

THE FREEDOM STRUGGLE

FRANCES ELLEN WATKINS HARPER

The Slave Mother

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

Saw you those hands so sadly clasped—
The bowed and feeble head—
The shuddering of that fragile form—
That look of grief and dread?

Saw you the sad, imploring eye?
Its every glance was pain,
As if a storm of agony
Were sweeping through the brain.

She is a mother pale with fear,
Her boy clings to her side,
And in her kirtle vainly tries
His trembling form to hide.

He is not hers, although she bore
For him a mother's pains;
He is not hers, although her blood
Is coursing through his veins!

He is not hers, for cruel hands
May rudely tear apart
The only wreath of household love
That binds her breaking heart.

His love has been a joyous light
That o'er her pathway smiled,
A fountain gushing ever new,
Amid life's desert wild.

His lightest word has been a tone
Of music round her heart,
Their lives a streamlet blent in one—
Oh, Father! must they part?

They tear him from her circling arms,
Her last and fond embrace:—
Oh! never more may her sad eyes
Gaze on his mournful face.

No marvel, then, these bitter shrieks
Disturb the listening air;
She is a mother, and her heart
Is breaking in despair.

CLAUDE McKAY

If We Must Die

If we must die, let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
Making their mock at our accursèd lot.
If we must die, O let us nobly die,
So that our precious blood may not be shed
In vain; then even the monsters we defy
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!
O kinsmen! we must meet the common foe!
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,
And for their thousand blows deal one death-blow!
What though before us lies the open grave?
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!

AJA MONET

#sayhername

i am a woman carrying other women in my mouth
behold a sister, a daughter, a mother, dear friend.
spirits demystified in a comrade's tone. they gather
to breathe and exhale, a dance with death we know
is not the end. all these nameless bodies haunted

by pellet wounds in their chest. listen for us in
the saying of a name you cannot pronounce, *black*
and *woman*, is a sort of magic you cannot hashtag.
the mere weight of it, too vast to be held. we hold
ourselves, an inheritance felt between the hips

woman of soft darkness. portal of light, watch them
envy the revolution of our movement. we break
open to give life flow. why the terror of our tears,
torment of our taste. my rage is righteous. my love
is righteous. my name is righteous. hear what i am

not here to say, we, too, have died. we know we are
dying, *too*. i am not here to say, look at me, how i
died so brutal a death, i deserve a name to fit all
the horror in. i am here to tell you, how if they
mention me in their protests and their rallies,

they would have to face their role in it, too, my
beauty, *too*. i died many times before the blow
to the body. i have bled many months before
bullet to the flesh. we know the body is not the
end. call it what you will but for all the hands,

cuffed wrists of us, shackled ankles of us, the
bend over to make room for you of us, how dare
we speak anything less than *i love you*. we who

love just as loudly in the thunderous rain as when
the sun shines golden on our skin and the world

kissed us unapologetically. we be so beautiful
when we be. how you gon be free without me?
your freedom tied up with mine at the nappy
edge of our soul singing with all our sisters, watch
them stretch their arms in my voice, how they
fly open-chested toward your ear, listen for

Rekia Boyd

Tanisha Anderson

Yvette Smith

Aiyana Jones

Kayla Moore

Shelly Frey

Miriam Carey

Kendra James

Alberta Spruill

Tarika Wilson

Shereese Francis

Shantel Davis

Malissa Williams

Darnisha Harris

Michelle Cusseaux

Pearlie Golden

Kathryn Johnston

Eleanor Bumpurs

Natasha McKenna

Sheneque Proctor

Sandra Bland

we are each saying,

we do not vanish in the bated breath of
our brothers. show me, show me a man
willing to fight beside me, my hand in his,
the color of courage, there is no mountaintop
worth seeing without us. meet me

in the trenches, where we lay
our bodies down
in the valley
of a voice

say it say her name

Essay by Joanne M. Braxton

IN THE struggle between the promise of the American Dream and the failures of the dominant culture to comprehend that Black lives not only matter but, like all lives, are precious, the poet sings a healing song. In this section, we encounter African American poets who engage this struggle to resist injustice and envision new aesthetic, spiritual, and humanistic possibilities.

