

## Private Learners

### Self-Education in Rhetoric

Having obtained a furlough from my boss I remained home today feeling like a happy fish out of water. I began an essay on the situation and requisites of the colored people everywhere.

—Mary Virginia Montgomery, 1872

While Mr. Harris was packing up to-day for his Northern trip, I came upon his journal, one which he kept several years ago, and obtaining his permission, I have read a part of it. In fact nearly all. After reading it, I have concluded to write a journal too.

—Charles W. Chesnut, 1874

This chapter considers more closely the private learner, a term used in the nineteenth century to describe the individual who engaged in some form of self-education. Nan Johnson observes that this learner was more visible in the late nineteenth century, when rhetorical ability became as much a personal asset as an essential tool of civic activism. During this period, interest in rhetoric—initially understood as an academic course centered on persuasive oratory for use in the church, the courts, and the legislature—spread to nonacademic community settings at the same time that an increasing number of middle-class students entered college, and rhetoric became more broadly defined as a “general expertise in speaking and writing applicable to a wide range of public and professional uses and settings.”<sup>1</sup> Understood to have practical, social advantage, of use in private and public life, rhetorical training became a critical part of general self-improvement. This chapter develops around the lives of five such learners who, while they may also have had various kinds of formal

school training, also spent a good deal of time on self-improvement, especially in reading, writing, speaking, and critiquing the rhetorical performances of others, and who all recorded various aspects of their private learning in diaries. The lives of Charlotte Forten Grimké, Frances Anne Rollin Whipper, Ida B. Wells Barnett, Mary Virginia Montgomery, and Charles W. Chesnut move across and function within several sites of rhetorical education, including private lessons, literary societies, journalistic work, self-education, and formal instruction, participating in but not fully engaging all aspects of these sites. These rhetors relied in large part on self-education, along with various levels of formal training, to improve their rhetorical skills, and their diaries record the histories of their self-education projects and, in turn, often served as a physical space in which to practice them. Thus, there is inevitable overlap of sites; for example, although references to literary societies occur in the diaries, we learn about them from the perspective of the participants. And it turns out that soldiers, like Christian Fleetwood, maintained diaries while fighting with the Union army, a fact I discuss in chapter 1. This same overlap occurs in descriptions of oratorical performances. The diaries frequently include the writers' assessment of a speech at some critical point in their lives when their own critical skills were just beginning to develop, while newspaper accounts of performances, generally more sophisticated, are targeted to readers, for education and often political purposes. These multiple perspectives converge to make our understanding of how nineteenth-century African Americans interpreted their rhetorical environment all the richer.

Self-education, as used here, means regular, voluntary, disciplined approaches to rhetorical education, initiated and carried out for self-improvement. The key term is "voluntary." In *The Pursuit of Knowledge under Difficulties*, Joseph F. Kett points out that formal education of any kind, especially for youth, is generally associated with some form of compulsion. Students are "sent" to school, while adults "join" societies for mutual improvement. Kett adds that "[t]hroughout the nineteenth century, self-education was associated with an often strenuous act of the will: to choose a course of mental improvement was to embark upon an ambitious enterprise that involved self-denial, persistence, and resilience," pointing out that diaries and journals frequently contain rich information about self-education projects, including the day on which they started.<sup>2</sup> The five writers treated here kept such diaries in which they account for their chosen pursuits, often sustained in the absence of financial or moral support and to the neglect of other activities, and record their responses to the oral and written rhetoric they encountered regularly.

Given that these were voluntary rather than assigned educational activities, these five writers had to have been highly motivated; yet their backgrounds

and the circumstances under which they wrote differed. Although Wells kept several diaries at various periods of her life, the diary she kept during her early days in Memphis, from 1885 to 1887, while a teacher and journalist reveals most about her own rhetorical practices and her views on effective public speaking. Montgomery maintained a diary in Davis Bend, Mississippi, in 1872, the year before she enrolled at Oberlin, and it conveys the extent of her preparation as well as the pure pleasure she took from reading, speaking, and writing. Entries from Rollin's diary were recorded from January to July 1868, while she was in Boston completing a biography of Martin R. Delany, and include comments on the rhetorical performances of several prominent Bostonians as well as an account of her own reading and writing practices.<sup>3</sup> Grimké's diary, rich with rhetorical activities, covers the longest period, extending, with breaks, from 1854, when she moved to Salem, Massachusetts, to attend school, to 1892, when she was living in Washington, D.C.

Although many women kept diaries in the nineteenth century, few black women's diaries remain.<sup>4</sup> The diaries of Grimké, Wells, and Alice Dunbar-Nelson have now been published. In addition to drawing on the published diaries of Wells and Grimké, I take examples of self-education from the published excerpts of Rollin's and Montgomery's diaries and the unpublished manuscript of Charles W. Chesnut. Prior to migrating to Cleveland, Ohio, where he was born in 1858, Chesnut's parents were among a small number of free blacks living in Fayetteville, North Carolina. The family returned to Fayetteville in 1866. Chesnut kept a diary intermittently between 1874 and 1883. Although only sixteen years old when he began the diary, Chesnut was already an assistant teacher at the Peabody School in Charlotte, North Carolina. By the time of his last entry at twenty-five, he was principal of the State Colored Normal School in Fayetteville. Wells, Montgomery, and Rollin were in their early twenties at the time of their entries, while Grimké began her diary at seventeen but continued it over several decades of her life.

(Of course, these five diarists are not representative of the majority of nineteenth-century African Americans. Grimké, a member of the Forten-Purvis Philadelphia family, all deeply involved in the abolitionist movement, received grammar and normal school education in Salem. Rollin, whose parents were among a small number of prominent free black families who settled in Charleston in the 1840s, was educated in local private schools and in Philadelphia. Though Wells and Montgomery were born into slavery, their families were able to see that they had access to the available means of education, and, as Richard Rhoadhead points out in the introduction to his edition of Chesnut's journals, "Given that the black illiteracy rate still stood at 75 percent in North Carolina

in 1880, the very literacy of which the journal is constant evidence differentiates Chesnut from the great mass of his contemporaries."<sup>5</sup>

It could be reasonably claimed, then, that diary-keeping was a practice most postbellum blacks had neither the time nor the skills to observe and that those who did were advantaged in some respect. But the lives of these five diarists tell another story. They all were hard workers, often barely able to pay their bills. While Grimké may have inherited the Fortens' abolitionist zeal, she inherited little of the often-cited Forten wealth, which by her time had apparently diminished considerably. In her journal, she writes of her father's financial difficulties and his request that she return to Philadelphia from Salem, as he could no longer support her there. By 1856, Grimké, whose mother died when she was three, was alienated from her father and his second wife, who had moved to Canada with her step-siblings. The following year, Grimké's father informed her that he was "utterly unable" to help her.<sup>6</sup> Lisa A. Long observes that "though they often sheltered her and gave her a sense of intellectual community, her relatives did not ultimately support young Forten."<sup>7</sup> Similarly, with her father suffering financial loss at the close of the Civil War and Martin Delany no longer providing promised funds, Rollin was forced to support herself while in Boston by sewing and working as a copyist for the Massachusetts legislature. And during her years in Memphis, Wells seemed always in the midst of one financial crisis or another. Aside from the requisite literacy, these diarists' most prominent features were not privilege but some version of the self-denial, persistence, and resilience Kett identifies as being associated with those who take on self-education projects.<sup>8</sup> Further, these diarists shared a reality with other black rhetors located in this site of rhetorical education: they were emblematic of those in the wider cohort of African Americans who engaged in some form of self-education through their use of this private literacy. It is our good fortune that they were motivated to record their activities in diaries, for they provide additional insight into the complex intellectual lives of blacks in the mid- and late nineteenth century.

### On Diary-Keeping

The diary or journal, defined here as a text written in the first person with dated, chronological passages in which the writing subject speaks of and comments on certain events, was at the height of its popularity in the late nineteenth century.<sup>9</sup> One nineteenth-century conduct book advised that the regularity of diary-keeping improves faculty with language that otherwise "lies merely in the outer court of the memory, and does not enter and make any permanent impression upon the mind, until it is practiced and made useful in every-day life."<sup>10</sup> The literature on the history of diary-keeping centers on the habits of middle-class

white women, many of whom kept diaries as outlets for the articulation of ideas in the only available space. Setting information on self-education and literacy practices aside, the diaries of the four black women considered here were no doubt motivated by these same social pressures and others. Mary Helen Washington, in her foreword to Wells's published diary, analogizes the diary genre to the "clearing in Black religious culture, a place where, physically and psychologically, Black people felt free to speak in a setting outside the boundaries of the official church, a private sanctuary where one's truer self is affirmed and authorized."<sup>11</sup> These diarists recorded their hopes and desires, their joys and disappointments, in a safe space, and while my interest is in the literacy practices their entries bring to light, I try to remember that these practices represent just one aspect of their complex lives.

