnesses of her escape, and the
readers of Frederick Douglass’ Paper. Wilson argues that
the poem’s opening lines “for[m] an imagined community
through affective spectatorship.”\(^{69}\) I would add that the
witnesses simultaneously hold Eliza’s terror—“‘Twas a
vision to haunt us, that innocent face”—and perform the
affective work of hope. Just as the community addressed in
“That Blessed Hope” upholds the discouraged speaker, the witnesses bolster Eliza’s tenuous hope by anticipating her successful crossing and model solidarity with Eliza for the newspaper’s readers.

While the text of “Eliza Harris” acknowledges the cognitive difficulty of hope amid oppression, its rhythm enacts hope’s emotional forward leap toward the future. The ballad is written in anapestic tetrameter, often chosen for its galloping effect of speed. John Greenleaf Whittier used it in “Hunters of Men” (1835):

Have ye heard of our hunting, o’er mountain
and glen,
Through cane-brake and forest,—the hunting
of men.⁷⁰

Watkins Harper appropriates this aural convention to enact the interlocking rhythms of the catchers’ chase and Eliza’s escape. Given her high esteem for Whittier, she may be alluding to his poem both metrically and thematically in order to augment her own protest against enslavement. The ballad’s intertextual rhythm interacts with the opening simile, which mobilizes the Western tradition of comparison to nature to ask under what conditions we grant empathy to those in extreme danger:

Like a fawn from the arrow, startled and wild,
A woman swept by us, bearing a child.

(“EH”)

For educated readers of Frederick Douglass’ Paper, these opening lines may have echoed Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s simile-laden style, as in his description of a ship tossed by waves:

She shuddered and paused, like a frightened steed,
Then leaped her cable’s length.⁷¹

However, Watkins Harper’s simile begins with the vehicle rather than the tenor, deferring the narrative to invoke poetic
tradition. In this way, she prioritizes literary convention over the seemingly primary reference to Stowe’s novel, even though the novel was probably the simile’s source. While Stowe writes that the trader “was after [Eliza] like a hound after a deer,” Watkins Harper transforms Stowe’s simile to characterize Eliza rather than her pursuers, extends it, and foregrounds the vehicle, suggesting that poetry adds value to her retelling. As in “For She Said,” the familiar story allows her to deemphasize the denouement, presenting Eliza’s escape from enslavement not as the resolution of her predicament but as the beginning of her fugitive life. The ballad declares Eliza’s victory halfway through:

But, aided by Heaven, she gained a free shore,  
Where the friends of humanity opened their door.

(“EH”)

The remaining stanzas describe Eliza’s feelings upon crossing into Ohio to interrogate what makes her heroic act possible and necessary.

“Eliza Harris” explores this question throughaurality. Sound simultaneously threatens, mediates, and enables Eliza’s escape. The ballad’s anapestic tetrameter interacts with its sonic imagery to create possibility and sustain hope amid the horrors of enslavement, represented as a soundscape with its own interlocking rhythms of suffering and abusive power: “shrieks of despair”; “the tramp of the horse and the bay of the hound.” This soundscape enacts the abolitionist argument that slavery contradicts the American ideals of liberty:

The cursing of men and clanking of chains,  
Make sound of strange discord on liberty’s plains.

(“EH”)

The menacing sounds of the storm and wind further aggravate the world’s hostility toward those enslaved:
She was nerved by despair and strengthened by woe,
As she leaped o’er the chasms that yawned from below;
Death howl’d in the tempest, and raced in the blast;
But she heard not the sound till the danger was past.

(“EH”)

By suspending Eliza’s capacity to hear her surroundings—“she heard not the sound till the danger was past”—Watkins Harper suggests that liminal situations like Eliza’s crossing require selective listening. Eliza’s struggle to maintain hope and follow its methodology demands such focused intentionality as to momentarily block out the reality of oppression.