“The Slave Mother,” by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, was published in 1854 at the height of antislavery activity in the years preceding the Civil War. An influential essayist, novelist, and lecturer, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper was born to free parents in Baltimore, orphaned at an early age, and raised and educated by her uncle, William Watkins. Beyond her primary and secondary education in her uncle’s school in Baltimore, she was, like Frederick Douglass, largely self-educated. She published her first volume of poetry, *Forest Leaves*, in 1846 while working as a maid. When the Fugitive Slave Law was passed in 1850, free Blacks in Maryland came under increased risk of being sold South into slavery. Harper moved to Philadelphia to decrease this risk; here she expanded her involvement in the antislavery movement after meeting Underground Railroad stationmaster William Still.

“Heard you that shriek?” Harper asks. Inspired by the personal testimonies of fugitive slaves she encountered through her work with the Underground Railroad, the poet goes beyond the sentimental and genteel poets who influenced her, such as Whittier, Longfellow, and Bryant, to raise the voice of protest at the heart of the abolitionist movement. In writing “The Slave Mother” she used oral traditions and poetic forms from the Black church to speak for enslaved women who may not have been literate and who were therefore unable to speak for themselves. Evoking the preaching and spiritual solidarity of a worship service, “The Slave Mother” uses the form of a metrical hymn (first stanza in short meter, remaining stanzas in common meter) to plumb the literary trope of the outraged mother. The first stanza can actually be sung to “Blest Be the

Tie That Binds” and the remaining stanzas to “O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing,” hymns with which Harper as a church woman would have been familiar. Taking on the struggle of the enslaved women of the race, the poet testifies to the human cost of the auction block, narrating in vivid and symbolic imagery details of the young boy trying to find comfort and protection in the folds of his mother’s skirts, and the mother’s pain-filled shriek as the inevitable soul-rending separation of mother and child comes to pass. Acting as a compassionate witness, the poet lifts up and restores the humanity of this mother and child, which enslavement so deeply denied.

“If We Must Die” originally appeared in *The Liberator* during the Red Summer of 1919, a time of bloody race riots in Washington, D.C., and Chicago and increased lynchings in other areas where hundreds of African Americans were killed. The author, Claude McKay, was a Jamaican-born poet, novelist, and intellectual and a key figure in the Harlem Renaissance. Born on a small farm, McKay was educated in part by his older brother, Uriah, a teacher, who introduced him to the poetry of Milton, Pope, and Shakespeare. Claude began writing at around 10. “My brother was fond of good books and possessed a nice library—all the great English masters and a few translations from the ancients . . . I read whatever pleased my fancy, secretly scribbling in prose and verse at the same time.” As a Jamaican, McKay made a choice to identify with the struggle of Black Americans in the U.S., just as Harper, a free woman, made a choice to identify with the struggle of enslaved women. In 1912, at the age of 23, he published and won a prize for his first two volumes of poetry and used the winnings to set out for the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. In the American South and later in the Midwest, he encountered a racial animosity he had never experienced in Jamaica: “It was the first time I had ever come face to face with such manifest, implacable hate of my race,” he wrote. “My feelings were indescribable.”

“If We Must Die” is McKay’s response to the many murders of Black people in the United States in the era immediately following World War I. Among those targeted in particular were African American soldiers returning from Europe, assaulted by white American servicemen who regarded them as a threat back at home. Some Black men were lynched in their

military uniforms; others fought back and mobilized to protect their communities. McKay's poem employs the rhetoric of honorable death commonly used to celebrate soldiers who "did not die in vain" to defy the dishonoring of Black soldiers by the "inglorious" mockery and violence they faced returning from war. The form of "If We Must Die" is a Shakespearean sonnet, an octet followed by a sestet. There is an appreciable tension between the stark imagery and the form of the poem—the metaphor of men being hunted by dogs and penned like hogs. The tension between the brutal imagery of hog-killing and the high artistic form of the sonnet is one of the marks of the aesthetic excellence of the poem, which was later republished in *The Messenger* and *The Crusader*. Juxtaposing the simile of dying "like hogs" with dying courageously "like men" serves to underscore the unifying trope—Black men are urged to resist ignominious slaughter by "fighting back." This was McKay's defiance and his call to action.