Although very much concerned about propriety and respectability, Wells, on numerous occasions, articulated her frustrations with the societal constraints of nineteenth-century Memphis, especially those placed upon an unmarried, outspoken woman. But these writers also seemed intent on documenting their responses to a variety of language experiences—that is, the material they read and the political speeches they heard—as a matter of record, even if only for themselves. In a foreword to her journal, Grimké offered among her reasons for maintaining a diary the fact that it would "doubtless enable me to judge correctly of the growth and improvement of my mind from year to year" (58). Montgomery seemed always enthusiastic about all her pursuits. Anticipating having to learn more about gardening, she wrote, "I feel like one just embracing the threshold of a new life."<sup>12</sup> Chesnut was probably the most isolated of all these diarists, with few friends or intellectual soul mates. He wrote at the beginning of his third journal, "Cast, as my lot has been, among a people, or in a place whose people do not enter into my trains of thought and who indeed cannot understand or sympathize with them, I find it quite a relief to take them to my confidant, my Journal, who listens patiently as long as I care to talk, never contradicts my statements, and keeps my secrets religiously."<sup>13</sup> His journal, possibly the most self-consciously written of the five examined here, must have functioned as an affirming companion.

The diary form also invites discussion of motive as well as action, including the why of various rhetorical pursuits—why this lecture, this book, this letter, or this response rather than another. While a discussion of various approaches to interpreting diaries is beyond the scope of this project, any assessment of the contents must take into account the diarists' assumptions about audience. To what extent did they write, knowing that at some point their entries might be read, and how might that awareness of audiences to come have helped to shape their narratives? Even if they were not consciously imagining external audiences,

rhetorical theorists Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca point out that self-deliberators, as I am claiming these diarists were, serve as their own audiences, arguing for a particular understanding of their experiences in the same way that they might with another person, and that “it is immaterial whether or not the subject [writer] is unaware of the real motives for his conduct.”<sup>14</sup> Questions concerning audience awareness and intent notwithstanding, these records of literacy encounters expose a great deal about the writers’ habits of mind and level of rhetorical sophistication.

Rather than focus on the educational contributions of diary-keeping and drawing on these diarists’ practices for examples, I have chosen to discuss each diarist separately, highlighting their practices one diarist at a time. This choice runs the risk of shifting the gaze away from diary-keeping as a site of rhetorical education and calling more attention to the diarists, but it has the advantage of presenting a more complete accounting of the rhetorical practices of these five diarists and of emphasizing the ways in which these practices are interwoven. To return to my definition of rhetorical education as various combinations of experiences influencing how people understand and practice effective communication, I see diary-keeping as a primary site of rhetorical education in that it provides such combinations of experiences: diarists write out their thoughts on issues and respond in their diaries to what they have read, heard, or experienced, thereby developing their critical skills. Secondarily, diaries also yield information on the kinds of educational activities these diarists engaged in outside of keeping diaries, for example, their participation in literary clubs and elocution classes. In my discussion, I place the contents of diary entries into one or more of these educational categories. As mentioned earlier, there are only a few extant diaries by African Americans. Part of my initial curiosity about how African Americans learned to speak in the nineteenth century can be satisfied on a case-by-case basis only. By looking at these five diarists separately, I attempt to understand better the circumstances leading to their keeping of a diary—how they found the time, what models they used, and what they hoped to accomplish, if anything. It could be misleading to treat them as if they are representative of some larger collection of diaries. At the end of this section, I identify common features that help to account for how diary-keeping serves rhetorical education.

#### Charlotte Forten Grimké

Across her five extant journals, maintained intermittently between 1854 and 1892, Grimké recorded innumerable historically rich accounts of rhetorical activities. They include her constant reading and writing habits; her participation in a literary society and antislavery sewing circles; and her responses to sermons, elocutionist performances, and abolitionist lectures. The determined

tone and attention to a variety of rhetorical activities in her entry of February 8, 1857, are typical:

Finished “The Autobiography of a Female Slave.”<sup>15</sup> To me it is deeply interesting. The writer’s style has not, perhaps, that perfect elegance and simplicity which distinguishes the *best* writers, but she evidently *feels* deeply on the subject, and her book is calculated to awaken our deepest sympathies. I thank her for writing it. Hers must be a brave, true soul thus to surmount all obstacles, to soar above all the prejudices, which, from childhood must have been instilled into her mind, and take upon herself the defense of a down-trodden and degraded race! Recommended Rollin’s “Ancient History” which I intend to read regularly, and read several papers of the “Spectator.” Committed some poetry to memory. A plan which I shall pursue, as my memory greatly needs strengthening. Mrs. And Mrs. [Putnam] spent the evening. Talked of forming a French class. Probably it will amount to nothing. I shall go on alone with both Latin and French—and *persevere*. (190–91)

The passage outlines a disciplined approach to self-improvement in rhetorical skills. Constantly in pursuit of knowledge, she writes, “I feel grieved and ashamed to think how very little I know of what I should know of what is really good and useful. May this knowledge of my want of knowledge be to me a fresh incentive to more earnest, thoughtful action, more persevering study?” (96).

At age twenty, Grimké had a plan to cultivate her memory, to read regularly, and to learn both Latin and French, all with a determination to prevail. According to a list found with her diary manuscript, Grimké, during the course of one year, read over one hundred books. What motivated her to engage in this determined project of self-education? Ray Allen Billington suggests that race shaped her existence more than anything else, that it was “always uppermost in . . . [her] thoughts,” believing that by excelling she would prove herself equal to whites.<sup>16</sup> I agree that she was fully cognizant of her racialized existence and fully invested in abolitionism and race representations. She came from a family steeped in antislavery activism, extending from her grandfather James Forten to her father, Robert Bridges Forten, and her aunts and uncles Sarah Forten, Harriet Forten and Robert Purvis, Margareta Forten, and James Forten Jr. In Salem, living with Charles L. Remond and his sister Sarah Parker Remond, both antislavery lecturing agents, Grimké had the opportunity to meet many key figures in New England abolitionism. Yet there is something in her passion for learning that seems driven by pure pleasure and self-satisfaction as well. In 1878, twenty-year-old Charles Chesnut would also write of having “persevered” to accomplish his goal of learning German (93).

On May 31, 1854, just a week after she began her diary, seventeen-year-old Grimké commented on the quality of public speaking at a political rally she attended in Boston with a friend during the time of the trial of fugitive slave Anthony Burns: "We went to the meeting, but the best speakers were absent, engaged in the most arduous and untiring efforts in behalf of the poor fugitive; but though we missed the glowing eloquence of [Wendell] Phillips, [William Lloyd] Garrison, and [Theodore] Parker, still there were excellent speeches made, and our hearts responded to the exalted sentiments of Truth and Liberty which were uttered. The exciting intelligence which occasionally came in relation to the trial, added fresh zeal to the speakers, of whom Stephen Foster and his wife were the principal" (64).

Living during a time of heightened abolitionist activity in a lyceum-driven oratorical culture, Grimké had many opportunities to hear and comment on the rhetorical performances of prominent speakers, like her Salem host Charles Remond, with whom Grimké lived from 1853 to 1857. After listening to his sister Sarah Parker Remond read one of his speeches, Grimké noted that she "like[d] it very much" (77).<sup>17</sup> Two years later, she commented on a talk he gave on the Kansas rebellion, observing that whether every one agreed with him or not, "Still I am glad that *something* has roused the people of the North at last" (166). It is not surprising that Grimké heard in person or read most of the renowned speakers of the late antebellum period, given her location in Salem where the Salem Lyceum Association, established in 1830, sponsored lectures in a hall seating seven hundred, nor is it surprising that she heard at least four of Ralph Waldo Emerson's lectures between 1855 and 1858, since he appeared at the Salem Lyceum more than any other speaker.<sup>18</sup> What is unusual is that in Grimké's journals, we have responses to these speakers from the perspective of a seventeen- to twenty-year-old black woman, committed to a self-education in the rhetorical arts of reading, speaking, and writing, often for pleasure and more increasingly in the service of abolishing slavery and improving living conditions for members of her race.