The ballad emphasizes the multiple, conflicting rhythms that structure this scene, setting the oppressive rhythms of nature against the rhythm of Eliza’s movement toward freedom: “a woman swept by us”; “she was nearing the river”; “she paused not to think”; “she leap’d o’er the chasms”; “her step on the ice, and her arm on the child”; “she gained a free shore.” The rhythms of Eliza’s body reflect these movements’ physical and emotional exertion: “the heave of her breast,” “the sway of her hair.” These rhythms are silent or nearly silent, seen rather than heard. Her body is the focus of the narrator’s intense gaze that redefines it as a site of creative possibility fueled equally by despair and love. Interacting with these rhythms, the poem’s anapestic beat imbues Eliza’s quiet movement with the intentionality of hope’s reaching toward the horizon of freedom. However, Eliza’s triumph over enslavement is constrained by the precarity of Black womanhood. The final stanza shifts from her joyous intimacy with her child to the brutal environment invading it even in the free states:

With the rapture of love and fulness of bliss,
She placed on his brow a mother’s fond kiss.
Oh! poverty, danger and death she can brave,
For the child of her love is no longer a slave.
(“EH”)

Yet instead of ending with a sentimental surge of sympathy, the poem affirms a difficult hope. Eliza is aware of the hardships ahead but is not disheartened because she has resolved she will make the most of her and her son’s newly won freedom.

While the ballad leaves Eliza on the horizon of fugitive life, the print context of Frederick Douglass’ Paper situates it among a broad range of topics important to free Black northerners, challenging readers to imagine her future beyond the poem’s conclusion. “Eliza Harris” appears in the literature section—which in previous issues featured installments of Dickens’ Bleak House—between a hastily-rhymed paean to the organizers of the Rochester Anti-Slavery Bazaar and a sentimental sketch by Fanny Fern. This placement, together with the above-mentioned editorial note introducing Watkins as a poet, frames the ballad as a noteworthy contribution to African American literature. The 23 December 1853 issue includes antislavery material but also several religious texts; articles on women’s rights, an orphanage for Black children in New York, and teaching Black children to read; as well as a list of recommended books in different genres and a prospectus for the Paper’s next volume. This thematically varied content encapsulates free Black northerners’ multiple activities and commitments, which included but exceeded abolition of enslavement.75 The context of the printed page encourages readers to ponder how Eliza might try to build a good life in the free states. Simultaneously, Watkins Harper’s poem illuminates a grammar of hope that animates free Black northerners’ everyday practice as documented by Frederick Douglass’ Paper—a practice oriented toward the future but committed to active work in the present.
Reading the poem in *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*—an African American periodical interested in all aspects of Black life—a different experience than reading it in the *Liberator*, a white-owned abolitionist newspaper. In the *Liberator*, “Eliza Harris” leads the poetry column on the last page, which also features Stowe’s contribution on the nature of God. The rest of the issue contains articles about enslavement in the South, the beating of a slave catcher in Ontario, activities of the American Anti-Slavery Society, and differences between Garrisonian abolitionists and other antislavery groups—as well as Garrison’s vehement dispute with Douglass showing how deeply estranged they had become. Much space is devoted to Stowe and her novel: besides printing her religious essay, the issue mocked a proslavery play based on *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and ran advertisements for a children’s adaptation of the novel and Stowe’s *Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. The *Liberator*, then, presents “Eliza Harris”—subtitled “From *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*”—as a tribute to Stowe and another adaptation of her book. The newspaper’s primarily abolitionist content foregrounds the ballad’s antislavery intervention, directing the poem’s hopeful affect specifically toward emancipation.

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THE SONIC THREADS OF ESCHATOLOGICAL HOPE: “THE BURIAL OF MOSES” IN THE *PROVINCIAL FREEMAN*

While “Eliza Harris” develops an affective grammar of hope through a dramatic account of female heroism motivated by hope for material change, Watkins Harper’s biblical poems often consider the relationship between eschatological and material hope. They engender these two kinds of hope both through their accounts of how bold action is rewarded by divine grace—as in “Saved by Faith”—and because each retelling of a biblical event references the
“The Burial of Moses” on the first page of the Provincial Freeman, Chatham, Canada West, 24 May 1856. Accessible Archives.
larger history of humankind shaped by God’s promises and their unfailing if often long-awaited fulfillment.

