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Mental Feasts
Literary and Educational Societies and Lyceums

> Then, members of this society, as ye cultivate the oratorical, do it diligently, and with purpose; remembering that it is by the exercise of this weapon, perhaps more than any other, that America is to be made a free land not in name only but in deed and in truth.
>
> —William G. Allen, 1852

> Every winter this church gave many entertainments to aid in paying off the mortgage, which at this time amounted to about eight thousand dollars. Mrs. Smith, as the chairman of the board of stewardesses, was inaugurating a fair—one that should eclipse anything of a similar nature ever attempted by the colored people, and numerous sewing-circles were being held among the members all over the city. Parlor entertainments where an admission fee of ten cents was collected from every patron, were also greatly in vogue, and the money thus obtained was put into a fund to defray the expense of purchasing eatables and decorations, and paying for the printing of tickets, circulars, etc., for the fair.
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> —Pauline Hopkins, 1900

African Americans created societies for self-improvement, general racial uplift, and mutual aid as early as 1780, when the African Union Society was organized in Newport, Rhode Island.[1] Black educational societies developed subsequently with expanded goals and were variously called literary, educational, reading-room, or debating societies and lyceums.[2] Their development paralleled but rarely intersected with the history of the white American lyceum movement that usually had a community orientation, in that lectures, plays, and debates were held in public spaces. The first white lyceums on record were

established in 1826 to provide a practical and inexpensive education for youth, to keep the community informed, and to train artisans in the practical applications of the sciences.[3] In other words, they were always linked to popular education: in the initial stages in order to have informed workers, but eventually to disseminate practical and useful information community-wide. These early lyceums in the United States were called societies for mutual education and concentrated on education in the sciences. Collective endeavors, they were controlled and supported by the people whom they were organized to educate. They tended to leave political arguments for debating societies.

Carl Bode links the rise of the lyceum movement to the Age of Jackson, beginning in 1828 when Andrew Jackson was elected president, and to the rise of democracy, when the white male population was given more control over government. During this period of populism, Jacksonians pushed to extend voting rights beyond landowners to include all white men of legal age. With the removal of the property requirement, more white American men could vote, and interest grew in having them acquire the education that would better equip them for participation in this new democracy. The lyceum, along with the development of public schools, helped them to acquire it. The lyceum also had the advantage of being cheap, costing nothing, of course, to those who did not participate. As the topic of lectures changed from the application of science to such subjects as biographies of famous persons, the audience included more women and others with broader interests. Bode writes that "[i]f there was ever an American dogma during these decades, it was the desirability of personal improvement."[4] Josiah Holbrook, generally credited with sustaining the lyceum movement, listed several benefits directly associated with the acquisition of literacy, including improving the quality of conversations, establishing libraries, training future teachers, providing an alternative to the "promiscuous assemblage of children" in public schools, and maintaining town histories.[5] The lyceum also provided a legitimate form of evening entertainment; thus, while the education function remained, the lyceum developed into a source of amusement as well.

This overview of the lyceum movement in early-nineteenth-century America provides a framework for considering the ways in which African American lyceum-type societies functioned as sites of rhetorical education.[6] While few African Americans participated in or were welcomed to the meetings of the Anglo-American lyceums, it is important to have a sense of the larger lyceum movement within which these associations developed. The desire for self-improvement, first economic, then intellectual, led African Americans to establish associations of their own to offer mutual support in these endeavors. The organizations had many similar and parallel goals. But the early societies were formed by blacks for

blacks, not so much in response to rejection by white societies as in recognition of a need to launch major, generalized literacy initiatives. African Americans in the late eighteenth century established a variety of such collective initiatives for self- and societal improvement, including abolitionist societies that, in the course of arguing against slavery, gave them opportunities to debate and publish treatises and, concurrently, to lecture for the antislavery cause and against colonization. What I will refer to in this chapter as literary societies grew out of these earlier groups and developed, in some instances, along with them. I refer to them as literary societies because this is the term used most commonly across the century to describe associations of this type, even when their purposes were much broader than those we associate with such societies today when many understand "literary" as fictional, imaginary texts and literary groups as readers coming together to discuss these texts. It is helpful to emphasize instead the etymological links to literacy, reading, writing, and letters.

Those groups loosely identified as literary societies or, to use Dorothy Porter's label, "societies for educational improvement" had education as their primary focus.[7] Applying a broad definition of these groups enables us to consider such sites as the home of Lucy Terry Prince, mentioned in the introduction as an early example of rhetoric in action. In his article on Prince, David R. Proper refers briefly to the claim that in the late eighteenth century, young people were attracted to Prince's home in Deerfield, Massachusetts, gathering there for "recitations, music and poetry on the order of an adult literary circle."[8] However, most histories of literary clubs begin in Philadelphia, where African Americans organized the Colored Reading Society of Philadelphia for Mental Improvement, which William Whipper addressed in 1828. A political conservative, Whipper edited the *National Reformer*, the organ of the American Moral Reform Society and the first black newspaper in Pennsylvania. Whipper's address to the Colored Reading Society, discussed below, is emblematic of the linked purposes these societies frequently served of providing a platform to discuss the advantages of developing rhetorical skills and to address pressing political matters. Within a speech in which he outlines the benefits of establishing such a society, he embeds a powerful invective on the evils of slavery, as if to remind his audience of this oppressive exigence for developing rhetorical skills.[9]

As Porter observes, "The lack of economic security, the desire for social contact, the necessity for moral and educational improvement, and the need for spiritual expression constituted the primary reasons for the establishment of mutual aid societies—fraternal, educational, temperance, and religious organizations—by the free Negro in the North and South during the latter part of the eighteenth century."[10] These societies provided libraries, audiences for the practice of public speaking and debating, and audiences to critique written work, all manifestations of rhetorical education. Functioning as blended mutual aid associations and literary societies, they supported the education of selected youths, provided mutual aid, and applied existing abilities to civic concerns. Holbrook's concern for providing alternative activities is echoed in Samuel E. Cornish's 1833 solicitation of support for the New York Phoenix Society's Library and Reading Room: "Many young men, yea' and old ones too, spend their evenings in improper places, because they have no public libraries, no reading rooms, nor useful lectures, to attract attention, and occupy their leisure hours."[11] Cornish, a Presbyterian minister and a founder of *Freedom's Journal*, served as the agent of the Phoenix Society, which also supported a high school for youth and an evening school for young adults. African Americans formed associations, not surprisingly, according to what Alexander Crummell would later call the "social principle" that leads individuals to come together to achieve some common goal for mutual benefit. In a sermon in which he calls for blacks to organize for a variety of social and educational purposes, he writes, "What I mean by the social principle, is the disposition which leads men to associate and join together for specific purposes; the principle which makes families and societies, and which binds men in unity and brotherhood, in races and churches and nations."[12]

In writing this chapter, I set out with the question "What was the impact of literary societies on rhetorical education among nineteenth-century African Americans?" To answer it, I first consider the types and purposes of literary societies that existed across the century. The question of access to these associations is addressed next. It is one thing to demonstrate that they existed, but another to determine the extent to which African Americans were influenced by them. I then analyze five addresses to literary societies delivered over an eighty-three-year period, starting with William Hamilton's 1809 address to the New York African Society for Mutual Relief and ending with Frances Harper's 1892 address to the Brooklyn Literary Union. Based on the kinds of advice these speakers offered, their addresses help to explain how they and these societies understood the function of such groups. They also help us gauge perceptions of rhetoric over time. Next I consider the specific impact of literary societies on prominent black activists, including Frederick Douglass, Mary Church Terrell, and Anna Julia Cooper. I point out that literary societies also appear in the black fiction of the period, reflecting the reality it interpreted. I discuss the decline and shifting roles of literary societies in closing.

All-Male Societies

While both men and women participated in antebellum literary societies, most of them did so in separate associations. I have grouped them below according

to this distinction, but in many respects their activities were quite similar, although their motivations were often reputedly different. I follow that separation with an overview of some mixed societies and of early literary societies in California and in the Midwest.

The goals expressed in the constitution of the Phoenix Society of New York, established in 1833, are typical of those for most male societies: "To establish circulating libraries formed in each ward for the use of people of colour on very moderate pay,—to establish mental feasts, and also lyceums for speaking and for lectures on the sciences, and to form moral societies,—to seek out young men of talents, and good moral character, that they may be assisted to obtain a liberal education . . ."[13] Of particular interest as a site of rhetorical education is the Demosthenian Institute. Formed in 1838, its purpose appears to have been primarily to prepare young men—most under the age of twenty-three—for public address. The institute provided a place where members could hone their oratorical skills until deemed ready for public performance, sponsoring twenty-one lectures during one season. Unlike most literary societies, the Demosthenian Institute also published a weekly paper, the *Demosthenian Shield,* starting in 1841 with over a thousand subscribers. Here then is an early example of one site of rhetorical education spawning another.[14] The *Colored American* seems to have assumed a parental relationship with the publication, referring to it as "our infantile protégé," gently chastising its fledgling efforts and even its choice of motto, but also extending encouragement ("the editorials are respectable; the selections are amusing and well arranged; the scissors have been used with judgment").[15]

The Philomathean Society of New York was organized in 1830 "by some of our colored young men, for the purpose of their mutual improvement," in the words of the correspondent to the *Liberator,* who signed the article "A Spectator." He comments on the events at the first anniversary meeting of the society. The meeting opened with a "suitable and well written address" by the president, followed by a reading of the society's constitution. A "collar of distinction" was awarded to a member for his prize essay on education. A recitation by another member of John Dryden's "Ode on Alexander's Feast" earned the praise of being "a fine specimen of Elocution." The meeting ended with another address, this one by Mr. J. G. de Grasse, author of the prize essay, which the "Spectator" deemed "well-written" and "pronounced with much eloquence and animation."[16]

It is important to remember that many of these associations were peopled by young men, like those in the Demosthenian Institute mentioned above, speaking or learning to speak publicly for the first time. They usually recited the works of others but occasionally delivered original compositions. Those performances

that were prepared without the aid of teachers were "mainly indebted for their improvement to the mutual suggestions and criticism imparted within their own little circle."[17] Members engaged in a form of peer critiquing. One observer of such a demonstration made the following comments: "We had the pleasure . . . to attend an exhibition of exercises in Elocution, conducted by an association who enjoyed the aid of no master in the art, but struggled forward only by their own exertions, and gained what skill they have gained, self-taught. . . . We have had constant experience from youth, at many schools, of exercises in elocution, and we must say that these youths of twelve and sixteen have equaled any we have ever seen. In full understanding of their pieces, just emphasis, distinct enunciation, correct action, good management of voices, and natural, unaffected manner, they would stand a comparison with any school in the city."[18]

This commentary resonates with the prevailing discourse of racial improvement, arguing that ability to perform these rhetorical maneuvers demonstrated racial equality. These students, the writer observes, "would stand a comparison with [white students in] any school in the city." As I note throughout this chapter, rhetorical ability as a sign of intelligence and, therefore, as deserving of all the rights of citizenship is a recurring theme in nineteenth-century black discourse—in speeches, letters, and articles in the black press.