The speakers mentioned in Grimké's diaries include Henry Ward Beecher ("His manner is not at all polished or elegant, but he says so many excellent things with such forcible earnestness or irresistible humor that we quite forget it" [121–22]), Lucy Stone ("The lecture was earnest and impressive, and some parts of it very beautiful. It was an appeal to the noblest and warmest sympathies of our nature, in behalf of the oppressed" [116–17]), Frederick Douglass ("Uncle [William] read to me some of [Frederick] Douglass' best speeches—very fine they were. I wish the man had a *heart* worthy of so great, so gifted a mind" [240]),<sup>19</sup> Wendell Phillips ("Mr. Phillips' lecture was worthy of himself. I can bestow no higher praises upon it. Oh! It is a source of some consolation to

feel—to know that some of the noblest minds—the greatest intellects of the age are enlisted in our behalf" [143]), essayist and critic Edward P. Whipple ("Whipple's oration is elegant. But I do not like him. He is too conservative" [185]), Theodore Parker ("I have long wished very much to see and hear this remarkable man, and my pleasant anticipation[s] were fully realized" [125]), and, of course, Emerson. She devoted over an entire page of her February 11, 1857, journal entry to comments on his lecture "Works and Days," which includes the following excerpt: "Have just returned from hearing R. W. Emerson.—Subject 'Works and Days' from Hesiod's poem—One of the most beautiful and eloquent lectures I ever heard. . . . Never, never before have I so forcibly felt the *preciousness* of time. And oh, how deeply do the words and presence of such a man as Emerson, make us feel the utter insignificance, the great inferiority of *ourselves*" (192).

Grimké's comments call attention to the critical link between *logos* and *ethos* in effective persuasion and acknowledge this connection between rhetorical training and the kind of public performances required of a worker in the antislavery movement. Her reactions to the leading antislavery orators and activists were akin to the responses of present-day teenagers to rock stars. These men and women coming forward in support of "the cause" were her heroes, not only because of the positions they took but also because of the eloquence with which they did so. She takes pride in knowing that "nearly all the finest orators now are anti-slavery" (126). Grimké mentions attending a meeting of an antislavery sewing circle during which members admired an inkstand once owned by Lydia Maria Child. The entry proceeds to praise Child's writing, especially her 1836 romance novel *Philothea*, set in ancient Greece, rather than her antislavery writings, as might be expected: "No one could read *her* writings without the most enthusiastic admiration of the high-souled writer. I am sure that I cannot. . . . I always think of it [*Philothea*] with a feeling of grateful pleasure that it was written" (171). A few entries later, on Christmas Day of 1856, she had the opportunity to meet Child and other "distinguished champions of our cause," noting, "She is not quite so spiritual looking as one would expect to see the author of 'Philothea,' but is a very charming person nevertheless" (175).

Janeé Carey Eldred and Peter Mortensen observe that Grimké "comes to expect in antislavery oratory a rhetorical stance undiluted by appeals to a broader range of human rights," pointing, for example, to her general objections to orators who advocate tolerance for slavery supporting Christians. These authors argue that when Grimké attended an antislavery lecture, she expected "to hear what she would hear in the Remond household or at an antislavery meeting: persuasion aimed at provoking action."<sup>20</sup> At the same time, still quite young and impressionable, Grimké also took much general pleasure in her rhetorical pursuits.

Throughout the journal, Grimké describes being read to or reading aloud to various people, reminding us of the prevalence of this practice at the time. Among those who were not literate, hearing the Bible, newspapers, letters, political tracts, and other forms of literature read aloud provided a valuable means of access to spiritual guidance, pleasure, and information—a function discussed throughout this volume. Jane Donawerth points out that Lydia Sigourney in her conduct book *Letters to Young Ladies* (1833) defended the practice of reading aloud as acceptable for women in promiscuous settings because it provided instruction in morals and could be a service to the family.<sup>21</sup> In her autobiographical textbook, *Reminiscences of School Life, and Hints on Teaching*, written at the beginning of the twentieth century but based on practices she followed during Reconstruction, Fanny Jackson Coppin emphasizes the value of reading to develop both listening and speaking skills in the classroom: “A first-class reader may be called an elocutionist, because he makes the thoughts of the writer live again in the minds of those who hear. . . . But besides training the eye, we should remember that the ear should be trained. Read a short sentence to the class and see who can repeat it correctly; you will be astonished to see how few can reproduce the sentence just as it was given. It is no wonder that our Lord said, ‘Take heed how ye hear.’”<sup>22</sup> Coppin, who joined the faculty of the Institute for Colored Youth in 1865, remained there for nearly forty years, bringing about many educational changes.

In one entry, Grimké records that she “read aloud fifty-nine pages of Macaulay, and an interesting sketch of the distinguished philosopher, Sir Humphrey Davy” (116). She apparently read these pages for her own benefit. For Grimké and her acquaintances, reading aloud appeared to be primarily a habit of pleasure rather than necessity, but nonetheless, it served as a source of rhetorical education. Though mainly considered a role for women, while they sewed or socialized, reading aloud as Grimké recounts it in her in the journal was frequently performed by men, and the shared experience of reading served as a starting point for critique or general conversation. Two instances have already been cited of her being read the speeches of Douglass and Remond; she also records being read ghost stories, the poetry of Robert Burns and John Greenleaf Whittier, Charles Dickens, Margaret Oliphant’s *Salem Chapel*, sermons, and temperance tracts. Readers included classmates, friends, relatives, and her husband, the Reverend Francis Grimké, whom she married in 1878. She records his reading to her in Jacksonville, Florida, where he served as pastor of the Laura Street Presbyterian Church between 1885 and 1889, before returning to Fifteenth Street Presbyterian in Washington, D.C. She writes on December 16, 1885, that “[Frank] read to me some extracts of speeches by Dr. Hazzard on the Education of the Negro. They are very fine. He seems to be by far the most liberal and the most Christian friend of the colored people” (520).

Grimké’s rhetorical education did not lead to her becoming a public activist. Most of her rhetorical work took place in her writing and in her classrooms. During her time in Salem with the Remonds, Grimké attended the Higginson Grammar School, where her comment following the unexpected class visit of a teacher for whom the students were asked to recite suggests an early reluctance to speak publicly: “I do think reading one’s composition, before strangers is a trying task. If I were to tell Mrs. Remond] this, I know she would ask how I could expect to become what I often say I would like to be—an Anti-Slavery lecturer. But I think I should then trust to the inspiration of the subject” (92). Her reluctance to join “a kind of literary society” stems from a concern that she might be called on “to read or recite” (339). Ultimately, Grimké’s race work took place through her writing and in classrooms on the South Carolina Sea Islands, where she taught contraband slaves from 1862 to 1864, rather than from the podium. As a later entry suggests, she apparently was not a spontaneous speaker. Not finding the words to encourage a friend on the Sea Islands, she records, “I longed to say, ‘I thank you, for that noble glorious speech.’ And yet I *could* not. It is always so. I do not know how to talk. Words always fall me when I want them most. The more I feel the more impossible it is for me to speak” (433).

In addition to the diary itself, evidence of her writing practices are plentiful: letters, essays, poems, and often just writing (though it’s not always clear what)—for example, “Have been writing nearly all day” (77) and “Spent nearly all day in writing busily. Determined to finish my story” (270). In May 1858, for her poem “Glimpses of New England,” AMI bishop Daniel Payne paid her a dollar (“The first money I’ve ever made by *writing*” [311]).<sup>23</sup> After completing her work at Higginson, Grimké enrolled in the Salem Normal School, the first African American to do so, completing her teacher training and her formal education there in 1856. But Grimké continued to read and write profusely for the rest of her life, detailing both activities in her journals. For Grimké, these activities of literacy do not seem to have been motivated primarily either by duty to the antislavery cause, as central as it was to her consciousness, or by pleasure, as much as she enjoyed reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Rather, the two incentives seemed to have been mutually sustaining.