This topic is central to “The Burial of Moses,” published anonymously in the Provincial Freeman on 24 May 1856. Moses was “a key figure in Harper’s personal mythology” and the protagonist of her most ambitious poetic work, the blank-verse epic Moses: A Story of the Nile (1869). In eighty lines of verse, “Burial” shows yet again that aurality is more important to Watkins Harper’s poetry than we usually recognize. It celebrates Moses’ faithful service to God and Israel in verse saturated with sonic echoes, embodying her goal to “introduce the most entrancing strains of melody” and “teach men and women to love noble deeds by setting them to the music, of fitly spoken words.” Like “Eliza Harris,” “Burial” generates hope through orientation toward a better future, recognition of the struggle to find hope amid deprivation, and intricate sound patterning that carries the poem to its forward-looking conclusion. The emotional forward leap of hope toward the future occurs through a gentle yet unceasing rhythmic pulse and phonic echoes.

Written in eight-line stanzas with the rhyme scheme xaxaxbxb, the poem experiments with alliteration, assonance, rhythm, and internal rhyme while interrogating the social and spiritual meanings of sound and its absence. The opening stanzas, which describe the silence at Moses’ remote burial site, are highly assonantal:

By Nebo a lonely mountain,
On this side Jordan’s wave,
In a vale in the land of Moab
There lies a lonely grave.
And no man dug that sepulchre,
And no man saw it e’er;
For the angels of God upturned the sod,
And laid the dead man there.
The sonic thread of *l* and *n* in the first quatrain foregrounds the shared seclusion of *a lonely mountain* and *a lonely grave*. This thread runs through the second quatrain, which echoes the long *o* and *n* of *lonely* in the parallel phrases *no man dug* and *no man saw*, and it continues through assonance and anaphora in the next two stanzas:

*Noiselessly* as the daylight  
Comes when the night is done

*Noiselessly* as the springtime  
Her crown of verdure weaves,

So, *without sound* of music,  
*Or voice* of them that wept,  
*Silently* down from the mountain’s crown  
The great procession swept.  
(“BM,” emphasis added)

Besides phonic echoes, Watkins Harper artfully varies the poem’s rhythm. “Burial” is written in a loose variation on short meter with three beats to a line in all but the seventh line, which has four beats and an internal rhyme (33333343). The unrhymed lines use the softer, less assertive falling rhythm, often including extra syllables between the beats. The last two stanzas replace the loosened short meter with a double ballad meter, alternating trimeter and tetrameter lines (43434343). The metrical change signals the shift from the biblical past to the present and the eschatological future.

This delicately modulated musicality enacts the poem’s exhortation to maintain hope despite disappointment. Developing the single Deuteronomy verse into a vividly descriptive account, Watkins Harper contrasts human perceptions of scarcity and failure with the divine truth of spiritual abundance and triumph. Without human ritual, Moses’ funeral is inadequate by social standards,
yet its execution by God’s angels honors Moses beyond human measure. The majestic eagle and lion witness the burial, while the rugged landscape forms sublime funerary paraphernalia:

The hill-side for his pall,

With stars for tapers tall,
And the dark rock pines like tossing plumes
Over his bier to wave.

(“BM”)

As in “Eliza Harris,” Watkins Harper’s attention to poetic sound parallels her preoccupation with soundscapes, particularly her revaluation of silence. Daybreak and spring symbolized resurrection in nineteenth-century Protestant theology. As vehicles of the similes introduced by *noiselessly*, they transform silence from a signifier of social oblivion to a sign of divine promise. Later stanzas contrast the silent burial with the loud soundscapes of social recognition. At the warrior’s and sage’s funerals “peals the minute gun”; “the sweet choir sings and the organ rings” (“BM”). However, Moses’ crucial role in the history of salvation outweighs the accomplishments of worldly leaders:

This was the bravest warrior
That ever buckled sword;
This the most gifted Poet
That ever breath’d a word.

(“BM”)

The change of meter in the last two stanzas introduces a change in soundscapes as the risen Moses’ voice breaks the silence of the wilderness, telling “of the strife that won our life / With th’ Incarnate Son of God” (“BM”).