The persistence and significance of these literary societies in some cities is evident in the 1869 progress report of a black Baltimorean speaking at a meeting called to petition the city government for better schools. He mentions the total assets of black churches, the financial holdings of black residents, and the seventy-nine beneficial associations that attend to the needy, but the first evidence he offers that the petition merits consideration is that "[f]or a number of years, and through the darkest days of slavery, we have kept in operation seven literary and debating societies."[19] Citing the seven continuous literary societies before ticking off monetary accomplishments suggests that the speaker placed a higher value on this accomplishment as a sign of culture. It is a reminder that the discourse of valuation, in which blacks felt compelled to demonstrate their "merit" for basic human needs and desires, was ongoing. These societies not only provided a site in which to develop the rhetorical skills needed to argue for their rights; their very existence helped to make the case.

Based on this attention to elocutionary excellence, we know, then, that these organizations were created to provide a venue for cultivating and enhancing various kinds of rhetorical skills that would be used to argue for important causes. In addition, charging admission to association-sponsored rhetorical "exhibitions" often generated funds to support these initiatives. For example, a notice in the September 14, 1839, *Colored American* announced a joint exhibition of the Philomathean and Phoenixonian Societies for the benefit of "the

unfortunate captives of the schooner Armistead [*sic*], now lying in jail at New Haven, awaiting their trial for alleged piracy."[20] For the occasion, they assembled a ten-piece orchestra, which rendered several musical selections grouped around three addresses, and the recitation of John Greenleaf Whittier's poem "Slave Ship." *Frederick Douglass' Paper* for November 3, 1854, carried a notice of a course of literary exhibitions, composed of eleven speeches, at the First Congregational Church, with proceeds benefiting the church and the sponsoring Young Men's Literary Productive Society.[21] The *Provincial Freeman* advertised a "Mental Feast for the Benefit of Miss Amelia Freeman" to help purchase a stove, desks, and other supplies for a schoolhouse, during which the audience would be treated to "brief but pertinent speeches."[22]

These literary associations were not limited to the eastern United States. Records indicate emerging literary societies in Michigan, Ohio, and across the country.[23] In 1853, the San Francisco Athenaeum, the first black literary society in California, was organized by Jacob Frances, Jonas Townsend, and William Newby. It served as a forum for debate on a variety of racial and political issues. During the five years of its existence, the society established a library and reading room and launched the city's first black newspaper, *Mirror of the Times*.[24] In 1855, Newby, who served as San Francisco correspondent to *Fredrick Douglass' Paper*, described in one communication the establishment of a "Musical and Literary Society" by the "young men of Sacramento (colored)," as well. In the mid-1850s, blacks in California had ample opportunities to put their rhetorical skills to work in such public venues as the state conventions, inaugurated that same year.[25]

Female Societies

Women's societies tended to be smaller, and many initially convened in the homes of members. The meetings generally opened and closed with prayer and included readings and recitations. Describing the activities of Philadelphia's Female Literary Association (FLA), William Lloyd Garrison writes in the *Liberator*'s "Ladies Department" column of June 30, 1832, "Nearly all of them write almost weekly, original pieces, which are put anonymously in a box, and afterwards criticized by a committee." Garrison took the liberty in his position as editor to publish many of their pieces, especially those surrounding debates on colonization and emigration to Mexico. Thus, more is known about the activities of this black women's literary society than any other.[26]

At some literary society meetings, a young, inexperienced speaker would often be invited to address the group, providing an interested but sympathetic audience before which the beginning rhetor could practice and creating thereby a site of rhetorical education for all involved. At the third anniversary celebration of the FLA, an address was delivered by "a colored youth," who opened with the following ingratiation: "Trusting that you will extend to me your forgiveness for any errors that may be committed by me, this being, as you are all well aware, no doubt, the first time that I have ever embarked in any subject of this nature." The youth, not identified as to sex, goes on to expand upon the accomplishments of writers from antiquity to Phillis Wheatley, encouraging the women to continue their own course of self-improvement.[27]

African American emigrants to Canada took the tradition of literary societies with them. Mary Bibb, after she became the widow of abolitionist fugitive slave Henry Bibb, formed the Windsor Ladies Club, also referred to as the Mutual Improvement Society, in 1854. Apparently, this was the first female literary society in Canada. Heather Murray points out in her work on Canadian literary societies that unlike Anglo-Canadian women, who established literary clubs some twenty-five years later, the first black women migrating to Canada would have known of and may have been members of women's literary societies in the United States.[28] They drew on that tradition as their need for self-improvement and community action increased. These black Ontario societies engaged in both cultural and political work.

One advantage of these separate societies was that the women could build their self-confidence and leadership skills away from the frequently domineering presence of men. Many of the women's societies grew out of the home sewing circles and mutual aid societies, established to provide aid for those in need. Even when the purpose was broader, the rationale was often that developing rhetorical skills would help women have a greater moral influence on their children and husbands. Consider, for example, this passage detailing the particulars of that influence from an address to the FLA, delivered shortly after it had been organized in 1831: "It is nothing better than affectation to deny the influences that females possess; it is their part to train up the young mind, to instill therein principles that may govern in maturer years; principles that influence the actions of the private citizen, the patriot, the philanthropist, lawgivers, yea, presidents and kings."[29] Although these organizations did not reject the traditional roles assigned to women, the organizers did see them as opportunities for increased community activism as well. In her address to the FLA, Sarah Mapps Douglass, one of the chief organizers, requested that the "readings and conversation should be altogether directed to the subject of slavery."[30] The women understood that finely tuned rhetorical skills could serve the abolitionist cause, and many used the societies as training grounds for, if not sites of, antislavery work at the same time. Julie Winch reminds us that it was "hardly coincidental that members of the literary societies also enrolled in the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society" and points to the dual activities of

women like Sarah Douglass, her mother, Grace Bustill Douglass, Sarah Forten, Harriet Forten Purvis, and many others.[31]

Mixed-Gender Societies

Membership in some societies apparently always included men and women. The Gilbert Lyceum, organized in 1841, admitted both men and women, as indicated by a list of those present at the first meeting, which included the names of Sarah Douglass and Harriet Purvis, along with names of prominent Philadelphia men. The April 23, 1858, edition of the *Liberator* announced the organization of the Histrionic Club, with William C. Nell as president. The "literary association" was established "by a few of the most enterprising colored men and women for their own improvement and elevation." At the meetings, they read their own pieces or those from the "best authors." The fact that the association included the participation of both men and women is mentioned three times, suggesting that this promiscuous activity in 1858 was still worth noting.[32] William J. Watkins, outspoken abolitionist and cousin of Frances Harper, reviewed a debate sponsored by the Union Literary Association in 1855. Watkins, who served as associate editor of *Frederick Douglass' Paper,* noted that the association was "composed of young gentlemen and ladies of color." The debate was on the relative merits of George Washington and Christopher Columbus, during which Watkins decided that the disputants "acquitted themselves very creditably."[33] The first mixed-sex literary society in Ontario was the African Canadian Wilberforce Lyceum Educating Society, established in 1850.[34]

An 1852 letter to *Frederick Douglass' Paper* provides one example of black women's participation in an institution-based society and in rhetorical education generally. The communication concerns the hiring and teaching practices at Central College in McGrawville, New York, founded in 1849 by the American Baptist Free Mission Society, as both interracial and coeducational. Three blacks served on the faculty during its twelve years of existence, and one of the senior commencement speakers at the June 1858 ceremony was John B. Reeve, an African American.[35] The writer observes: "The sexes here obtain the same mental discipline. All are required to take the same part in rhetorical exercises. I found the young ladies as much engaged and interested in preparing for their declamations as I have ever known young men to be; and from all accounts given both of their weekly and yearly exercises in this direction, they prove themselves to be as susceptible to improvement, and as capable of attaining to a high degree of perfection."[36] It is likely that some of these "young ladies" were black women, given the school's progressive agenda. An underground "station" was even operated on the college grounds. Grace A. Mapps, a cousin of Sarah Douglass, is credited with being the first black woman to graduate from the McGrawville school in 1852, the same year the letter was sent to *Frederick Douglass' Paper.* The writer adds that a "literary society in connection with the college, in which ladies and gentlemen are received upon terms of equality, has been voluntarily organized by the students." The letter goes on to quote one of the women students: "I am not expecting to be a public speaker; but I should like to be prepared to express myself intelligibly, either before a society of ladies or in a mixed assembly, if I should ever be called to do so unexpectedly."[37] The student carefully constructed her desire for rhetorical training within midcentury societal boundaries for women. The literary society may have received both sexes "upon terms of equality," but all did not necessarily use their developing abilities for the same purposes.