#### Frances Anne Rollin

Excerpts from the diary of Frances Anne Rollin reveal this same kind of natural pleasure in an active life of the mind. However, in the case of Rollin, we have only excerpts from entries made over seven months in 1868 while she was in Boston.<sup>24</sup> Rollin received a superior education in antebellum Charleston, South Carolina, as the daughter of Margaretta Rollin and William Rollin, a successful businessman. She was given a Catholic private school education and attended the Quaker Institute for Colored Youth in Philadelphia, where Fanny Jackson

Coppin would later teach. During Rollin's time there in the early 1860s, the institute offered a classical curriculum, with courses covering Caesar, Virgil, Cicero, Horace, and New Testament Greek.<sup>25</sup> She left the institute and returned to Charleston to teach in 1865. Rollin and her sisters, Charlotte, Katherine, Louisa, and Florence, reportedly held influential political meetings at their home in Columbia, South Carolina, where the family moved after the Civil War. Their drawing room was called "Republican Headquarters." Dorothy Sterling points out that such gatherings of the wives and daughters of prominent black men were common in Southern capitals during Reconstruction.<sup>26</sup> These events, shaping the course of Southern politics, also provided numerous opportunities to sharpen argumentative skills. Both Louisa, who addressed the state House of Representatives in 1869, and Charlotte, who spoke at the 1870 convention of the South Carolina Woman's Rights Association in Charleston, were also active in the South Carolina woman's suffrage movement.<sup>27</sup> Thus, Frances Rollin grew up in a family of political activists who understood the critical value of rhetorical abilities.

Rollin was twenty-two years old in 1867<sup>28</sup> when she met Martin Delany, serving as a captain in the Union army and as a Freedmen's Bureau agent, in Charleston. Delany, then fifty-five years old, commissioned her to write his life story. With the promise from Delany of financial support, Rollin moved to Boston in the fall of 1867. Her great-granddaughter Carole Lone writes that Delany had heard that Boston publishers were interested in his biography, and since he knew many there who would support the project, he encouraged Rollin to move to Boston, a city filled with like-minded "aspiring writers."<sup>29</sup> Rollin worked on the biography throughout the winter of 1867–68, completing a draft in March. The book was published in the summer of 1868, by Lee and Shepard, under the title *Life and Public Services of Martin R. Delany*, and Rollin returned to South Carolina to work for the state government. From January 1 to July 28, 1868, while writing the biography, Rollin also kept a diary in which she documented her writing and revising processes, reading practices, and reactions to various public speakers.

Usually working on the biography in the morning, often at the State House library, Rollin speaks of "writing as hard as ever," even though she had no guarantee of publication. She shared drafts with her acquaintance Richard Greener, who was on his way to becoming the first African American Harvard graduate, with abolitionist orator Wendell Phillips, and with William C. Nell. Greener's critique solicited this response: "Mr. Richard Greener has gone over some of it with me, but he is cynical and apt to discourage instead of acting otherwise. He lives in a grand intellectual sphere and is accustomed to only perfection."<sup>30</sup> Rollin never mentioned what Phillips, whom she called "a masterpiece of humanity," thought of it (455).

Rollin read widely during her time in Boston—Thomas Macaulay, Alphonse de Lamartine's *History of the Girondists*, a biography of Josiah Quincy,<sup>31</sup> Whitier's poem "Randolph of Roanoke," and portions of Thomas DeQuincy's letters. She also read the newly published *Behind the Scenes Or, Thirty Years A Slave and Four Years in the White House* by Elizabeth Keckley, noting that it was "well written but not by Mrs. K, that's clear." Later registering further disappointment, she comments on Keckley's reading of excerpts from *Behind the Scenes*: "It was poor to say the least. It is too late in the day for her to attempt it especially without a first class teacher" (460). Rollin probably was wishing that Keckley had had the assistance of a teacher of elocution.<sup>32</sup>

Rollin attended and commented on a variety of speaking events as well. (Over a two day period in January, Rollin attended two speech-making occasions—an anti-slavery festival in Boston, staged to support newly emancipated African Americans rather than abandon them in their time of greatest need, and an antislavery meeting. The second sentence of her first diary entry reads, "Speeches tonight at the Tremont Temple, but so terribly rainy that there is no possibility of reaching there."<sup>33</sup> She heard Dickens reading from *David Copperfield*; Emerson, who spoke on the "immortality of the soul"; Phillips, who gave her a copy of his speeches, "as precious to me as the apple of my eye" (458); William Lloyd Garrison; Frances Kemble; and William Wells Brown. While comfortably acquainted with most of Boston's leading statesmen and women, Rollin was also fully aware of her outsider status. She demurred from celebrating George Washington's birthday, observing, "I am no enthusiast over Patriotic Celebrations as I am counted out of the body Politic" (456), although she did write that men like Phillips "reconcile . . . me to Americans" (455).

Rollin had an impressive array of associates reading and critiquing her work, most of them already well established authors and orators, like Brown and Nell. As mentioned, one of the leading abolitionist orators, Wendell Phillips—whom Grimké praised at least a dozen times in her journal—was Rollin's personal mentor. It is clear from Rollin's diary that he took her under his wing, giving her tickets to various speaking events, offering to listen to her read from drafts of the Delany biography, and providing encouraging feedback. Thus in Rollin's diary entries, we capture a snapshot of rhetorical activities over a brief period but in a setting deeply immersed in postbellum oratorical culture. Rollin interacted with many of the same "Americans" as Grimké, whom she also met with while in Boston. Grimké had been in Boston since 1865, when she moved there to serve as secretary of the Teachers Committee of the New England Branch of the Freedmen's Union Commission. The routines of these two diarists were similar in the blend of the political and the pleasurable. One might say that for Rollin, as for Grimké, the commitment to self-education was closely linked to an abiding concern for bettering conditions for members of her race.

## Ida B. Wells

What would the diary of Ida Wells, born into slavery and, upon the death of her parents from yellow fever, the sole breadwinner for her five surviving siblings, reveal about her self-education strategies? In her autobiography, Wells writes that she does not remember when or where she started school but does recall that the children in her family had the “job” of learning all they could there.<sup>34</sup> Until the age of sixteen, she attended Shaw, later renamed Rust College, one of the many schools established by and officially for the formerly enslaved. Rust College in Holly Springs, Mississippi, provided instruction at all levels—elementary, grammar, normal course, college preparatory, and college. An 1896–97 Rust catalog lists spelling, penmanship, advanced grammar, reading, and civil government among the courses offered in the grammar school; medieval history, literature, rhetoric, pedagogy, and ethics in the normal course; and English Bible, Roman history, Greek, Latin, and French in the college preparatory course.<sup>35</sup> In 1896, Wells would have been away from Rust at least fifteen years. Wells writes in her autobiography, however, that she “had no normal training” and worked hard on her own to prepare her daily teaching lessons.<sup>36</sup> Thus, it is difficult to know with certainty what courses Wells took. T. Thomas Fortune, in a biographical sketch, noted that although she did not graduate from Rust, the institution “conferred upon Miss Wells the degree of Master of Arts at the commencement exercises of 1892,” an honor possibly bestowed in recognition of her journalistic work.<sup>37</sup>

Wells’s role as an activist-orator had roots in the activism of her parents and her community. When the man to whom her father, James Wells, was apprenticed as a builder learned that Wells had voted Republican, he locked him out of his shop. In response, James Wells purchased another set of tools and moved his family to a location nearby.<sup>38</sup> A trustee of Rust, James Wells was probably also a member of the Holly Springs branch of the Loyal League, a Republican-supported political organization established by local Rust College officials and by the Freedmen’s Bureau primarily to encourage blacks to vote. The league met at the home of Nelson Gill, local head of the bureau, or at a Baptist church, with “long speakings and demonstrations.” During one meeting, Ku Klux Klan members hid themselves under the house in order to shoot Gill, but their plans were foiled.<sup>39</sup> Growing up in this racially charged environment of active participation in community affairs provided an early model for Wells’s own subsequent public rhetoric.

Wells kept diaries during three distinct periods of her life. The examples of rhetorical activities that follow come from the diary she kept while living in Memphis between 1885 and 1887. At the age of twenty-four, her reading list included the Bible and works by Dickens, Louisa Alcott, Charlotte Brontë, and

Shakespeare; all influenced Wells’s rhetorical training. But she wrote that during her early years, she “never read a Negro book or anything about Negroes.”<sup>40</sup> Wells’s diary entries suggest a critical interest in oral performance, particularly pulpit oratory. In one passage, Wells criticized a minister’s preaching style for lacking the reverence required in “dealing with holy things” and for being too similar in delivery to a lecture he had given earlier.<sup>41</sup> This critique marks Wells’s sense of a clear distinction between what Hugh Blair called pulpit oratory and the oratory of the popular assemblies.<sup>42</sup> She wrote: “I went back last night to hear him *preach* in order to come to a decision and came away doubtful as to his holy zeal & fitness for the work. A constant arraignment of the Negro as compared to the whites, a burlesque of Negro worship, a repetition of what he did not believe in, and the telling of jokes together with a reiteration of his text ‘ye must be born again’ made up his sermon.” It was in style so closely allied to his “talk” of the morning that I detected little difference between the two” (39).