The ending links the biblical story with the present moment, defined by collective longing for deliverance from
pain, and exhorts readers to emulate Moses’ patience in awaiting the fulfillment of divine grace:

O lonely tomb in Moab’s land,
O dark Bethpeor’ hill,
Speak to these curious hearts of ours,
And teach them to be still.
God hath his mysteries of grace,
Ways that we cannot tell;
He hides them deep like the secret sleep
Of him He loved so well.

(“BM”)

Through the plural “hearts of ours” and “ways we cannot tell,” Watkins Harper foregrounds the need for solidarity in the struggle to maintain eschatological hope, as she did in “That Blessed Hope.” The final stanza rekindles hope by forging a parallel between Moses and the readers: like the location of his grave, the time of deliverance is unknown to readers but known to God, and because Moses’ story ends in triumph over death, the readers’ story will also have a glorious ending. The poem engenders hope as a cognitive act by transforming disappointment into spiritual triumph, and it performs the emotional forward leap of hope through the forward movement of patterned sound and the pleasure of melodic verse with carefully orchestrated phonic repetition. The last stanza offers exquisite acoustic closure, resuming the sonic thread of the poem’s first section through consonance (hill—still—tell—well) and repetition of the words lonely, land, and hill. The intricate sound patterning throughout the poem is itself a form of literary activism, foregrounding the formal artistry often denied African American poets.

The publication of “The Burial of Moses” in the Provincial Freeman activates its latent allusions to nineteenth-century Black experience, imbuing the poem’s eschatological hope with material specificity. Outside this context, readers
could interpret the poem as solely devotional. Indeed, the Seventh-Day Adventist Church organ *Signs of the Times* reprinted it on 5 April 1905 as a religious poem attributed to a white woman by the name of Cecil Frances Alexander—a striking example of the newspaper poem’s availability for recontextualization and a Black writer’s unstable ownership of work published anonymously in ephemeral format and never reprinted in book form.

The *Provincial Freeman and Weekly Advertiser*, founded by African American activist Mary Ann Shadd, was a four-page newspaper based in Ontario and dedicated to emigration, antislavery issues, moral reform, and “general literature,” or topics of popular interest. Watkins Harper’s poem appears on the front page, surrounded by an eclectic mix of classifieds for local businesses and articles reprinted from US and British papers: a review of a book on China, a sketch about Charles Lamb, advice on cultivating “female character” and choosing wives, and advice for farmers on milking cows, using manure, and growing potatoes. This page also includes Kentucky minister R. J. Breckenridge’s denunciation of enslavement and an attack on the American Tract Society’s proslavery actions. The second page brings more antislavery and antiracist contributions, with advertisements for Douglass’ and Shadd’s lectures as well as articles defending free-born African Americans against accusations of moral inferiority and condemning rape of enslaved women. The last two pages feature advertisements, a train timetable, and a list of Canadian import tariffs. The heterogeneity of these items reflects the newspaper’s expansive mission. Besides raising political awareness, the *Freeman* cultivated Black readership and helped immigrants to Canada build a good life grounded in land ownership, familial stability, and loyalty to the British Crown.80

On the printed page, “The Burial of Moses” participates in this fabric of ephemeral texts. Its hortatory ending resonates with the didacticism of the advice pieces, while
its setting in the biblical land of Moab, like the article on China, extends the newspaper’s geographic imaginary to faraway places. Most importantly, the print context of the *Provincial Freeman* imbues “Burial” with an expansive referentiality, inviting readers to relate the poem to the many elements of Black life chronicled in its pages. Moses’ journey to the promised land resonates with African American emigrants’ and fugitives’ experience of leaving the US to settle in Canada, which the *Freeman* presented as a land of freedom and opportunity. The poem’s focus on Moses’ death before entering Canaan commemorates martyrdom in fugitivity while foregrounding the importance of faithful service and quotidian work whose visible results may be delayed. Such work, the poem reminds readers, must be rooted in hope and intentionally oriented toward freedom. Finally, the poem’s vision of Moses’ resurrection anticipates deliverance as a result of divine intervention that rewards persistent effort. The newspaper, then, encourages multiple readings of the poem that exceed its religious theme. Concurrently, the poem offers an affective key for reading the other newspaper contributions, highlighting the hope intrinsic to emigration, fugitivity, and Black activism. In its print context, “The Burial of Moses” is simultaneously a spiritual meditation on faith and an exhortation to cultivate hope in all the contexts the *Freeman* documented.