In an issue of the *Colored American,* Samuel Cornish's eulogy for Henrietta D. Ray, first wife of New York abolitionist Charles B. Ray, provides further evidence of society activity among women. He observed that Ray was "first president of a society of young ladies, formed for the purpose of acquiring literary and scientific knowledge, and though not blessed with an extended systematic education, yet she possessed a giant mind for improvement, and persevering industry in making investigations."[38] Cornish here refers to the New York Ladies Literary Society. A subsequent *Colored American* article gives notice of the society's third anniversary celebration and posts the "Order of Exercise," listing the typical sequence of events at these society anniversary celebrations: (1) a reading, (2) the constitution, (3) an opening address, (4) two musical selections, (5) a dialogue, (6) another musical selection, (7) an address on the improvement of the mind, (8) a musical selection, (9) a poem, (10) a musical selection, (11) a dialogue, (12) a musical selection, (13) an epilogue, (14) a musical selection, (15) a closing poetic address, and (16) a musical selection.[39]

These associations were valued for entertainment as well as for educational purposes. A post–Civil War correspondent to the *Christian Recorder* laments the lack of "a literary and debating society" in Chillicothe, Ohio, adding that it is "one thing they need very badly here. . . . For there is no enjoyment whatever for the young in this city. There are some very talented and nice young ladies and gentlemen in this city, that would deem it a great pleasure if there was something of the kind here."[40] It is interesting to note the concern here for providing a source of amusement rather than an opportunity for racial uplift or self-improvement, as in so many of the calls for literary societies.[41]

Many of these associations were formed within black churches, especially in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They too promoted learning in their efforts to challenge notions of black inferiority. A report on the proceedings of one church-sponsored society in Washington, D.C., highlights the competitive nature of rhetorical performance in these sites. The Washington correspondent

to the *Christian Recorder* narrates the events of a meeting of the Israel Lyceum of Israel AME Church, where during a "Grand Literacy Demonstration," Mrs. Lydia Maddon from Baltimore delivered a "presentation address" with "the best of elocution" while bestowing the gift of a Bible. The correspondent goes on to mention a rivalry between the Baltimore and Washington women with respect to oratorical abilities, a rivalry the writer mentions only because "we are not disposed to remain silent when our dignity is unjustly assailed."[42]

The Brooklyn Literary Union of Siloam Presbyterian Church became one of the best known in that city. Organized in 1886, it spawned others, like the Literary Circle of Concord Baptist Church and the St. Augustine Protestant Episcopal's Literary Sinking Fund. They sponsored "debates, lectures, elocution contests, recitations, musical recitals, and discussions of pertinent issues" and followed a prescribed agenda. The agenda for the Brooklyn Literary Union carried specific time limits for each item for debate: no paper should last longer than twenty minutes unless agreed upon; debates should be conducted between four disputants limited to ten minutes each; and papers and debates would be followed by a discussion lasting no longer than forty-five minutes. Frederick Douglass, Frances Harper, T. Thomas Fortune, educator Maritcha Lyons, and physician Susan McKinney were among the prominent persons affiliated with the Brooklyn Literary Union.[43] Fortune's newspaper, the *New York Freeman*, carried regular reports on the activities of this literary society. For example, the June 26, 1886, issue called into question the originality of a paper, apparently taken from an encyclopedia, that had been read to the society by J. A. Arneaux, described in *Men of Mark* as a "Professional Tragedian, 'Black Booth'—Editor—Poet—Graduate of the French Institutions of Learning."[44]

Another column includes a detailed account of a December meeting of the union, providing a clearer sense of what took place at late-nineteenth-century literary club gatherings. The program opened with an essay on "society," followed by a musical selection, leading up to the evening's debate on a question that, with a few minor changes, is still under discussion in the twenty-first century: "Should the Negro be independent in politics?" The first participant spoke in favor of independent voters, "free from political shackles," not tied to any political party. The second speaker responded in the negative, arguing that blacks could not afford to take an independent stand. The third speaker, again taking the affirmative, argued that the "Negro had been used as a political football long enough," and the final speaker took the compromising position that blacks should distribute themselves among the parties at the polls. The literary club voted overwhelmingly against the question. Following the debate, a resolution petitioning Congress to pass the Blair Education Bill passed unanimously.[45] At this same meeting, the union also authorized the board of the Brooklyn

Literary Union to publish Rufus L. Perry's paper on the Cushite[46] and to sponsor a fund-raiser, a Liberian Coffee Party, to pay off the church piano. The meeting closed with the announcement that the titles of the following week's lectures were "Heredity in Character" and "Stanley, the African Explorer."

This meeting contained several instances of rhetorical action and opportunities for rhetorical education: the speeches, debate, resolutions, petitions, and approval of a publication. But they primarily represented discursive engagements with a wide range of substantive matters all related in some way to the future of the race and its African connections. Rhetorical education in this setting occurred secondarily as a by-product of political activism. The decision to publish Perry's paper also reminds us of the direct link between these societies and various publication venues, like Fortune's *New York Freeman*, where he often published papers delivered at the meetings, as did the black antebellum newspaper editors. A paper presented at a literary society meeting might be published in a newspaper or by the society itself or, as in the case of Perry's paper, be developed into a book for even wider distribution.

Postbellum literary societies were active in Southern cities as well. For example, the *New York Freeman* reports on a meeting of the Lyceum at the Congregational Church in Raleigh, North Carolina, where a debate was held on the U.S. Senate's rejection of James C. Matthews as Recorder of Deeds for the District of Columbia, as well as a meeting of the Baltimore Monumental Literary and Scientific Association, where a paper on hygiene was read by R. M. Hall.[47]

Literary Societies and the Question of Access

It is clear in looking back over this brief overview of literary societies as sites of rhetorical education that only a small percentage of nineteenth-century African Americans participated in them. The same names tend to recur (Cornish, Douglass, Mapps, Garnet, Forten, Remond, Watkins, Terrell, Fortune) and the same cities (Philadelphia, Washington, Boston, and New York). Yet these facts do not diminish the contribution of literary societies to black rhetorical education, especially when we consider that much good abolitionist work came out of them. I set out to identify a variety of sites without concern for numbers. All African Americans did not participate in any one site. Still, it is worth considering this question of access (my version of the talented-tenth debate) because the answers reveal important links across class, to the extent that class distinctions existed.

In Cornish's call for support of the Phoenix Society's Library and Reading Room, he also described in the plans of operation the practice of listening and responding to texts being read aloud. Classes of 25 to 30 students were to begin in staggered two-hour intervals—4, 6, and 8 o'clock—three evenings per

week, presumably to accommodate varying schedules. So on a given evening, up to 90 persons could conceivably participate, or up to 270 per week. Readers would be appointed to read for an hour, after which the auditors would gather in small groups to discuss what they heard and, significantly, to discuss other "occurrences of the day."[48] This aspect of the plan encouraged civic engagement with the day's occurrences as well as with literary materials. Of this practice, Elizabeth McHenry observes that "in the case of the earliest African American literary societies, the emphasis on the performative aspect of literary learning and on the sharing of texts indicates that membership in a literary society and basic literacy—the ability to read—did not necessarily go together. . . . Reading texts aloud fostered an environment in which a truly democratic 'sharing' of texts could take place, and it ensured that cohesive groups could be formed from individuals with widely divergent literacy skills."[49]

It is clear from Cornish's call for support that the reading room invited the participation of all interested parties. The levels of literacy of those who participated would have varied; thus, as McHenry notes, the practice of reading aloud could have been, in part, a way of sharing texts communally, even among those who could not read. John Brewer, in his book on eighteenth-century English culture, observes that with the rise of print culture, the practice of reading aloud "enabled non-readers to share in the pleasures of the literate."[50] But reading aloud was also was an art in itself, and members of reading groups often took turns reading to one another to stimulate discussion, as in the small groups described above—a blending of oral and written forms of expression. Brewer and others also refer to this practice as "intensive" versus "extensive reading," applicable here in that public and private intensive readings occurred in contexts with scarce reading material such that the same material was read over and over and was highly valued.[51] Extensive reading was more casual, leisurely, and personal, because the books were not scarce. It is quite likely that many who participated in reading rooms would be considered intensive readers, who were not necessarily members of the sponsoring society.

The Philadelphia Library Company of Colored Persons, established in 1833, was apparently quite successful at reaching diverse audiences. In a December 2, 1837, article in the *Colored American*, a visitor to one of its meetings reported that the library contained nearly a thousand volumes, "neatly labeled and arranged" in a spacious room. The members met two or three evenings a week to debate in front of "large and improving audiences of young of both sexes, and by many of the aged and patriotic, without distinction of color."[52] Such descriptions suggest that whether all those who participated in these events officially belonged to the sponsoring society or not, the societies nonetheless functioned as sites of rhetorical education. What is important is the notion of sharing texts among individuals with a range of literacy skills.

The author of an article in the *Colored American*, possibly Cornish, who was editor at the time, seems to have been especially attuned to the need for these organizations to reach a wider public and refers to it frequently. Five years after the earlier solicitation of support for a reading room, a particularly urgent article, pointedly titled "Literary Societies," opens with the claim that they are more important than other kinds of associations because they bring people with the potential to become public speakers together in an environment where they can compare their abilities. But after acknowledging the good work already being done by existing societies, the author adds that "there is, unfortunately, an exclusiveness about those associations which deters the stranger from making efforts to gain admission into them; they are more like literary clubs than the *public* Societies; consequently their numbers must necessarily be few." He continues, "We need a literary institution which will be in all its bearing, essentially *public*." He then puts forth a plan for a "Union Lyceum, for the purpose of establishing a *public* Reading Room and Library." The plan calls for black and white members, yearly dues of about two dollars, a minimum of twenty-five members to draw up a constitution, and fifty members to begin operations.[53] The article does not discredit the existing societies but calls for a different kind of association to provide various forms of rhetorical education to a broader public, a word repeated several times in the article.

In a rare reference to a specific work read during a reading room session, Amos G. Beman recalls knowledge of a small group assembled "to hear David Walker's 'Appeal to the Free people of Color,' read through." The scene he reconstructs here incorporates some of the key elements of effective rhetorical education—the shared experience of a thought-provoking text followed by discussion. This article, third in a series of occasional pieces Beman submitted to the *Colored American* on the sources of mental improvement, expounds upon the benefits of participating in debating societies and "meeting together for the purpose of the free interchange of thoughts and opinions." Beman emphasizes the importance of engaging in stimulating conversation as a kind of mental exercise, along with the less interactive rhetorical activities of reading, listening to others read, speaking, or debating—a more structured form of exchange.[54]

Literary societies had their purposes; reading rooms and public lyceums others. As mentioned, the distinction between actual dues-paying members of these societies and those they reached through the kinds of activities they sponsored, such as the reading rooms and lecture series, is worth remembering when we consider access. Rhetorical education took place nevertheless.

Addressing Literary Associations

In this section, I consider implied and explicit rhetorical principles in five addresses to literary societies. We can develop a clearer sense of these associations by paying attention to what speakers said in addressing them. William Hamilton delivered the first address considered at an 1809 meeting of the New York African Society for Mutual Relief on the anniversary of its founding. While not strictly a literary society, this kind of group represents the base upon which many of them were founded. William Whipper's 1828 address to the Colored Reading Society of Philadelphia for Mental Improvement is considered next. In it he critiques the florid style of delivery as an essential component of activist rhetoric. William G. Allen, a professor at New York Central College and, according to one anthology, "the earliest known [African American] to have taught rhetoric," delivered a formal lecture on rhetoric and rhetorical practices to the college's Dialexian Society in 1852.[55] In this address, Allen combines a review of basic rhetorical principles with a call to apply them in service to justice and equality. Charles Chesnutt's 1881 postbellum address at a meeting of the Normal Literary Society of Fayetteville, North Carolina, offers evidence of the changing roles of these organizations. Finally, "Enlightened Motherhood," a speech Frances Harper delivered before the Brooklyn Literary Union in 1892, prescribes traditional roles for literary clubwomen in order to rear sons for public life.[56] These addresses span the century and serve as instructive models of the rhetorical practices they promote.