Yet, Wells also wondered why many preachers in their sermons did not give people the kind of practical information needed for everyday living. On the one hand, it appears that Wells wanted sermons to be different in *form* from the discourse people would hear in nonreligious spaces. On the other, she implies that preachers needed to make their sermons more useful by including information congregations could act upon, thus making them similar in *substance* to the oratory of the popular assemblies. In her February 8, 1886, entry, she praises the delivery style of prominent American evangelist Dwight L. Moody: “His style is so simple, plain and natural. He told the old, old story in an easy conversational way that charms the listener ere he is aware and the secret of his success is, I think—that he does not preach a far-away God—a hard to be reconciled Saviour but uses a natural earnest tone and tells in a natural way without any long drawn doctrine or finely spun theology or rhetoric the simple truth that Christ Jesus came on earth to seek & save that which was lost” (41–42).

Years later in her autobiography, Wells takes the time to comment on the speaking ability of another minister she heard in Liverpool, noting, “He was young, eloquent, and inspired, and it is no wonder that he preached to a church full to overflowing.” She called his “the most wonderful sermon I had ever heard in my life.”<sup>43</sup> Wells’s own extant speeches, all direct indictments of the perpetrators of mob violence and all addressed to popular assemblies, certainly met the criterion of relevance. Wells’s comments on her own writing process reveal a dissatisfaction with what she considered to be her inability to vary her prose style: “I think sometimes I can write a readable article and then again I wonder how I could have been so mistaken in myself. A glance at all my ‘brilliant’ productions fall on my understanding; they all savor of dreary sameness, however varied the subject, and the style is monotonous” (100).

Because oratorical performance was valued highly in the nineteenth century, many ordinary citizens, not preparing to be lawyers, preachers, or public servants, took private elocution lessons to improve themselves. Elocution, “the study of the artful delivery of speech or poetry,” including “training the body and voice,” would have been particularly useful to teachers, like Wells, whose work required daily public performances before a class.<sup>44</sup> Wells took elocution lessons in Memphis from a Mrs. Fannie J. Thompson, a Memphis public school teacher, at two dollars a session, even when she had little money.<sup>45</sup> Her diary mentioned intermittent lessons dependent upon her finances, but clearly these lessons were important to her, as she noted that lack of funds resulted in her not going out one day, “not even to take a lesson” (44). Additional entries find her critiquing her own literary meeting performances and those of others: “Went to Literary meeting at LeMoynes Friday night to see Machbeth played but they read it thro [sic]. It was exceedingly dull & tiresome & some of the pronunciation was execrable in the extreme. Took my 3rd lesson of the season from Mrs. [Thompson] yesterday. The weather was miserably cold as the second ‘blizzard’ came sometime Friday night after we got home, but I went as I realize I am losing valuable time by not going. Did not know it [her assigned reading] thoroughly but got along very well” (34).

Wells gave dramatic readings, like the soliloquy of Lady Macbeth, at the literary society meetings at LeMoynes Normal Institute and other venues: July 4, “Went to Mrs. H[ooks]’s concert & recited ‘The Letter Reading’ & Sleep walking scenes from ‘Lady MacBeth.’ The first was loudly applauded[!] the last, given in my Mother Hubbard was not so effective as I could have wished” (84). The one constant throughout these early entries is reference to taking or having to miss taking lessons with Thompson, for example, “Took no lesson last Saturday as my book had not come” (60).<sup>46</sup> The activity of taking lessons is listed along with what were considered to be other routine events: “Took lessons Tuesday and tried on my dress this evening” (61); “Went to the Literary Friday night. Went to recite Saturday but have made no choice of a piece yet” (66).

Wells’s entries here with respect to her performance at lessons and at the literary meetings contrast sharply with those made during this same period by Laura Hamilton Murray, a young Alexandria, Virginia, mother, who kept a diary between February 1885 and February 1886. Murray was much less enthusiastic about attending such meetings and about her performances once there. She probably participated out of a sense of duty, since her husband, Freeman Murray, was president of the “Literary” at the time. She wrote in a July 9, 1885, diary entry: “I finished my lawn dress. Went to Literary at night. It is as bad as usual. I was given an essay for next time. It is very discouraging.”<sup>47</sup> Two days before the next meeting, she noted that she copied the essay “Expectations” to

read at “Literary.”<sup>48</sup> Following the meeting, Murray wrote: “Finished a dress for baby. Went to Literary read essay to a very slim crowd” (476), adding, probably with little regret, that the club would adjourn for ten months (7/23). Still, it is notable that successful performance at these society events did matter to her, perhaps in part because of her husband’s position but also because she perceived these performances as a means of self-validation, as a confidence builder. Unlike Wells, Murray was first and foremost a homemaker and mother rather than an activist for race and women’s rights.

Murray took occasional trips into the city, referring in her diary to such events as the February 22 dedication of the Washington Monument. On March 4, she attended Grover Cleveland’s first inauguration and a week later took the train into Washington to see *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* “played.” She also mentions “reading a great deal” (2/28) and, on one day in March, writing thirteen letters. Laura Murray’s diary serves as a reminder that many of the black women who kept diaries were ordinary women. We have access to her diary only because it is included among the papers of her husband, who went on to become a civil rights activist, author, and publisher who survived her by over fifty years. Her rhetorical education did not lead to the publication of a biography or a newspaper, nor did she become a schoolteacher. The mother of five children, Murray died at thirty-four. She lived a short life as a hardworking homemaker who also kept a diary in which she inscribed her literacy practices.

#### Mary Virginia Montgomery

Another Mississippian who kept a diary—though some thirteen years before Ida B. Wells began hers—was Mary Virginia Montgomery. In 1891, Wells visited Mound Bayou, Mississippi, an all-black town established by Isaiah Montgomery, Mary Virginia’s brother.<sup>49</sup> Wells mentions him in her autobiography as one of those who assisted her during state tours to promote her paper, the *Free Speech*, and they became “the best of friends,” even though Wells disagreed with his acquiescence, as the only black member of the 1890 Mississippi Constitutional Convention, to the “Understanding Clause,” which provided a way around the fifteenth Amendment that granted all male citizens the vote.<sup>50</sup> Wells probably met Mary Montgomery during her visit.

Montgomery’s early rhetorical education exceeded that of most Southern men or women, black or white, in the years surrounding the Civil War. Born in 1849, Montgomery spent the first sixteen years of her life in slavery on the Hurricane plantation run by Jefferson Davis’s brother, Joseph. Hurricane and Briertield plantations were located on the Davis Bend peninsula near Vicksburg, Mississippi, some 150 miles south of what would later become Mound Bayou. Montgomery’s father, Benjamin, was given certain opportunities on the Davis

plantation not usually afforded to slaves. He helped to run the plantation and encouraged Mary Virginia and all of his children to pursue their interests. When only five years old, she and Isaiah were tutored by a well-educated white man Benjamin met who had moved to the area to teach local black and white children. However, this rare mixture of black and white, free and enslaved students being schooled together in antebellum Mississippi, was soon dissolved.

Her brother wrote of having ready access to the Davis library and to all the reading matter that came into the household as a consequence of his position as "private secretary and office attendant" to Joseph Davis. He noted, "I read a great deal, but it was without method and served only to give a fair knowledge of history and current events, of language and composition by familiarity and use, which has stood me well in hand to this day for I have never studied either."<sup>51</sup> The Davis family came to rely on Isaiah Montgomery for war news he acquired during his trips to town, an interesting reversal of the opening scene in Frances Harper's novel *Iola Leroy*, where the enslaved engaged in subversive eavesdropping as slaveholders discuss the progress of the war. Mary Virginia, no doubt, had similar access.

Since black codes did not allow the sale of property to blacks, Joseph Davis sold in a secret deal the Hurricane and Brierfield plantations to Benjamin Montgomery in November 1866 for \$300,000, to be paid over ten years. Davis Bend developed into a thriving black community even during the turbulent years of Reconstruction. After the Montgomerys took ownership of the Davis Bend property, Mary Virginia held a full-time job at the family store, assisting the bookkeeper and the mail clerk.