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**RHYME, REPETITION, AND REVISION FOR DEFERRED HOPE:**

“THE NEW LIBERTY BELL”

February 1863; “President Lincoln’s Proclamation of Freedom,” included in Lydia Maria Child’s *Freedman’s Book* in 1865; and “The Change,” published in the 1871 *Poems* alongside revised or expanded versions of the other two poems.81 “The New Liberty Bell” responds to the white abolitionist James Miller McKim’s call—quoted in the epigraph—to commemorate the nation’s break with enslavement by replacing the cracked bell. However, the poem’s initial elated tone belies a more complex theory of hope and emancipation, developed through imagery and sound. Simon Jarvis argues that rhyme is an epistemological tool whose “thinking” affords knowledge inaccessible through other means.82 In “The New Liberty Bell,” Watkins Harper uses rhyme to explore how the affective grammar of hope works when true emancipation and war violence collide. The revisions she made to the 1871 version, after several lecture tours in the postbellum South during which she saw emancipated people’s deprivation and former enslavers’ hostility to change, register the effort of clinging to deferred hope.

Written in the immediate aftermath of the Emancipation Proclamation, “The New Liberty Bell” envisions the future realization of freedom in newly emancipated people’s lives. Premised on the not-yet completed casting of a new bell, it describes an action that cannot yet be performed and imagines the transformative impact of a sound that cannot yet be produced:

YES! ring again the freedom bell,
And let its tones be loud and clear;
With glad hosannas let it swell,
Until they reach the bondman’s ear.83

The opening stanza’s rhyme sequence *bell—clear—swell—ear* foregrounds an emerging soundscape of freedom as the bell’s tones travel through space to those emancipated. The rhyme *clear—ear* registers the subject’s awakening to
an embodied “knowledge of freedom” that enables a new way of being that the poem’s second half describes. The subsequent stanzas, whose shift to the future tense renders freedom the object of hope rather than a lived experience in the present, complicate this utopian vision, alternating scenes of freedom with scenes of violence. Watkins Harper posits violence as hope’s methodology, a devastating but necessary sacrifice for the nation’s rebirth: “Through pain that wrings the life apart . . . The fainting land renews her life” (“NLB”). Rhyme performs freedom’s emergence through and entanglement of violence. The first section comprises seven octosyllabic quatrains with the rhyme scheme abab, a departure from Watkins Harper’s usual aabb rhyming of octosyllabics. The alternate rhymes link war and freedom, undermining the poem’s descriptive contrast between them:

Where shrieks and groans distract the air,
And sods grow red with crimson rain,
The ransomed slave shall kneel in prayer,
And bury deep his rusty chain.

(“NLB”)

*Air* as a soundscape of *shrieks and groans* rhymes with *prayer of the ransomed slave*, and the *rain* of blood soaking the battlefield rhymes with a *chain* buried in a gesture of freedom. The repetition of the *r* sound across the semantic constellations of war and freedom in this stanza further performs their entanglement. In another stanza, rhyme separates figurations of violence from those of freedom, but each pair of neighboring lines yokes them back together:

Where waters blushed with human gore,
Unsullied streams shall purl along;
Where crashed the battle’s awful roar,
Shall rise the freeman’s joyful song.

(“NLB”)
Following these unflinching descriptions of violence, the poem’s second half envisions the fulfillment of freedom in a newly emancipated person’s voice. The person’s speculative song, which inhabits a sound not yet produced, articulates the bell’s message. The song defines freedom as the exercise of basic human rights: speaking about one’s experiences, living with family, owning a home and the products of one’s labor. Watkins Harper thus situates freedom in hope’s realm of what will have been:

I no more dread his cruel grasp  
Shall tear my loved ones from my clasp:  
They are mine forevermore.