Hamilton's Address to the New York African Society for Mutual Relief

In 1809, William Hamilton spoke on the anniversary of the founding of the New York African Society for Mutual Relief. It was also a celebration of the anniversary of the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade, a piece of legislation that would become the occasion for numerous celebrations and speeches, including several from Hamilton himself. Hamilton, president and cofounder of this mutual aid society, also helped to organize early literary societies in New York, including the Phoenixonian Society and the Philomathean Society.[57] The mutual aid societies often functioned as literary societies as well, with the difference often being only in chief purpose. By acquiring the education that many literary societies provided, members were better positioned to argue for mutual aid. Education supported personal improvement and community development.[58] Hamilton, thirty-six years old at the time of this address, has been described as "the foremost black intellectual of the first quarter of the nineteenth century."[59] He was influential among African American political activists and understood the kinds and modes of arguments that were needed to promote the abolition of slavery and the general progress of the race. It is important to remember

Porter's point that "[t]he lecture platform of these societies was the work[shop] and the preparatory school for many of the Negro anti-slavery lecturers who later won fame in America and England as public speakers."[60]

In this address, Hamilton gives high praise to a published document he calls "a specimen of African genius." Hamilton's reference to "genius" resonates with the belletristic discourse of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which privileged a kind of native ability over the tactics of imitation or invention drawing on cultural topoi. Hugh Blair, one of the chief proponents of this view, writes, "Genius is a word, which, in common acceptation, extends much farther than to the objects of Taste. It is used to signify that talent or aptitude which we receive from nature, for excelling in any one thing whatever."[61] This possibility of a native "African genius" was still an open question in 1809, and one of Hamilton's motives in delivering this speech was to answer affirmatively, pushing against Blair and others. The publication not named in his speech was *Peter Williams's Oration on the Abolition of the Slave Trade: Delivered in the African Church in the City of New York, January 1, 1808. With an Introductory Essay by Henry Sipkins.* The audience would have nodded knowingly in agreement with this epithet and smiled at the two young rhetors, Williams and Sipkins, both about twenty years old, who were almost certainly in the audience. Some had doubted Williams's ability to produce the oration Hamilton held up, one of the earliest abolitionist speeches to be published.[62] Nineteenth-century black activists knew that oratory was their chief way of communicating with large audiences. By publishing their speeches separately in pamphlet form or in the press or by including them in their autobiographies, they were able to extend the reach of their messages and at the same time provide tangible proof of intellect for the benefit of what John Ernest calls their "always implicit white audience of judgment."[63] Speeches like Hamilton's, several of which were also published as pamphlets, were almost always addressed to these two categories of hearers and readers: the physical audience of literary society members, who would be expecting a certain kind of epideictic rhetoric combined with a push for social action, and skeptical white readers and auditors, who were not fully persuaded of their rhetorical ability.[64] The rhetors and the black members of their primary audiences acquired rhetorical education in the process of delivering, hearing, and reading such speeches on numerous occasions.

Especially in the years immediately following the abolition of the slave trade, black speakers like Hamilton felt compelled to offer "proof" of black intellectual ability, evidence of the race's humanity. After commenting on the significance of the occasion, Hamilton, as if to disprove white theories of black inferiority, held up the publication as an example of the kind of rhetorical work needed to counter such claims. Of the document, he observes the following:

"[T]he address or frontispiece to the work is a flow of tasteful language, that would do credit to the best writers; the oration or primary work is not a run of eccentric vagaries, not now a sudden gust of passionate exclamation, and then as sudden calm and an inertness of expression, but a close adherence to the plane of the subject in hand, a warm and animating description of interesting scenes, together with an easy graceful style."[65] For Hamilton, the strength of Williams's prose is its evenness of style and the avoidance of excesses. It may represent his attempt to privilege a cerebral over a more emotional delivery, generally associated with black worship in some churches. Hamilton concludes this praise of rhetorical invention and style with the hope that such evidence of genius will silence white assertions of "superiority of souls" (37). Some disagreed with the strategy of seeking equality through demonstrations of intelligence, arguing instead that engaging in that contest elided the truth that equality was a natural right. Still, of interest here is Hamilton's singling out of rhetorical abilities as proof of genius, a clear indication that early-nineteenth-century activists held oral and written eloquence in high regard. Hamilton, at thirty-six, was claiming a space in public discourse for his younger black activist colleagues. He recognized fully the importance of an effective black public voice, one that influenced through argument and evidence. His address goes on to exhort the officers and board members of the New York African Society for Mutual Relief to persevere in their good works.

Related to Hamilton's notion of "African genius" are these two excerpts from subsequent speeches. In her 1837 address to the Ladies Literary Society of New York, schoolteacher Elizabeth Jennings, who would later win a lawsuit against New York's Third Avenue Railroad Company, also spoke about the need for women to develop "powers and dispositions of the mind" lest "our enemies will rejoice and say, we do not believe they [people of color] have any minds; if they have, they are unsusceptible of improvement."[66] An excerpt from an 1840 speech by Austin Steward, president of the African American State (New York) Convention, addressed "to the [white] People of the State," provides another near-midcentury example of the push to demonstrate merit and intelligence to whites by pointing to "our people['s]" participation in literary associations: "In all parts of the state, from Montauk to Buffalo, literary and debating societies and clubs exist among our people, in city, town, and village. In some instances, these societies are adorned and made more useful by libraries and reading rooms. Our schools and associations are continually sending forth a host of youth, with strong determination and purpose of subserving the best and highest interests of their proscribed race."[67] Of particular significance here is that this proclamation was addressed to the citizens of the State of New York as part of the general epideictic project that blacks during this period seemed

invested in—to provide what many counted as evidence that African people were intelligent and educated, or becoming educated, and consequently formed literary societies.

William Whipper's Address to the Colored Reading Society of Philadelphia for Mental Improvement

Jacqueline Bacon and Glen McClish observe that extant texts from meetings of these societies often reveal a keen awareness of the importance of applying rhetorical principles in the process of acquiring this much-needed education.[68] Among other examples, the authors point to William Whipper's 1828 address to the Colored Reading Society of Philadelphia for Mental Improvement, in which he speaks about the level of rhetorical training that such societies might support: "I am well aware that the age in which we live is fastidious in its taste. It demands eloquence, figure, rhetoric, and pathos; plain, honest, common sense is no longer attracting. No: the orator must display the pomp of words, the magnificence of the tropes and figures, or he will be considered unfit for the duties of his profession" (107). Coming early in the address, the statement can be understood as part of Whipper's engagement in a form of introductory *insinuatio,* wherein through the modesty topos, he enhances his ethical appeal. In the paragraph preceding this quote, Whipper offers an "apology for my inadequacy" and "regret[s] that the task of awakening these reflections in your minds had not devolved on some one more competent to do justice to the important subject" (107). This statement could be understood as supporting a view of rhetoric as window dressing, a "pomp of words," or flowery but necessary emotional language lacking substance. It expresses sentiments that resonate with Hamilton's in his praise of Peter Williams's speech ("not a run of eccentric vagaries, not now a sudden gust of passionate exclamation") cited above. Bacon and McClish, however, offer a reading that does not support what they refer to as an "antirhetorical stance": "At first glance, this pronouncement resembles the late seventeenth-century antirhetorical stance championed by the likes of Bishop Sprat of the Royal Society and John Locke. As Whipper continues, however, it becomes clear that his ostensible attack on rhetoric is more probably a means of simultaneously laying claim to the spirit of the Scots rhetoric of the previous century ('plain, honest, common sense') and of supporting a self-acquired, democratic eloquence particular to radical antebellum discourse. . . . Whipper transforms the belletrists' notion of taste into a democratic principle that empowers previously marginalized African Americans to participate in the civic sphere."[69]

About half of Whipper's speech expands upon the cultural benefits of creating a reading society. He discusses the general advantages of mental improve-

ment and counters the objections of those who say there are better ways to spend their time. He also points to the ways in which such a society contributes to the cultivation of taste. Bacon and McClish have traced the influence of eighteenth-century Scottish rhetorical theory, including faculty psychology, education, and industry in contrast to genius, the cultivation of taste, and the use of a variety of "stylistic pyrotechnics."[70] Whipper concludes this portion of the speech affirming the importance of a rhetorical education:

> It is therefore not without good reason that in a system of education so much attention is required to the study of belles lettres, to criticism, to composition, pronunciation, style, and to everything included in the name of eloquence.
>
> 'Tis vain to reject these things as useless ornaments; taste is the gift of God, and was given to be used. In the present state of society, attention to these things is absolutely necessary to usefulness and respectability. (112–13)

Yet Bacon and McClish caution that his rhetoric should not be understood "as merely imitative of Scots theory or complacent about current inequities in discursive power."[71] I agree. Whipper's speech is indeed as much a political document as an Enlightenment-inflected treatise on the benefits of a sound rhetorical education. The second half of this text can be understood as an enactment of the benefits expounded upon in the first half in that Whipper addresses his early-nineteenth-century audience on a matter of grave concern. In 1828, America was a slaveholding republic with close to one-fifth of the U.S. population enslaved. Halfway into his speech, Whipper launches into a powerful antislavery invective in which he attacks Southern lawmakers and slaveholders in particular. His chief evidence is the contradiction between the freedom many invoke as justification for the revolution that severed the United States' ties to Great Britain and the enslavement of Africans in this same freedom-founded nation. In Jeremiadic fashion, he predicts destruction of the defenders of slavery if they continue along this path in clear violation of "the letter and spirit of the constitution of the United States" (114). He charges the members of this newly formed literary society to increase their ambition as a catalyst for change, ambition "to be possessed by every useful citizen" (118).