Frances Harper, an older contemporary, commented on the lifestyle she observed in Davis Bend during an 1871 visit there of several days, just months before Mary Virginia began her diary. Harper was especially impressed with the kinds of work women like Mary Virginia, whom she described as "an intelligent young lady," and her mother performed. At the same time, Harper acknowledged that the Montgomerys were an exceptional case, "one of the most interesting families I have ever seen in the South."<sup>52</sup>

Information as to her self-education activities comes primarily from extant portions of a diary, covering the period from January 17, 1872, to December 28, 1872, which are filled with rich examples. The diary is an uncommon record of the daily activities of a young black woman, living a relatively comfortable but busy life on a postwar former Mississippi slave plantation. It has been described as depicting "a life so fully programmed with improving activities that it resembles the regimen of the great female Transcendentalist, Margaret Fuller."<sup>53</sup> Montgomery observed a rigid schedule driven in part by household responsibilities, her job at the family store, and an ambitious self-education

project. She read widely during every spare moment, especially at night before retiring. A good deal but not all of this reading may have been based on her hopeful anticipation of matriculation at Oberlin College, where she and her sister Rebecca matriculated for two years. But it is also clear that she derived a great deal of pleasure from her intellectual pursuits.

She arose early, often reading before breakfast, performed household chores, and on certain days went to work in the family store. What is immediately apparent is her passion for learning. Mary Virginia sewed, played the piano, and worked in her mother's flower garden, but her ultimate pleasure seems to have been reading. She wrote as the first entry, "Beautiful morning. I have so much to do that I hardly know how to begin" (1/17).<sup>54</sup> She calls reading "a great recreation" (4/12), and at the close of one early entry she tells of having to "forgo book pleasure" because of illness (1/26). One summer evening, she gleefully notes that she "had leisure to read a small book," adding "I have so much to read and so little time, that I often wish the days were twice as long" (8/17). As in Grimké's journals, there are frequent references to reading aloud, especially with Montgomery reading aloud to her father and to communal silent reading: "Read Politics [?] to Pa until too late to do anything else" (8/19) and "Tonight we have a supplement to the N.Y. Times so full of political interest. We read until time to retire" (4/67).

Of all the material she particularly enjoyed reading over this twelve-month period, works on the interrelated topics of phrenology and self-culture attracted her most. Interest in phrenology, the popular nineteenth-century science of determining a person's mental strengths, abilities, and personality traits from the shape of the skull, frequently merged with an interest in self-improvement under the belief that a knowledge of one's mental strengths and weaknesses would aid in developing self-improvement strategies. In line with this thinking, as Janet Sharp Hermann suggests, Montgomery probably felt that if she could gather enough information about her own capacities, she could improve herself more effectively.<sup>55</sup> On March 25, she mentions having had "a splendid opportunity for studying phrenology . . . almost memorized my chart" and that she had examined the heads of a dozen persons, probably for entertainment. In addition to subscribing to Orson Fowler and Samuel Wells's *American Phrenological Journal*, Montgomery mentions reading and having her father read two works titled "Self-Education" and "Self-Culture." No authors are given for either title, and it is not clear that she refers here to two different works or one, since "self-education" and "self-culture" were often used interchangeably to refer to self-improvement of the mind.<sup>56</sup>

Other topics mentioned include the Ten Commandments, mineralogy, the Punic Wars, zoology, chemistry, United States history, and parallel histories of

the construction of Babel. She enjoyed reading William Cowper's "The Task" and Plutarch, whom she found "difficult for fast reading" (6/20). She also read Alfred Lord Tennyson, John Dryden's translation of Virgil, Lord Byron, and Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, noting that "[i]t bids to be interesting and will entertain me many nights" (4/16). Continuously pursuing her "great recreation," she enjoyed the *Times*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and *Demorest's Illustrated Monthly Magazine*.

Montgomery also wrote her own compositions and critiqued the written and oral productions of others. In the evenings, she practiced and studied composition using Richard Green Parker's *English Composition*.<sup>57</sup> On an unexpected day off, she began an essay on the "situation and requisites of the colored people everywhere" (4/26). In a later entry, she mentions working late on an essay on progress, one with which she was not pleased. After a walk in the garden one morning, she wrote an essay on flowers. One source of ideas and inspiration was Maturin Ballou's compilation *Treasury of Thought*, an encyclopedia of quotations, which she noted would "serve as a reference when engaged in composition" (10/1).

Diary entries also demonstrate attention to public speaking and politics. She read a great deal of history and the *New York Times* during the summer months. She commented on the controversy surrounding the election of local politician George C. McKee.<sup>58</sup> The family attended public meetings. At one, Mary Ann Shadd Cary's brother Isaac D. Shadd spoke. Shadd had earlier given Montgomery a book of Sir Walter Scott's poetry. After hearing one political speech, Montgomery commented regretfully that the speaker was "intellectually unable to do the subject justice" (10/16). On the Fourth of July, all the workers on the large farm were invited to the Montgomery home for dinner, at which time "several made short speeches." It is clear that the family often read and discussed their readings together. Her father also read "Self-Culture" and, according to Montgomery, was "highly pleased with it" (4/3). Once she enrolled at Oberlin, her reading was mainly related to class assignments with other study time devoted to grammar lessons, recitations, and rhetorical exercises.<sup>59</sup>

Montgomery returned to Davis Bend from Oberlin in 1874 and became a teacher. In 1887, after a financial loss and the deaths of her parents, the Jefferson Davis family reclaimed the plantations. When her brother Isaiah subsequently established the all-black town of Mound Bayou, Montgomery joined him and other family members there and served as postmistress until 1902. Throughout the diary, she expresses thanks for the pleasure she derived from reading. The March 6, 1872, entry closes, "Now with sincere gratitude for all blessings lay me down."

### Charles W. Chesnut

It must be acknowledged that Charles Chesnut offers an unusual case of rhetorical training for his time and location, which he developed as fully as the circumstances allowed. His journals present an early example of rhetorical education in rural North Carolina at the end of Reconstruction. His own self-education project supplied much of his education, but he also had the benefit of sound training at the postbellum Howard School in Fayetteville, established in 1867, where he attended between the ages of nine and sixteen. The school was a product of the general postwar push to educate the newly freed, but it turned out to be an exceptional one. It was well-staffed, free, public, and graded, unlike the white schools in the area. In addition, it was funded by the Freedmen's Bureau, the American Missionary Society, the Peabody Educational Fund, and members of the Fayetteville black community. The Howard School was so successful that North Carolina's segregated white graded schools, established some years later, were modeled in part on it.<sup>60</sup> In 1874, when he began writing in his first journal, he was serving as an assistant teacher at the Peabody School in Charlotte, North Carolina, under the tutelage of Cicero Harris, the brother of Robert Harris. Cicero Harris's journal served as a model for his own.

The Harris brothers, in fact, played a major role in shaping the course of Chesnut's education. To improve their situation, the Harris family, members of the Fayetteville antebellum community of free blacks, migrated to Ohio in 1850, eventually settling in Cleveland. Cleveland had a reputation as one of the few cities in Ohio particularly welcoming to African Americans. One historian of the period points out that the Cleveland of 1912 was described as "the negro's Paradise," boasting that from its establishment in 1835, Cleveland admitted black children into its schools "on equal terms with whites."<sup>61</sup> Thus, the Harris brothers attended the integrated Central High School, which adhered to the traditional classical curriculum they carried with them when they returned to Fayetteville to establish the Howard School. It was this curriculum that molded Chesnut and accounts in large part for the kinds of reading materials he refers to in his journal. He began his second journal in 1877 when the state legislature established two normal schools. The one for whites was part of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The Howard School was chosen as the site for the State Colored Normal School with Robert Harris as the first principal and Chesnut as the assistant principal.

More than any of the other diarists considered here, Chesnut understood his diary as an explicit instrument of his self-education project, thereby requiring less of the kind of "sleuthing" generally associated with research on African American literacy practices, wherein one must examine the daily activities of subjects from a variety of perspectives that help to uncover new ways to char-

acterize those activities.<sup>62</sup> His diary, a collection of three journals maintained for varying periods between 1874 and 1883, is not just a record of his rhetorical engagements but is in fact one of his chief rhetorical engagements, and the act of maintaining a diary his chief means of self-education. Thus, Chesnut the diarist frequently announces the purpose for a certain entry or series of entries: "I shall confine myself to no particular subject or order of writing. If a bit of poetry strikes my fancy, or may perhaps be of use to me, I shall immediately insert it. If a scientific fact is new, or particularly impressive, it shall be deemed worthy of a place in my note-book" (85). When he began the third journal in 1881, he had become a normal school principal, so that much of the reading he records—Latin, French, rhetoric, ancient history—represents his efforts to acquire a great deal of education rapidly. Chesnut ends this journal in 1883, before he resigns his post and moves away from the South in search of a more fulfilling life. Few who knew him realized that Chesnut had accomplished a great deal largely through a strenuous self-education regimen, assisted, as were many nineteenth-century African Americans, by access to a local citizen's well-stocked library.