"I am a woman carrying other women in my mouth," writes Aja Monet, a Caribbean American poet of Jamaican-Cuban descent born in Brooklyn, New York. "#sayhername" is from her 2017 debut volume, *My Mother Was a Freedom Fighter*. The historical context is the Black Lives Matter and #sayhername movements in the early twenty-first century. According to the Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies at Columbia University, the #sayhername movement is "dedicated to the Black women who have lost their lives to police violence and to their families who must go on without them." These are the women in the poet's mouth. The poem itself is both a lamentation and a call to action. Monet's poem, like the movement itself, resists the narrative of excessive police force and lethal violence as "exclusively the experience of men." The poet witnesses and demands that the reader see and touch the "cuffed wrists of us, shackled ankles of us" that connect those named in the poem to those enslaved women who went before. Aja Monet's use of the word *us* is powerful. She becomes one with the women she carries in her mouth, recognizing the commonality of experience over time, particularly the struggles of Black women to be made visible in the trauma zone of violence where emotional, psychological, and physical scarring occurs. Her work has been called "a healing balm for the soul."

When the poet reads her poem aloud, twenty-one real women, who lived and walked this earth and who died too soon, fly out of her mouth. They include Kathryn Johnston, 92, from Atlanta, killed in her home during a drug raid on the wrong property; Eleanor Bumpers, 66, a grandmother from the Bronx killed by two blasts from a 12-gauge shotgun as she was being evicted for being four months behind in her \$98.65 monthly rent; Rekia Boyd, 22, shot in the back of the head as she stood in an alley with friends in Chicago; and 7-year-old Aiyana Jones, killed as she slept during a raid on her grandmother's home. Others, like 28-year-old Sandra Bland, on her way from Chicago to Texas to take up a new job at Prairie View A&M University, died in prison after being pulled over on a traffic stop. Monet's calling of these names reflects ritual religious and liturgical practices within communities with which this Caribbean American poet would have been familiar. She forges a literary form that is uniquely her own and yet connected to Black feminist poets of the '60s and '70s, particularly June Jordan and Audre Lorde, finding her place among them. Monet witnesses to the reader/listener, reminding her audience that the Black woman is too likely to be erased, even in death. The poet demands that, as we read the name of each woman, we "say her name," that we speak with her the names of Black women who have died, so that their lives and their deaths will be remembered. Monet specifically speaks to the Black man and invites him to *see* her struggle and the struggles of Black women everywhere. She demands that he see the bodies in the trenches and lay his body down in struggle, beside hers.

Collectively, these poems by Francis Ellen Watkins Harper, Claude McKay, and Aja Monet represent a shriek, a call to action, and a lamentation. Each poet was politicized by things that they saw in the world, and each chose symbolic witnessing and protest over silence. These brave poems carry within them countless other poems, lives, lamentations, and the sorrow-songs of a people still struggling to be free.

Discussion Questions

1. The authors of each of these three poems are engaged in struggle. What specifically is each struggling *for*? How do their differing contexts affect the way each gives voice to their struggle?
2. Read each poem aloud and let each word sink into your body. Describe what was happening with your voice when you read each poem: For each, were you drawn to read it in a loud or a soft voice? Were there pauses or silences that seemed especially significant? How can different registers of voice and feeling be used to express a sense of struggle? Read each poem a second time, as slowly as the first, allowing the pace of reading and the emphasis on certain words to shift. Ask yourself the same questions for the second reading of each poem. What changes for you and what stays the same? Find another person doing the same exercise to share with. Pay particular attention to your changing experience of each poem.
3. Some diminish the poetry of the African American struggle for the full recognition of Black humanity by calling it the poetry of protest. Nonetheless, each of these poems voices strong emotions against injustice. What sorts of appeals do they make to those among their audience who, like the poets themselves, are struggling against oppression?
4. At times African American poets have spoken in two voices at once, as their ancestors sometimes did in the “masked language” of the spiritual. Where in these poems (if anywhere) do these poets speak in ways that seem to keep something hidden beneath the surface?
5. Who is each poem addressed to as its primary audience? How does the racial identity of this audience—and that of other audiences that might read the poem—affect the understanding of these works?

Poems for further reading

Andy Razaf, “What Did I Do (To Be So Black and Blue)”

Langston Hughes, “Let America Be America Again”

Countee Cullen, “Scottsboro, Too, Is Worth Its Song”

Esther Popel, “Flag Salute”

Pauli Murray, “Prophecy”

Toi Derricotte, “On the Turning Up of Unidentified Black
Female Corpses”

Claudia Rankine, from *Citizen*