Approximately twenty-four years old at the time of this address, Whipper grew up in Columbia, Pennsylvania, in the home of a lumberman for whom his mother worked. He became a well-to-do lumberman himself and a public voice in abolitionist discourse. Little is known of his early education, but as he indicates in his address, he had knowledge of rhetorical practices and principles derived from his reading of "Scotch philosophy" and the "ancient classics" (111)

and absorbed from nineteenth-century oratorical culture in general. Letters authored by Whipper also routinely appeared in *Freedom's Journal*, the *Christian Recorder*, the *Colored American*, and *Frederick Douglass' Paper*. These letters, usually contentious, were based on the unpopular position of the American Moral Reform Society that developing the morality of African Americans would gain them acceptance into white institutions.[72]

William G. Allen's Address to the Dialexian Society of New York Central College

A quote from Allen's address to the Dialexian Society—"Then, members of this society, as ye cultivate the oratorical, do it diligently, and with purpose; remembering that it is by the exercise of this weapon, perhaps more than any other, that America is to be made a free land not in name only but in deed and in truth"—articulates his belief in the power of rhetoric to effect change.[73] He calls "the oratorical" a weapon, implying that it can be used for protection against an enemy. Allen, however, had specific kinds of enemies in mind and charged his auditors to study rhetoric "with purpose." He implies that this ability was not to be used wantonly or to do harm. One clear difference between this literary society speech and Hamilton's and Whipper's above is that there is less emphasis on performance for dominant culture, although there is some reference to it in his discussion of black orators. Instead, the emphasis in on a rhetoric of political activism. Allen had grown up in an environment shaped by harmful rhetoric, such as that of U.S. congressman Henry Clay, whom he mentions in his speech.

A sketch of his formative years will help to explain how he came to address the Central College Dialexian Society, having been "called to Professorship of Greek and German languages, and of Rhetoric and Belles-Lettres."[74] Allen, born in the Tidewater area of Virginia, writes in his personal narrative that he was considered a quadroon, being the son of a half-white mother and a white father. Left an orphan at a young age, he was adopted by a couple who provided this future teacher of rhetoric with a solid grade-school education. He describes his teacher as "a preacher of rare eloquence and power."[75] His education ended abruptly on the heels of the slave rebellion of literate Virginia preacher Nat Turner, when all black schools in the state were closed. Allen was forced to engage in a more intentional self-education project by soliciting instruction from several rank-and-file soldiers at Fort Monroe, many of whom turned out to be highly educated foreigners. From them he learned several languages, including German. One slaveholder, also a soldier, gave Allen free access to his library, and another gave him the small library of his dead son.

When Gerrit Smith, a wealthy abolitionist, learned of him through an associate, he invited Allen to move to New York and attend college at his expense, if

necessary. Allen described Smith as "a great orator" with "a great heart" (102), a connection he invokes at the end of his speech to the Dialexian Society as well. At eighteen, Allen enrolled in the Oneida Institute of Science and Industry in Whitesboro, New York, where under the leadership of Beriah Green, it developed into a center for abolitionist activism.[76] Allen was graduated from Oneida in 1844 and studied law in Boston with Ellis Gray Loring, one of the founders of the first Boston antislavery society. Allen also worked with Henry Highland Garnet in editing the abolitionist newspaper the *National Watchman*. A frequent correspondent to *Frederick Douglass' Paper* and the *Liberator*, Allen also contributed an essay on Placido to the first volume of Julia Griffiths's edited collection *Autographs for Freedom* (1853). In 1850, he was called to teach at Central College, an institution that had been established as a kind of social experiment in early-nineteenth-century higher education. As A. L. Brown observed in her 1852 communication to *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, it was "an institution which practically recognizes the rights of humanity without distinction of color or sex. . . . It is well known that one of the professors is a colored man; yet another statement of a fact so cheering will not be a useless repetition, should it serve merely to stir up 'pure minds' in the antislavery world."[77]

Allen, thirty-two years old when he delivered this address on June 22, 1852, began by announcing his subject, "Orators and Oratory," and assigning the thinker and then the orator to the highest ranks of humankind. His yoking of thinker and orator places emphasis on invention over style, content over form. Based on descriptions of the composition of the student body, there were probably men and women in the audience, although his opening salutation—"Gentlemen and Members of the Dialexian"—might suggest otherwise. After a visit to the college, Gerrit Smith observed that "the sexes are educated together": "about two-fifths of the students are females" and "about one-fifth of the students are colored persons."[78] It seems likely that the literary societies would also be mixed. They certainly invited women to address them. For example, *Frederick Douglass' Paper* of June 30, 1854, announced that as part of the college's annual exercises, Antoinette L. Brown would address the Dialexian Society.

These then are some of the elements making up the rhetorical situation for this address. They result in a speech that is a blend of rhetoric designed to teach, to praise, and to promote action. As McClish observes in his analysis of the speech, "Indeed, the basic components of a conventional instructional presentation on the history and future prospect of oratory—such as those delivered by Blair in Edinburgh a century earlier or Channing at Harvard in Allen's era—are present, but in this speaker's hands they function in service of explicit advocacy."[79] The didactic component is primarily perfunctory, more a review of rhetorical principles than a lecture on them. Allen first recalls that oratory develops in response to some exigence and that it develops best in the movement between liberty and the suppression of liberty. He offers the examples of Demosthenes, Cicero, Patrick Henry, Daniel O'Connell, Frederick Douglass, and Louis Kossuth, moving then into a comparison of the first two, with the conclusion that "Cicero *wins*, Demosthenes *compels*" (234). After evaluating the performances of several of his contemporaries, including Daniel Webster and temperance lecturer John B. Gough, he launches into an extensive critique of Kossuth, leader of the Hungarian independence movement, who was touring in the United States at the time. Allen pronounces him "superior to any orator who has ever spoken, whether of ancient or modern date" (238). Although he is generous in praise for his rhetorical abilities, he criticizes Kossuth's failure to speak out against American slavery in any of his speeches—"Not a word in reference to the wrongs of the American slave has he ever dropped in this country" (237). Allen did not expect him to become an abolitionist, but he did believe that Kossuth should have at least made reference to the practice. Having chastised him thus, he proceeds to spend what must have been at least half of an hour highlighting the strengths of his oratory and quoting a lengthy passage from a speech Kossuth had just given in New York City. Allen seems especially impressed with his breadth of knowledge, his pathetic appeal, and his delivery, even commenting on his "dignified and impressive" personal appearance (241). Allen then moves on to pay tribute to the black orators Samuel Ringgold Ward, Henry Highland Garnet, Frederick Douglass, and Charles Lenox Remond. After brief mentions of the white abolitionists William Lloyd Garrison, Gerrit Smith, and Wendell Phillips, he begins to conclude with a discussion of the types of oratory, ranking the rhetoric of the bar as highest in the development of the speaking faculties and pulpit rhetoric superior in developing the "highest powers" of oratory. Legislative eloquence, he concludes, is no more than "dignified and convincing" (245). He ends this section by adding a fourth category, oratory for the public platform, suggesting that he will discuss it at another time, although it is just this category of oratory that he has been featuring in his previous examples and modeling in his own. After a brief foray into the strengths and weaknesses of various languages because he considered it "not inappropriate in a lecture on oratory" (245), he concludes with a challenge to the members of his audience that they "cultivate the oratorical, do it diligently, and with purpose" (246).

Following the dictates of his closing adage that "he that would be a great orator, must have a great heart" (246), Allen provided the Dialexian Society a lesson in rhetoric that came as much from his heart as from his head. He had obviously been thinking a good deal about responsible rhetoric, rhetoric with a purpose. Kossuth had been in the country since December of the previous

year and was preparing to leave after over six months of speaking in front of large, enthusiastic crowds. Allen mentioned in his speech that he himself had traveled ninety miles to hear him speak. The January 1, 1852, edition of *Frederick Douglass' Paper* carries a letter from Allen expressing anger about the reaction of the black citizens of New York to Kossuth.[80] He calls their response "a stupendously foolish thing! Not a word of their own wrongs—their sufferings—their enslavement;—no point, no directness, no nothing except the mere rhetoric. Palaver, the whole of it; and to cap the climax of absurdities, the address winds up with the assurance to the Hungarian that on the day of giving, they (the colored people) will be on hand with at least the 'widow's mite,' if no more. Where did mortal man ever read of such folly as this before[?]" The letter continues in this vein for several paragraphs. By the time of his July address to the college literary society, he had channeled his annoyance into a speech on oratory, challenging the members to exercise this "weapon" that would help America become a truly free land.

Charles W. Chesnutt's Address to the Normal Literary Society of Fayetteville

Some thirty years later, another educator, who titles himself somewhat fancifully in a journal entry a "Professor of Reading, Writing, Spelling &c in the State Colored Normal School of N.C.," addressed an institution-based literary society.[81] Unlike Central College, however, this institution was all-black and located in the postbellum South; yet many of the rhetorical principles outlined are predictably quite similar. In 1881, Charles Chesnutt delivered a speech to the Normal Literary Society of Fayetteville, North Carolina, titled "The Advantages of a Well-Conducted Literary Society." Chesnutt, then only twenty-three—roughly the same age as William Whipper when he addressed the Colored Reading Society of Philadelphia—was principal of the State Colored Normal School at Fayetteville.[82] Chesnutt, who had served as "recapitulator" when the literary society was first organized in 1877, would later deliver addresses to other black literary societies, including the well-known Bethel Literary and Historical Association of Washington, D.C., and the Boston Literary and Historical Association, but it is apparent that in this early literary society address, Chesnutt was helping to establish guiding principles for a newly organized group in which he had invested a great deal of intellectual energy. He opens by defining the literary society as a "valuable auxiliary means of education," not established to replace but to supplement formal training, and quotes from the society's constitution that it "was designed 'for mutual improvement in the arts of composition and debate, and in other literary exercises.'"[83] Thus, we have here a very useful distinction between an institutional and a community-based literary society, the former being understood as supplementing the core curriculum, while the latter,

especially in the case of the early societies, often served as the chief source of instruction. In preparation for considering the advantages of a "well-conducted debating society" (13), he talks about the link between the desire to organize an association that would give pleasure and the act of the will that led to its creation, in a section that parallels Francis Bacon's characterization of rhetoric as applying "Reason to Imagination for the better moving of the will."[84]