Further, Chesnut's position as the only male in the group of diarists examined here prompts us to consider the extent to which nineteenth-century gender roles might have influenced his responses to his experiences of rhetoric and his opportunities for rhetorical education. Throughout his journal, he conveys a sense of isolation from those around him. But he was isolated from the kind of antebellum rhetorical activity Grinké and Rollin wrote about. He lacked the LeMoyné Normal Institute affiliations of Ida Wells and the familial financial support of the Mound Bayou Montgomerys. None of these differences, however, were the consequence of his sex or of societal gender roles. They were mostly a consequence of location. He did have the advantage of the strong mentoring of the Harris brothers, who were responsible for his schooling and his teaching appointments. They might not have been as supportive of a female student in whom they recognized the same potential. At the age of twenty, he married Susan Perry, a teacher at the Howard School, and became the father of three children during the period in which he maintained the journal (his fourth child was born after they moved to Cleveland). He speaks fondly of his wife ("I was lucky in my marriage" [168]) and expresses concern about the quality of education his children would receive. The children would have been too young to participate in rhetorical activities with him, and he does not mention his wife in this regard. It would, therefore, be difficult to make a well-supported claim regarding gender differences, although they were likely.

Chesnut's early writing practices contain the seeds of his later literary productions. In an August 1874 journal entry, Chesnut, who would later become a

fiction writer, an essayist, and a public speaker, includes an essay he composed after studying George P. Quackenbos's *Advanced Course of Composition and Rhetoric*,<sup>63</sup> first published in 1854. He writes, "As I have been reading 'Quackenbos' Composition & Rhetoric,' I shall write some essay[s], anecdotes, &c. in this book. One is here given" (50).<sup>64</sup> What followed was a brief narrative titled "A Storm at Sea." He abandoned his first attempt to start a second journal, recognizing that he could not give it the time and attention required, adding, "If I wish to improve myself in writing and composition, I must write at some other time than ten o'clock at night, for then my body is fatigued, my eyes are tired, my mind is anything but vigorous and clear, and my hand, as this writing indicates, by no means steady. In order to write well a clear head and a steady hand are prerequisites" (86). Believing that experience is equally as important as training, he later notes that his painstakingly acquired knowledge of the classics, modern languages, and literature; his years of teaching; his life as a family man; and his practice of studying character had prepared him for writing, "not so much [for] the elevation of the colored people as the elevation of the whites." His demonstration of ability, he felt, would advance the "moral progress" of whites (139–40).

He devotes several journal pages to a summary of Blair's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*. The Brodhead edition includes the sections that Chesnut discusses—"Lecture X: Style—Perspicuity and Precision," "Lecture XI: Structure of Sentences," and "Lecture XIV: Origin and Nature of Figurative Language"—and Chesnut here appears to observe the principle that a first step in mastering concepts is basic reiteration of those concepts. He stays very close to Blair's text in his review of the key attributes of perspicuity—purity, propriety, and precision—in his definitions of the periodic sentence, the properties of the perfect sentence, and of tropes.

To practice languages, he wrote some of his entries in German and Latin and, as if in preparation for his later job as a court stenographer, some in phonographic shorthand. He hired a Davidson College graduate to tutor him in Greek. In August 1878, he records his reaction to Homer's *Iliad*. One comment on the work illuminates his search for commonalities across difference: "Yesterday while reading the ante-Homeric history of Troy as given in Dwight's Mythology, we were struck by the story of Iphigenia, and its remarkable resemblance to the scriptural account of the offering of Isaac. The resemblance of many of these legends to the stories of Bible History, as that of Deucalion and Pyrrha, Prometheus, Iphigenia, and others that could be pointed out, only serve to show us that all men come from a common stock and that those events which occurred prior to the dispersion of Babel and shortly afterward, were formerly known to them all, and as Indian and Chinese traditions tell us, were corrupted

by the lapse of time and the ignorance of writing” (88). But a few months later, a telling entry finds him lamenting the fact that he lacks intellectual companionship as he continues his self-education, studying French, German, rhetoric, and stenography. There may have been common threads, but in postbellum North Carolina, Chesnut found them difficult to weave into an intellectual community: “As I have been constantly on my own resources in my solitary studies, I have acquired some degree of *self-reliance*. As I have had no learned professor or obliging classmate to construe the hard passages, and work the difficult problems, I have ‘*persevered*’ till I solved them myself. . . . I have studied and practiced till I can understand and appreciate good music, but I never hear what little there is to be heard. I have studied German and have no one to converse with but a few Jewish merchants who can talk nothing but business. As to procuring instruction in Latin, French, German, or Music, that is entirely out of the question. First class teachers would not teach a ‘nigger’ and I would have no other sort” (93).

On June 28, 1880, near the end of the second journal, Chesnut records components of his own invention process, emphasizing the function of memory in extemporaneous delivery, as he prepared for a series of addresses to the school’s literary society, organized by Robert Harris: “I am trying to think of a subject for an essay,—critical or Biographical, and I also want subjects for a series of lectures which I propose to deliver to the school, or to the literary society next session. I wish to inspire the young men with ambition—honorable ambition, a earnest desire for usefulness and distinction in life. . . . I shall write the lectures or essay and commit them to memory, so that I can deliver them with ease and effect” (143).

Unlike the female diarists, Chesnut did not include critiques of political speeches he might have heard during the years he kept the journal. He reports without comment on hearing Senators James G. Blaine of Maine and Zebulon Vance of North Carolina. He does devote several journal pages to effective preaching styles, using as his source Elder J. W. Davis, minister of the local AMEZ church. Davis advised him on the importance of audience accommodation, an essential rhetorical strategy, but in this instance, the audience addressed became the audience invoked, in that over a series of sermons, the congregation would be brought to the point where only a polished style of delivery was acceptable. According to Chesnut, Davis explained further, “You must first stir them up, which can only be done by excitement. Then you can work on them to greater advantage. It’s like getting in new ground—you must first grub at the soil, break it up, and then you can cultivate it” (130–31). Chesnut’s later tribute to Joseph C. Price, a nineteenth-century AMEZ minister and educator, also demonstrates his appreciation for skilled oratory. At least sixty-five years

old, the fully matured Chesnut argued for the value of well-honed oratorical skills from the perspective of his own experience rather than from the advice of a rhetoric textbook. Chesnut developed the essay around vignettes of Price’s numerous oratorical performances, including a response to a politician who spoke at Shaw University, a speech delivered at Chesnut’s AMEZ church in Fayetteville, his passionate international appeals for Livingston College, a sermon delivered at the 1880 AMEZ General Conference in Alabama, a speech at the Prohibition State Convention in Raleigh, an oration at Lincoln Hall in Washington, D.C., and an address to students at Wofford College in South Carolina. Chesnut folds into his tribute considerable praise of oratory generally, observing that during Price’s time, oratory had not yet become the lost art it became with the development of “modern methods of propaganda,” which removed the spontaneity of direct audience interaction upon which speakers like Price relied heavily to produce effect. He notes that orators “are not born equipped for effective service,” usually being motivated by some cause.<sup>65</sup> Such comments indicate the extent to which the mature Chesnut recognized the value of training in rhetoric—particularly for a disenfranchised people—training that his journals reveal he worked so diligently to acquire.

#### Self-Education Manuals for African Americans

Two of the diarists, Montgomery and Chesnut, refer explicitly to self-help manuals as a source of self-education. Conduct books, variously referred to as success, conduct, self-help, home improvement, and advice manuals, made up a popular genre across the nineteenth century among the white middle class. The belief in the people’s ability to improve and educate themselves manifested itself during the Jacksonian era in the growth of the lyceum movement as well. Many of these manuals sought to regulate the behavior of women and included tips on etiquette, courtship and marriage, and homemaking.<sup>66</sup> Others offered advice on conversation, elocution, letter-writing, and other communication practices. These self-instruction guides carried such titles as *The Skillful Housewife’s Book* (1846), *The Universal Self Instructor: An Epitome of Forms and General Reference Manual* (1882), *The Golden Way to the Highest Attainments: A Complete Encyclopedia of Life* (1889), and *The Imperial Highway: Essays on Business and Home Life with Biographies of Self-Made Men* (1888). In the period following the Civil War, these manuals targeted African American audiences and were often compiled solely by black authors or by black authors in collaboration with white authors, or were compiled by a white author with an authenticating introduction or foreword by a prominent African American.