In peace I lull my boy to sleep,  
And watch his slumbers calm and deep:  
Oh, Freedom give us rest!

(“NLB”)

Watkins Harper underscores the shift from the present forging of freedom to its speculative fulfillment by the formal change from octosyllabic quatrains to tercets of 8, 8, and 6 syllables with the rhyme scheme aab ccb. However, this pattern excludes the last line of the first tercet, “They are mine forevermore.” The absent rhyme for the temporal adverb forevermore indexes the temporality of hope, one that is open and ongoing, extending toward the horizon of emerging freedom.

The printed page of the National Anti-Slavery Standard immerses “The New Liberty Bell” in white abolitionist discussions of war and Emancipation, foregrounding the poem’s challenge to the discourse of subordination that dominated articles about the formerly enslaved in the white-owned press. The edition of 28 February 1863 features white-authored war commentary, enthusiastic reactions to the Emancipation Proclamation at home and abroad, and a condescending appeal to emancipated Black men to work
harder. The half-page section of war news mostly comprises racist reporting on formerly enslaved refugees to the Union army, which combines criticism of their behavior with praise of their “loyalty” to the Union. Watkins Harper’s “The New Liberty Bell” leads the “Miscellaneous Department” on the last page, which it shares with another text featuring the voice of an emancipated person—“A Contraband’s Prayer,” reportedly heard at Fort Monroe. The dignity of Watkins Harper’s emancipated speaker contrasts with the latter poem’s subordination of the refugee whose desire for freedom is cast in the language of debt, obedience, and sacrifice: “Lord Almighty, make us willing to obey . . . de Union soldiers . . . Let us be willing to lay down our lives for those who have come to break our chains.” The remaining items on this page present a mix of antislavery and literary material, including articles on the eighteenth-century enslaved British writer Ignatius Sancho and a white northerner’s benevolence toward South Carolina freedmen, as well as a correspondence on Dickens’ reading in Paris, a religious poem, and an advertisement for William Wells Brown’s *The Black Man*. In this context, Watkins Harper’s poem reframes the war as a Black liberation struggle, asserting the hope that Black southerners’ legal emancipation will be followed by genuine freedom.

Eight years after its newspaper publication, Watkins Harper revised “The New Liberty Bell” for her 1871 *Poems*. While she often made minor changes to her newspaper poems for inclusion in bound volumes, these two versions differ to an unusual degree. Retitled “The Freedom Bell” to eliminate the reference to the specific object, the 1871 poem omits the epigraph from McKim’s speech and the emancipated person’s freedom song, reflecting the fact that the new bell had never been cast and Emancipation brought only nominal freedom to those formerly enslaved.85 Watkins Harper’s revisions to the initial stanza further index this deferral of freedom. In the opening line of “The New

The belfry bell of Hope and Peace
He tastes the sound of glad and woe:
O'er much of earth her voice is heard
With hope and prayer, and signal more the glad
That Freedom's banner, spread, is spread
And floors from earth with sound and word,
Where voices more bold, with accents clear,

And, ringing deep, the raptur'd throned:
The banners high, the heavens' bright
And peace is heard, and rest, the earth's theme,
And, ringing deep, the raptur'd throned:

With hope and prayer, and signal more the glad
That Freedom's banner, spread, is spread
And floors from earth with sound and word,
Liberty Bell”—“YES! ring again the freedom bell”—*again* gestures toward both the past and the future, signifying recursive action that marks the temporality of progress. By contrast, “The Freedom Bell” supplants iterative action with verbal iteration:

> Ring, aye, ring the freedom bell,  
> And let its tones be loud and clear;  
> With glad hosannas let it swell  
> Until it reach the Bondman’s ear.  

The second *ring* registers as a weakened echo of the first, rendering the imperative more wistful than expectant. The wistful tone is amplified by the subjunctive “it reach,” which replaces the newspaper version’s declarative “they reach.” Through its etymological meaning of “bringing under,” the subjunctive indexes the continuity of subjection; however, as a verb form that expresses potential or desired action, it also conveys the unceasing, if tenuous, hope of transcending it.  