Modeling good principles of arrangement, Chesnutt next outlines the parts of his address, which are composed of the three main advantages of a literary society, listed climactically from least to most valuable. In teacherly fashion, he embeds four additional numbered lists within this main list. He firsts discusses the advantage that a literary society provides recreation, because "a different set of faculties are brought into play" (14), and the advantage that it "gives its members instruction in practical business knowledge" (15), by which he means the ability to participate in public discourse, facilitated by knowledge of parliamentary procedure. The third and chief advantage of a literary society, he observes, is that it nurtures mental discipline by teaching how to handle oneself before an audience, to control the emotions, to respect authority, and, most important, to develop sound arguments (4–17). We can recognize in these advantages the classical persuasive appeals, ethos, pathos, and logos, along with sound principles of delivery. Delivery, in fact, receives a good deal of attention in this speech as Chesnutt invokes the habits of Demosthenes, Daniel Webster, and Henry Clay to make his a fortiori point that even the great orators had to practice, as does Allen in his speech to the Dialexian Society, except that Allen also points out Clay's misuse of rhetoric. Chesnutt recalled a French statesman's remark that on public matters, it was no compliment to be thought to deliver speeches without preparation, quoting him to say, "I hold it criminal in a man to discuss great public measures without careful thought and study" (18). In support of proper preparation, he attributes to Hugh Blair the advice that beginning speakers should "write their first speeches, and commit them to memory" to capture the "life and fire of the extemporaneous language" (18).[85] Chesnutt argues a strong connection between facility with these rhetorical skills and participation in public discourse: "Under our system of government, the democratic form, every intelligent citizen is likely, almost *certain* to be called upon at some time to take part in a public meeting, or to fill some public office" (16), adding that oratory has never been an art practiced primarily for its own sake but is always associated with some cause. It is worth noting that Chesnutt assumes for himself and his auditors the right to participate in mainstream public spheres to "discuss questions of public moment" and implies that there will be opportunities to do so (18). During this post-Reconstruction period of racial paranoia and denial of civil liberties, such opportunities would in fact have been

quite limited. Chesnutt understood that being able to imagine themselves in certain roles was an important first step on the road to full civic engagement. Rhetorical training and social action are here inextricably bound.

The incomplete handwritten text of Chesnutt's lecture ends with a passage from Levi Hedge's 1816 *Elements of Logick, or a Summary of the General Principles and Different Modes of Reasoning,* which he took "verbatim from the excellent little work."[86] It is a section in which Hedge lists the value and rules of argument. Of the twelve included in the incomplete text of the speech, of particular interest is the last point, which speaks to the importance of ethical argument in that the "professed" goal of argument is "a truth, and not victory" (23). This "rule" highlights a distinction between Chesnutt's speech and Allen's. As mentioned, Allen had an agenda well beyond providing an overview of rhetorical principles designed to indoctrinate students in the belief that they needed to learn how to speak and write in ways that would, he hoped, help to improve their lives. Allen wanted his audience to apply these principles in the service of abolition. His was not a neutral assessment of rhetorical abilities. Allen really does seem more interested in truth than victory, while Chesnutt speaks about rhetoric in the abstract.

Frances Harper's Address to the Brooklyn Literary Union

In a paper read before the February 16, 1892, meeting of the Brooklyn Literary Union,[87] New York public school teacher Susan Elizabeth Frazier included the announcement that "Mrs. Harper is now engaged in writing a book called 'Iola,' which is a work on the racial question."[88] Nine months later, Harper herself would speak at a meeting of this same group on the subject "Enlightened Motherhood," an address that could easily have been placed into the mouth of one of the participants in the *conversazione* described in "Friends in Council," a chapter from her 1892 novel, *Iola Leroy.* In the chapter, Iola, the title character, is said to have given a paper on the education of mothers. Although the text of the paper is not provided, the discussion it stimulated centered on the role of mothers in ensuring the survival of the race. One member responds, "I agree . . . with the paper. The great need of the race is enlightened mothers."[89] Harper, sixty-seven years old and an honorary member of the Brooklyn Literary Union, gave this address at the end of a distinguished career as an antislavery lecturer, race and woman's rights activist, and poet. Her novel had probably just been published and some in the audience may have read it, given Frazier's earlier announcement. The address, however, makes no mention of the novel; rather, it emphasizes what Harper claims is the vital role that mothers play in molding the character of children descended from a "legally unmarried race" to train them for "useful citizenship on earth and a hope of holy companionship in heaven."[90] This call to duty borrows from the Victorian discourse of an enlightened domesticity and republican motherhood, informed by science and other kinds of knowledge rather than by blind acceptance of male dictates and desires. Linked to this discourse as well were the concepts of social purity and the "laws of heredity and environment" (289), which were influenced by such "social evils" (288) as alcoholism, prostitution, and sexually transmitted diseases. The social purity movement of the late nineteenth century aimed to suppress what was considered to be excesses of the male sexual drive, such as adultery and pornography, in pursuit of a moral regeneration of society. In the speech, Harper sharply criticized the double standard often applied to boys: "Are there not women, respectable women, who feel that it would wring their hearts with untold anguish, and bring their gray hairs in sorrow to the grave, if their daughters should trail the robes of their womanhood in the dust, yet who would say of their sons, if they were trampling their manhood down and fettering their souls with cords of vice, 'O, well, boys will be boys, and young men will sow their wild oats'" (288).

Harper argues that women should educate themselves in the principles of liberty, independence, and democracy in order to prepare future generations for responsible citizenship and nation-building. In its original iteration, this preparation for motherhood, grounded in a belief in natural sexual distinctions, rarely took into account women or blacks as those being prepared. White women were to nurture white male leaders. Harper, however, takes this concept and applies it to the mothers of black children, male and female, who must extend race work into the future. In her article on Harper, Gabrielle P. Foreman makes the point that "African-American women often fit their writing into what to many contemporary readers seems like conventional generic shells. Their valorization of motherhood, their endorsements of marriage and traditional women's concerns like temperance, and their novelistic use of racially indeterminate protagonists, all characterize later nineteenth-century Black women's writing. Their commitment to these concerns was genuine and political."[91] Harper was claiming for these women of the Brooklyn Literary Union a space in this discourse from which they were often left out as a vehicle for continued racial uplift. She challenges them explicitly in this regard: "Would it not be well for us women to introduce into all of our literary circles, for the purpose of gaining knowledge, topics on this subject of heredity and the influence of good and bad conditions upon the home life of the race, and study this subject in the light of science for our own and the benefit of others?" (290).

Unlike the literary society speeches of Hamilton, Whipper, Allen, and Chesnutt, Harper's does not comment on the occasion or the rules of rhetoric that such a group might promote. Rather, its contribution to the rhetorical education

of those who heard it inheres in the ways in which it models the grand style of address, with balanced phrases, repetition of words and syntactic patterns, richly figured language, and antithetical pairings, so typical of Harper by then. The Brooklyn Literary Union, mentioned above, had been established in 1886 and seems to have attracted the black elite from around the country to engage in race work. But even twenty-two years later, the sense of urgency expressed in a 1908 *New York Age* article suggests that such organizations were still needed: "Those of the race who have had intellectual and mental training are to be the levers with which the masses are to be lifted. A literary society in Brooklyn organized with a view to the mental uplift of the community is an imperative necessity."[92] Harper's rhetorical situation responds to this need. She speaks of a larger role, outside of performance, that the society needed to assume and that such black societies had for years assumed: the social role of racial uplift, in this instance as manifested through enlightened mothers.

Prominent Speakers and the Community of Literary Societies

In this section, I discuss the communal impact of literary associations on prominent nineteenth-century black activists who talked about their membership as a site of rhetorical education and as a source of inspiration. The benefit they derived from participation seems to have come as much from being in community with others as from perfecting a skill or a particular set of rhetorical principles. (In chapter 2, I attend more closely to sites located in singular, individualized initiatives.)

Frederick Douglass and Communal Involvement

Still another advantage of these literary societies, given that the most effective rhetorical education benefits from an audience, was that they enabled communal involvement. Those who acquired and developed rhetorical skills most successfully were involved in communities; they participated collectively in activities that helped to hone these skills. It was not just that people worked together to create institutions to advance their communicative abilities, it was also that the coming together itself developed those abilities through *mutual* improvement. This communal, collaborative context yielded perhaps the greatest benefit of literary societies.

In 1871, Frances Harper wrote to William Still of the Philadelphia Underground Railroad about engaging in private conversations with poor women in post–Civil War Greenville, Georgia, women who had had limited opportunities for the kinds of deliberative exchanges that took place in the literary clubs or the antebellum North but who were nonetheless responsive and appreciative: "But really my hands are almost constantly full of work; sometimes I speak

twice a day. Part of my lectures are given privately to women, and for them I never make any charge, or take up any collection. But this part of the country reminds me of heathen ground, and though my work may not be recognized as part of it used to be in the North, yet never perhaps were my services more needed; and according to their intelligence and means perhaps never better appreciated than here among these lowly people. I am now going to have a private meeting with the women of this place if they will come out."[93] It is exciting to imagine the intensity of these free and private discussions among freedwomen of the South. What questions might they have had for Frances Harper, then a widow, former antislavery lecturer and poet, acquaintance of William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass? In these private settings, they would have been more at ease in articulating their concerns about a wide range of issues. Rhetorical education here was achieved through practice in what we today would call a "safe space."

These societies, while improving individual rhetorical abilities, ultimately served the entire community. The notion of community is especially salient in Douglass's discussion of his affiliation with the East Baltimore Mental Improvement Society. Contrary to the prevailing view, Douglass's acquisition of literacy did not alienate him from his community. Rather, it provided new ways of understanding and articulating existing communal relationships. In his article on literacy as communal involvement, Daniel J. Royer points out that the "apparent paradox that pits the slave's efforts to achieve freedom and independence against the slave's efforts to cultivate community is also untangled when black acculturation, especially the central issue of black literacy, is characterized not as a change from the old to the new, but as revitalization, reaffirmation, and recreation within the black community."[94] Royer also notes that the traditional notion that one can't go home again, that learning the rhetorical conventions of another linguistic culture, especially of a dominant culture, will place communicative barriers between the learner and her home culture, has also been questioned by literacy specialist Deborah Brandt. Brandt claims that literacy—and by extension other rhetorical skills—is essentially collaborative in that good communicators become more aware of their audiences and thus better able to relate to them. Literacy enhances Douglass's ability to "intervene in his own context."[95] These associations formed by blacks across the nineteenth century had this communal function. They provided audiences, sympathetic yet critical, bound by a common purpose.