Claudia Tate convincingly argues that these conduct manuals, published from the post-Reconstruction era to the turn of the century, were manifestations of

the optimism associated with the "Negro improvement" agenda. Engaged in a project of recovery from the devastating effects of slavery, African Americans set about trying to change themselves into acceptable members of white society rather than trying to change society under the belief that such personal change would make a difference.<sup>67</sup> Tate refers specifically to a conduct book by white authors Professor and Mrs. J. W. Gibson, *Golden Thoughts on Chastity and Procreation including Heredity, Prenatal Influences, etc., etc.* (1903), with an introduction by H. R. Butler, black physician at Morris Brown College. This book carries no advice on effective communication except the conversation guideline that one of the qualities of the ideal woman is that she alludes to no subject that would cause pain and, in the section on the "growing boy," the writing guideline that words must be carefully selected, offering the example of William Wordsworth, who was said to have taken an entire day searching for the right adjective to describe the cuckoo.<sup>68</sup> Rather, as the title indicates, the manual focuses on matters associated with reproduction, heredity, and sexuality. African American families at the turn of the century owned a variety of success manuals with such titles as *Sparkling Gems of Race Knowledge Worth Reading* (1897), *Afro-American Home Manual and Practical Self-Educator, Showing What to Do and How to Do It; Being a Complete Guide to Success in Life* (1902), *Bacon Lights of the Race* (1911), *Progress and Achievements of the Twentieth-Century Negro* (1913), and *Hall's Moral and Mental Capsule for the Economic and Domestic Life of the Negro*, compiled in 1905 by Josie Briggs Hall, an African American woman from Texas.

I consider here *The College of Life or Practical Self-Educator: A Manual of Self-Improvement for the Colored Race*,<sup>69</sup> originally published in 1895 by Henry Davenport Northrop, a white Presbyterian minister from Pennsylvania; Joseph R. Gay, a white attorney and publisher; and African American journalist and professor I. Garland Penn. Unlike many of these manuals, this one includes a section on rhetorical concepts. *The College of Life* is divided into two sections, "The Practical Self-Educator" and "The Proper Conduct of Life." The first section contains profiles and images of accomplished African Americans, descriptions of various educational institutions and organizations, and essays on such topics as "honesty," "self-respect," "patience," and "perseverance." "The Proper Conduct of Life" covers rules of etiquette, advice on domestic life ("House-Building"), health ("How to Strengthen the Muscles"), and business matters, ranging from a glossary of business terms to instructions on how to conduct public celebrations. Of particular interest as a site of rhetorical education is book 5 of this section, "Manual of Practical Suggestions and Useful Information for Home and School." Here we find discussions of how to express written thoughts in a correct manner, how to spell correctly, rules of punctua-

tion, illustrations of sign language, and general principles of grammar and style, supported with advice from Hugh Blair on the divisions of style and the methods for attaining a good style<sup>70</sup> and from Richard Whately on the value of revision. Also in book 5 are a list of common errors in writing and speaking, a guide to writing poetry, and a discussion of the care and management of birds and other household pets.

Of course, the volume is a collection of material from a variety of sources, much of it not originally targeted for African American readers. One scholar refers to prescriptive books like *The College of Life* as "strange amalgams which fused representations of black progress with writings by white experts," pointing out that *The College of Life* was republished as *The Afro-American Home Manual and Practical Self-Educator* in 1902.<sup>71</sup> For example, the section "Who Should and Should not Marry" includes images of whites and the advice that "red-whiskered men should marry brunettes but not blonds."<sup>72</sup> In most instances, however, images of African Americans have been inserted. The penultimate section, "Masterpieces of Eloquence," includes excerpts of texts by John Quincy Adams, Daniel Webster, Charles Sumner, Lydia Maria Child, Demosthenes, Horace Greeley, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Charles Dickens, and Robespierre, but none from black orators like Frederick Douglass, Frances Harper, or Bishop Payne. These improvement books, advertised in black newspapers, were quite popular, many going into multiple editions. Both Mary Virginia Montgomery and Charles Chesnut read self-improvement books, Montgomery from *Self-Culture* and Chesnut from *A Handbook for Home Improvement* (40) and the *Student's Manual* (88). During a 1937 Federal Writers' Project interview, Mrs. Randall Lee, a formerly enslaved woman living in Florida, still proudly guarded her copy of *The College of Life*, along with a book on the history of the race.<sup>73</sup> This manual took its title seriously, attempting to include instructions on all aspects of living under the guidelines of respectability in postbellum America. The self-help manual *A Handbook for Home Improvement*, from which Chesnut copied in his journal, was probably a compilation of a series of "pocket manuals" the author Samuel R. Wells published in 1857, since, as Brodhead points out, the pages in each section are numbered separately.<sup>74</sup> The quest for respectability included mastering societal rules for speaking and writing that were laid out in many of these manuals.

#### Race Improvement through Self-Improvement

Given the nature of their advice, these self-improvement manuals, then, present in formal terms a description of the kinds of lives these young diarists documented in their journals. The activities they recorded and the desires they expressed signaled their interest in securing positions of respectability and independence

through engagements with language. The diarists reveal what seem to be thoroughly integrated and fairly routinized rhetorical activities. The reader acquires a sense of their passion for language and their critiques of what their passion conveyed. They read widely, attended lectures, took classes, joined literary clubs, exercised their memory, and wrote—diary entries, poetry, biographies, essays, and personal letters. Their recorded rhetorical engagements are frequently communal and inflected by a racialized sensibility. The communal nature of their reading, writing, listening, and speaking practices suggests that self-education in rhetoric was not an entirely isolated endeavor. Even though they functioned singly as individuals pursuing various kinds of knowledge, these pursuits inevitably led them to external audiences and collective engagements.<sup>75</sup> For example, Charlotte Grimké's reticence toward participation in a literary society was based on the possibility that she might be required to recite publicly. She seemed to relish frequent conversations and reading with friends and family members. Recognizing the value of such associations, she asked Bishop Payne about establishing a literary society in Jacksonville, Florida, years later while she was living there with her husband. Frances Rollin frequently shared drafts of her biography of Delany with Boston acquaintances. Ida Wells was active in the LeMoyné Literary Society and other kinds of literary gatherings. Mary Virginia Montgomery, although not involved with a literary group, often discussed reading material and shared her writing with family members, and the Sunday gatherings of other residents of Davis Bend presented opportunities for communicative engagement. Charles Chesnut, more isolated in his pursuit of a rhetorical education, nonetheless helped to establish a literary association and spoke on the benefits of such alliances. Although he rarely mentioned conversations with others about what he read or wrote, he did debate with Filder Davis about politics and effective preaching styles. The alienation his diary conveys, discussed above, though undeniable, seems to have been as much the result of the limited opportunities for African Americans in the area to develop higher order rhetorical skills, during a time when most were still struggling to acquire basic literacy, as it was a product of Chesnut's sense of superiority. He wished for intellectual companionship and recognized its value, as indicated in this entry on the usefulness of literary societies: "Reading stores the mind with knowledge . . . writing classifies and arranges the results of the reading, but only debate, argument, interchange and criticism of opinion can give one that skill and judgment which is necessary to select the valuable and reject the worthless" (138).

While it would be difficult to imagine that any of these diarists, all born before the abolishment of slavery and maturing in its long and pervasive aftermath, would not have developed a keen sensibility to race matters in general,

they were also guided by the conviction that their self-education projects in particular would lead not only to self-improvement but to improvement of the race. Grimké and Rollin were both concerned about how performances by African Americans might reflect on the race, and both applied their rhetorical skills to race improvement and to presenting what they considered to be more favorable images of people of color to dominant culture through their writing and teaching. Montgomery chose to spend her day off drafting an essay on the needs of the race. Wells's entire career in journalism was enabled by her pursuit of rhetorical training and was devoted to exposing racial violence. Chesnut declares increasingly in his journal that he will go north, write, and show the world that members of his race could achieve. They all imagined that their rhetorical training in some way would serve in race improvement.