In the 1871 *Poems*, “The Freedom Bell” correlates with the volume’s other poems on enslavement, abolitionism, war, and Emancipation that commemorate various stages of the African American struggle for freedom. In this context, it documents the memory of an unprecedented historical moment: the jubilee that was thought to have happened but did not, symbolically reflected in the nation’s failure to cast the new bell.

How do individuals and collectives maintain hope in the face of multiple disappointments? For Watkins Harper the answer lies in a fluid relationship to the future and a capacious understanding of hope. Her poems address material hope for imminent social change and eschatological hope for God’s deliverance from oppression. Hope’s affective grammar orients these poems toward a liberated future while grounding them firmly in present activity chronicled on the printed page. In turn, Watkins Harper’s poems provide an affective key for reading
other newspaper contributions. In the absence of genuine freedom, the poems improvise the freedom to dream, to recognize the creative potential of struggle, to take pleasure in the musicality of verse. This improvised freedom helps maintain the hope necessary to continue activist work even when its outcome recedes further into the future.

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NOTES


15. On aural imagery, see Stoever, Sonic Color Line, 286n58.


21. Jarena Lee, The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee, a Colored Lady: Giving an Account of the Call to Preach the Gospel, 2nd ed. (Cincinnati: Published for the author, 1839), 14, original emphasis.

22. Zilpha Elaw, Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experience, Ministerial Travels and Labours of Mrs. Zilpha Elaw, an American Female of
Colour (London: Published by the authoress, 1846), 97. On Lee’s and Elaw’s preaching, see Peterson, Doers of the Word, 73–87.

23. See Brown, Black Utopias, 23–57.

24. Lee, Life, 19–20, original emphasis.


30. Pennington, Fugitive Blacksmith, 15.


34. C. M. C., “The Brotherhood of Man,” North Star, 1 June 1849.


40. Johanna Ortner, “Lost No More: Recovering Frances Ellen Watkins Harper’s *Forest Leaves,*” *Common-place.org* 15, no. 4 (Summer 2015), accessed 13 March 2016. As was typical of antebellum writers, Harper’s revisions of published texts ranged from changing the wording of a line to adding or deleting stanzas.


42. Watkins, “That Blessed Hope.”


44. Frances Ellen Watkins, “For She Said if I May but Touch of His Clothes I Shall Be Whole,” in *Forest Leaves* (Baltimore: James Young, n.d.), 22, rpt. in Ortner, “Lost No More.”


53. See Stoever, Sonic Color Line, 44.
56. Watkins, Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects, 35.
58. See Foster, introduction, 15; Peterson, Doers of the Word, 121–24.
59. As Wilson argues, “African American writes both use the instrumentality of music to create poetry . . . [and] manipulate the function of music within poetry to reimagine socialities.” Specters, 60.
62. In Frederick Douglass’ Paper, 14 April 1854, Douglass apologizes for not crediting the Aliened American for the poem.
63. On Frederick Douglass’ Paper’s reception of Stowe’s novel, see McHenry, Forgotten Readers, 125–28.

66. “Drink” is possibly the compositor’s error; the *Liberator* and later versions have “think.”


73. C. Levine proposes to “consider meter as another . . . social rhyth[m], not an epiphenomenal effect of social realities” in *Forms*, 74. On abolitionist representations of slavery’s soundscapes, see Smith, *Listening*, 140–84.


75. Foster, “Narrative,” 715.


88. See “The Dying Fugitive,” “To Charles Sumner,” “Lines to Hon. Thaddeus Stevens,” “An Appeal to the American People,” “Words for the Hour,” “The Change,” “President Lincoln’s Proclamation of Freedom,” “Fifteenth Amendment,” “Truth,” “The Little Builders.” These poems address the martyrdom of self-emancipated people, antislavery protest, Black soldiers’ heroism in the Civil War, the Emancipation Proclamation and the Fifteenth Amendment, and the incremental work of racial uplift.