Of the nineteenth-century black activists with literary society affiliations, Douglass was among the few who were enslaved at the time of involvement. Douglass recalls that after being returned to Baltimore from the eastern shore, he became acquainted with free literate black caulkers in Baltimore's Fells Point,

who helped to advance his own education. In 1837 or 1838—when Douglass would have been approximately twenty—they formed the East Baltimore Mental Improvement Society, similar, no doubt, to societies that were being formed in many Northern cities with a concentration of free blacks. Antebellum blacks in Baltimore organized literary societies, debating societies, and lyceums that engaged in reading and critiquing famous and contemporary writing, declamatory speaking, and prose writing. They also sponsored lectures on current issues and instruction in grammar, rhetoric, logic, and composition. The first was the Young Men's Mental Improvement Society, formed in the early 1830s and possibly the one to which Douglass belonged. William Watkins, Frances Harper's own teacher and her uncle, organized a literary society to promote the practice of formal and informal debate in midcentury Baltimore. One of the members, William Douglass, published *Sermons Preached in the African Protestant Episcopal Church of St. Thomas', Philadelphia* in 1854. "To this society, notwithstanding it was intended that only free persons should attach themselves," Frederick Douglass writes, "I was admitted, and was several times assigned a prominent part in its debates. I owe much to the society of these young men."[96] So we have here in Douglass's own words testimony as to the role the community of this improvement society played in his rhetorical education. Douglass's literacy was communal. His association with these other members advanced his own facility with language.

Mary Church Terrell's Foundational Community

Mary Church Terrell left explicit testimony on the benefit of literary club membership in her autobiography, *A Colored Woman in a White World*. She recalls her experiences as quite possibly the first black member of the Aelioian Literary Society, which "provided women with a forum for debate and oration" and was founded in 1852 as a more progressive branch of Oberlin College's Ladies Literary Society.[97] Terrell joined while a senior in the preparatory department there, probably in the early 1880s, since she was graduated from Oberlin in 1884. She credits the society with exposing her to some of the best speakers in the country and with enabling her to argue extempore, preside over meetings, and hold her own in formal debates.[98] Terrell went on to have a long and accomplished career as head of the National Association of Colored Women and as a professional lecturer who used the platform over a thirty-year period to represent the race in a series of speeches she recounts throughout her narrative. All of her comments acknowledge the power of rhetoric to bring about change in the sad state of African Americans during that post-Reconstruction period in African American history that Rayford Logan dates from 1877 to 1901. She expressed surprise at how little her Northern white audiences knew about the

lives of black people—the difficulty of voting, and the Convict Lease System,[99] and their many accomplishments in the face of oppression—a gap in knowledge she never missed addressing in her speaking opportunities.

Drawing on her early training at Oberlin, Terrell generally spoke without a manuscript in front of her, although she always prepared one. She provides this valuable account of her composing and delivery process: "Because I practically never used a manuscript when I delivered an address, many thought I spoke extemporaneously. But this was not the case, and I attempted to disabuse people's minds of this impression. As a rule, I decided not only what arguments I would make and what facts I would present, but I spent considerable time choosing the language in which my thought should be couched. I took myself very seriously indeed as a public speaker."[100] Understanding the value of having an audience's attention, Terrell, like Chesnutt, had no respect for speakers who gave audiences the impression that they had not thought about or prepared a text for the occasion. When she expressed concern to a lecturer associate that she might say nothing of interest to her audiences, he replied, "Oh, never mind about that. . . . Maybe you won't. But people never go to hear what a woman says anyhow. They simply go to see how she looks."[101] Terrell did not include her response to this advice in the text, but given her concern for substance and purpose throughout her career as a public speaker, it is not difficult to construct one.

Anna Julia Cooper's "At Home" Community

At the other end of the social scale, Anna Julia Cooper recalled fondly her early years in Washington, D.C., where she was called to teach in 1887. She described in detail the weekly informal get-togethers or "at homes" hosted on Friday evenings by Charlotte Forten Grimké and Francis Grimké, pastor of Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church, and on Sundays by Cooper. These gatherings were attended at various times by other prominent black intellectuals who might have been available, including Jennie Simpson Crummell and Alexander Crummell, then rector of St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Edward Blyden, Mrs. Frederick Douglass, and Richard Greener. Cooper attested to their regularity, writing, "I can safely say not a week passed for thirty years or more that did not mark the blending of those two homes [hers and the Grimkés'] in planned, systematic and enlightening but pleasurable and progressive intercourse of a cultural and highly stimulating kind."[102] They discussed art, politics, literature, and religion. On the days when they discussed literature, she recalled that the material was very carefully selected and that each member purchased the selected reading, all of which was read aloud. Someone was assigned to bring in questions to test comprehension, and then the work was discussed for a full hour. For Cooper, these gatherings

served as a forum for the "interchange of ideas" and were for her a source of pure delight: "Here was activity, planned and purposeful, strenuous but joyous, not hunger-driven animal action to appease wants, rather spirit-driven by the inner spur and need for life—the more abundant life."[103] We see, then, opportunities for rhetorical education in the form of impromptu discussions among needy postwar black women in the rural South as well as regularly scheduled meetings of members of the Washington, D.C., black elite.

In the last decade of the nineteenth century, Kelly Miller, Alexander Crummell, and W. E. B. Du Bois helped to establish the American Negro Academy to counter the racist discourse in documents like Frederick Hoffman's 1898 *Race Traits and Tendencies of the American Negro,* purporting to demonstrate the genetic inferiority of blacks. The academy provided a site for the production of a range of rhetorical responses to such claims. Members of this society assumed that those invited to join already possessed the requisite rhetorical skills needed to participate. It was an intellectual think tank for black men. Unfortunately, the organizers did not have the foresight to include women, though at least one woman, Anna Cooper, was invited to address them and may even have been invited to join. This group can be thought of as the realization of the goals of the early societies, although the academy's objectives did include continued support of "youths of genius in the attainment of the higher culture, at home and abroad," along with promoting scholarly publications, archiving black history, vindicating the race from claims of inferiority, and issuing an annual volume of works by selected members.[104] The focus here was not so much on training and improvement of members' rhetorical skills as on applying them in service to the race.

Literary Societies and Public Speaking in Nineteenth-Century Black Fiction

In considering references to literary societies in fiction of the period, I hope to present a sketch of the extent to which these associations were absorbed into black culture such that they appear in the imagined worlds of novelists. Frank J. Webb's 1857 novel *The Garies and Their Friends* provides an abundance of information about the lives of Northern blacks in the pre–Civil War period. Set primarily in Philadelphia, where a number of literary societies were founded, the novel recounts their social activities, business ventures, and attempts to improve their status. In the opening section, a Mr. Winston is visiting the Ellis family when his host's daughters announce their intention to attend a lecture at the "library company's room." In response to Winston's assumption that blacks were not admitted to such events, the host explains: "It is quite true . . . at the lectures of the white library societies a coloured person would no more be

permitted to enter than a donkey or a rattle-snake. This association they speak of is entirely composed of people of colour. They have a fine library, a debating club, chemical apparatus, collections of minerals, &c. They have been having a course of lectures delivered before them this winter, and tonight is the last of the course."[105] Webb's fictional family could have been participating members of a society like the Philadelphia Library Company of Colored Persons, which met several times a week.

Sites of domestic rhetorical activity were also re-created in black women's fiction. For example, in "The Sewing Circle," a chapter from Pauline Hopkins's novel *Contending Forces,* women gather at the Smiths' boarding house to sew and to debate "events of interest to the Negro race." In Hopkins's account, these "parlor entertainments" were frequently held to raise money for specific events. Once the sewing tasks had been assigned, the business meeting convened with a review of the past week's events and closed with a talk by a prominent senior woman of the community. At one gathering, a Mrs. Willis spoke on "[t]he place which the virtuous woman occupies in upbuilding a race." Only after the close of the business meeting were the men invited to join them for socializing.[106] The topic would seem to assign women a supporting role in racial uplift work, but a role nonetheless. Their separate discussion of this role gave them a chance to speak openly, as in the case of the women's separate literary societies. In the chapter "Friends in Council" from Frances Harper's novel *Iola Leroy,* mentioned above, she refers to the *conversazione,* in this case a gathering of "some of the thinkers and leaders of the race to consult on subjects of vital interest to our welfare."[107] Both men and women assembled to consider such matters as black emigration to Africa, patriotism, the education of mothers, and the moral progress of the race. Each speaker opened with a prepared paper on the topic, followed by extended critical discussions. It is worth noting that the two women present at the meeting in Harper's novel, Iola Leroy and Lucy Delany, participated in these discussions on equal footing with the men.

Rhetorical performances such as these that took place in parlor rooms rather than in more open spaces gave participants the opportunity to hone their rhetorical skills in alternative public spheres.[108] Lauren Berlant points out that by being "performatively democratic," these gatherings helped make counterpublic spheres "more permeable by women and the ethnic and class subjects who had been left out of aristocratic privilege." She adds that they learned "to construct a personal and collective identity through the oral sharing of a diversity of written ideas."[109] Thus, such meetings existed as sites of rhetorical education.

The 1899 novel *Imperium in Imperio* incorporates another account of rhetorical education in action and, drawing on the tradition of the commencement speech, dramatizes the high value placed upon facility with language. In the

narrative, author Sutton Griggs describes the lifelong friendship and rivalry of Belton Piedmont, dark-skinned and impoverished, and Bernard Belgrave, fair-skinned and supported with the financial resources of an absentee white father. On two occasions in the novel, their rivalry culminates in rhetorical battles. The first competition is staged at their high school graduation where the "two oratorical gladiators" had both been asked to speak.[110] Belton, with no help from the teacher, addresses his class on the ironically titled subject "The Contribution of the Anglo-Saxon to the Cause of Human Liberty." Bernard, whose light skin earns him favor with the white judges, speaks last, delivering a panegyric to Robert Emmett, Irish orator and nationalist leader. On the second occasion, at the close of the novel, both men unite behind the Imperium, a black nation within a nation somewhere in Texas. Bernard, having been chosen president, delivers an address to the Congress of the Imperium, calling for armed rebellion in response to recent acts of Southern mob violence: "Let us then, at all hazards, strike a blow for freedom" (149). Belton follows with a chapter-length counterargument that the Imperium should reveal itself to white Americans and work with them for peaceful resolutions: "There is a weapon mightier than either of these [the sword and the ballot]. I speak of the pen. If denied the use of the ballot let us devote our attention to that mightier weapon, the pen" (164). Belton's argument carries the day, and the Imperium is dissolved. Following their performances, Bernard congratulates Belton on his delivery: "Belton, that was a masterly speech you made to-day. If orations are measured according to difficulties surmounted and results achieved, yours ought to rank as a masterpiece" (166).

It's a curious novel of rebellion and accommodation, with rhetoric rather than violence being offered as the proper response to racial oppression. But of significance to this discussion is the extent to which most of the plot centers on rhetorical rather than physical action. Griggs gives considerable attention to the rhetorical training both men received in preparation for their first ceremonial speeches, and many of the characters are described in terms of their oratorical ability. When Belton sought outside help in preparing his high school speech, he chose a local congressman and "polished orator" (26) to correct his diction. According to the narrator, the congressman was so impressed with the "depth of thought" (invention), the "logical arrangement," and the "beauty and rhythm of language" (style) that he allowed Belton to use his library and provided him with constructive feedback (26). Griggs, a graduate of Bishop College and Richmond Theological Seminary, was a Baptist preacher who wrote over a dozen books and established his own publishing company. His father, a prominent Texas activist minister as well, founded the first black newspaper in Texas and edited several others. Thus, Griggs understood the power of rhetoric in its oral

and written manifestations. Belton's remarks to the Imperium and to readers of the novel could be a reflection of Griggs's own beliefs.

Why the Decline of Literary Societies?

F. P. Powell observed in 1895 that the lyceum had served its purpose but that its decline did not portend a lack of interest in political or social issues; rather, he suggested that much of the instruction received from outside sources was now being carried out in the homes and in universities. He also pointed to the increasing number of women's clubs, whose programs incorporated discussions of art, music, economics, and literature, a development he attributed to the lecture system. He closed his analysis with the powerful assessment that the "lyceum rose to great power, and fell away and practically died, inside a single quarter of a century. But it killed slavery; it broke the power of superstitious theology; it made woman free; it created a universal demand for higher culture."[111] While Powell here was referring to the more formal New England antebellum lyceum structure, with paid invited lecturers, including Susan B. Anthony, Frederick Douglass, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Ward Beecher, Louis Agassiz, Anna Dickinson, Wendell Phillips, John B. Gough, and Sojourner Truth, some of these same effects certainly applied to literary societies, more broadly defined, which often fulfilled the same purposes. Carl Bode, writing in 1956, confirmed and extended Powell's conclusions, attributing the decline of the lyceum to the fact that many of its functions had been redistributed—bureaus managed lectures; adult education had been taken over by extension courses, vocational schools, night schools, and in-service training; public schools had taken over specialized training; public libraries collected books; and mass media had taken over entertainment.[112]

Newly formed postbellum black institutions of higher education provided an additional site for literary societies. In 1894, Fisk University's Union Literary Society reported on the activities of its members in the *Indianapolis Freeman;* the Young Ladies and Gents Occidental Literary Club announced a fund-raising event for the Shorter University at Arkadelphia; and students of Fisk and Roger Williams universities and Central Tennessee College held an "Intellectual Love Feast—A Feast of Reason and Flow of Soul," during which one speaker read a paper on female suffrage that "caused the brethren to say many funny things."[113] Debating clubs and literary societies were, in fact, the earliest extracurricular student groups at black colleges. Fisk's Union Literary Society was established in 1868, and Monroe H. Little has documented that between the early 1880s and the beginning of the twentieth century, no fewer than seven additional societies were founded at Fisk alone, adding that most black schools during this period had at least one literary society.[114] Literary societies established during

the antebellum period frequently served as substitutes for more formal school training in rhetorical skills. At the end of the century, these college societies often supplemented such training in that they gave students the opportunity to apply what they were learning in discussions on a variety of topics, including woman's suffrage, mentioned above, although evidently not taken seriously by many on that occasion. Little also lists such topics as temperance, migration to Africa, American involvement in Mexico, Phillis Wheatley, Jim Crow laws, and textbooks for black schools by black authors as some of the those discussed by literary clubs at Fisk and Atlanta universities and at Morehouse College.[115] The agenda at one 1878 meeting of the LeMoyne Normal Institute Literary Society, which Ida B. Wells would later join, included a historical paper on Benjamin Franklin, a "poetical" paper on Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, a scientific paper on cell life, and a debate on the topic "Resolved, that the Crusades were a benefit to the world." The LeMoyne Literary Society also enacted an early example of community outreach in that it extended membership to non-LeMoyne teachers and students and added a Friday meeting with a "more devotional character." Sabbath school superintendents from various denominations rotated leadership of the meetings, which always included discussions of "practical" subjects like "Best Methods of Conducting Infant Classes."[116]

During this period of shifting roles for literary societies, two contrasting experiences with collegiate rhetoric and oratory are noteworthy. James Weldon Johnson wrote of his affiliation with two Atlanta University literary societies during his matriculation there in the late 1890s. He joined the Ware Lyceum, a debating society, while in the preparatory department, recalling that during his first debate he was "almost as terror-stricken as when I attempted my first Sunday school recitation," but he went on to win the first prize of thirty-five dollars in an oratorical contest during his sophomore year, speaking on the subject "The Best Method of Removing the Disabilities of Caste from the Negro."[117] As one of the top graduates in his college class and president of the Phi Kappa college literary society, he gave a commencement address in which he attempted to "break through the narrow and narrowing limitations of 'race,' if only for an hour," by speaking broadly on "The Destiny of the Human Race."[118] Johnson went on to deliver many speeches in various professional roles: school principal, lawyer, diplomat, newspaper columnist, author, and field secretary for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Yet in spite of his apparent success as a speaker, he would write astutely but disparagingly of "rhetorical oratory" in his 1933 autobiography at the age of sixty-three. Given his opinion's relevance to this volume, I quote it in full:

> Before I left Atlanta I had learned what every orator must know: that the deep secret of eloquence is rhythm—rhythm, set in motion by the speaker, that sets up a responsive rhythm in his audience. For the purpose of sheer persuasion, it is far more important than logic. There is now doubt as to whether oratory is an art—curiously, it is the only art in which the South as a section has gained and held pre-eminence—if it may still be classed among the arts, it is surely the least of them all. Oratory, it cannot be denied, has its uses; it has been of tremendous use to me. But the older I grow, the more I am inclined to get away from it. For rhetorical oratory I have absolute distrust. My faith in the soundness of judgment in a man addicted to opium could not be less than that in a man addicted to rhetorical oratory. Rhetorical oratory is the foundation upon which all the humbug in our political system rests.[119]

It appears that by "rhetorical oratory," Johnson meant rhetorical excess, although he says nothing further about this subject in his narrative. He no doubt distinguished this kind of rhetoric from the kind that he employed so effectively over the course of his productive life.

Although he does not mention belonging to a literary society, W. E. B. Du Bois, Johnson's contemporary, presents a very different college oratorical experience in many respects. Du Bois began his writing and speaking career at Fisk University, where he edited the *Fisk Herald* and "became an impassioned orator." He went on to Harvard, where he took English from American literature professor Barrett Wendell, writing in one of his compositions, "I believe foolishly perhaps, but sincerely, that I have something to say to the world, and I have taken English 12 in order to say it well." While there he won a second place Boylston prize in oratory, and in 1890, he delivered one of the six commencement speeches, on the subject "Jefferson Davis," receiving a favorable review in the *New Nation*.[120] While he does not claim that these experiences made him determined to become a public speaker, he also does not express the same dislike for oratory that Johnson does in his autobiography.

These collegiate societies also provided students a social outlet and issued publications, as did the antebellum societies. Many of the social and service-oriented functions of these collegiate societies were taken over by Greek-letter fraternities and sororities, established in the early twentieth century.[121]

The Social Principle

Whether in a church, in a hall, in the front room of a house in Greenville, Georgia, on a college campus, or in the parlor of Anna Julia Cooper's LeDroit Park home in Washington, D.C., these mental feasts, each in its own way, enacted the social principle of unity and accord that Alexander Crummell expressed in his 1875 Thanksgiving Day sermon "The Social Principle among a People and Its Bearing on Their Progress and Development." Crummell responded

to arguments against race-based associations, against the "dogma . . . *that colored men should give up all distinctive effort, as colored men, in schools, churches, associations, and friendly societies.*"[122] Crummell, then rector of Saint Mary's Chapel Protestant Episcopal Church in Washington, urged his black congregation to observe the cooperative principle by persisting in organizing associations for mutual support:

> Everywhere throughout the Union[,] wide and thorough organization of the people should be made, not for idle political logomachy, but for industrial effort, for securing trades for youth, for joint-stock companies, for manufacturing, for the production of the great staples of the land, and likewise for the higher purposes of life, i.e., for mental and moral improvement, and raising the plane of social and domestic life among us.
>
> In every possible way these needs and duties should be pressed upon their attention, by sermons, by lectures, by organized societies, by state and national conventions; the *latter not* for political objects, but for social, industrial ends and attainments.[123]

In many respects, the goals ("securing trades for youth," "mental and moral improvement") and the means of reaching people (sermons, lectures, societies) parallel those advanced in early-nineteenth-century African American discourse. The difference here, of course, is that this message could now be addressed to postbellum blacks North and South.

It seems then that literary societies, as I define them here, played an important role in developing the rhetorical abilities of nineteenth-century African Americans. These associations brought people together to pool their resources, first for assistance with basic needs and then for mental and moral improvement. They performed and judged their own works and the works of others in order to perfect their skills and build their confidence. They believed the rhetorical ability these societies helped to develop was one sign of their equality, their "African genius," and that it gave them a powerful way to reach wider audiences, including the majority of African Americans who did not belong to such associations, particularly through society-sponsored reading groups, circulating libraries, and often the publishing of newspapers. Society events frequently generated revenue to support the building of schools and other educational initiatives. The separate societies enabled women to develop their rhetorical abilities among one another, often in the service of traditional roles for women, but also they took the skills developed in literary societies with them when they joined activist groups like the female antislavery societies. They would use rhetoric the way William Allen characterized it, as a "weapon." The postbellum societies, many of them church-based, concentrated more on an activist agenda as access

to basic skills grew, and they could devote more of the agenda to substantive discussions, such as the progress of a congressional bill or the state of Liberian politics. Rhetorical education became a significant by-product of this activism as participants developed their skills as they addressed these matters. Later in the century, Charles Chesnutt in his first literary society address would make a distinction between institutional and community-based literary societies as newly founded black colleges formed their own associations with the purpose of supplementing class work. The literary societies declined as other social groups replaced them in colleges and as community groups grew more and more exclusively political. The literary society performed a variety of roles across the century; chief among them was as a site of rhetorical education.