
DIGITAL ACCESS TO SCHOLARSHIP AT HARVARD
DASH.HARVARD.EDU

HARVARD LIBRARY


"Strange Longings": Phillis Wheatley and the African American Literary Imagination

Link
http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:40046547

Terms of use
This article was downloaded from Harvard University's DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Other Posted Material (LAA), as set forth at
https://harvardwiki.atlassian.net/wiki/external/NGY5NDE4ZjgzNTc5NDQzMGIzZWZhMGFlOWI2M2EwYTg

Accessibility
https://accessibility.huit.harvard.edu/digital-accessibility-policy

Share Your Story
The Harvard community has made this article openly available.
Please share how this access benefits you. Submit a story

“Strange Longings”: Phillis Wheatley and the African American Literary Imagination

A dissertation presented by
Charita Elaine Gainey-O’Toole

to

The Department of African and African American Studies

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the subject of African American Studies

Harvard University

Cambridge, Massachusetts

May 2017

© 2017 Charita Elaine Gainey-O'Toole
All rights reserved.

Dissertation Advisor: Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Charita Elaine Gainey-O'Toole

"Strange Longings": Phillis Wheatley and the African American Literary Imagination

Abstract

Throughout the African American literary tradition, writers have engaged Phillis Wheatley as a forebear, invoking her poetry and her biography for a number of purposes. Because the ways in which black writers treat race in their literature changes over time, these writers' evocations of Wheatley respond accordingly. Wheatley falls in and out of favor over the course of African American literary history, but she remains a recurring figure in the nearly 250-year history of the tradition. Although portrayals of Wheatley evolve over time, various forms of longing inform all representations of the poet. Furthermore, these longings reflect the ways in which African Americans' identity formation is ever changing and inextricably linked to the historical moment.

Table of Contents

Introduction: “Rescued by Our Imagination”: African American Writers Remember Phillis Wheatley……1

Chapter One: “We Love to Rehearse It”: Phillis Wheatley as Indication and Inspiration in African American Periodicals, 1890-1906……21

Chapter Two: “One Looks In Vain For Some Outburst”: Phillis Wheatley and the New Negro, 1919-1938……..54

Chapter Three: “Wasn’t It Good Sister?”: The Phillis Wheatley Poetry Festival, 1973 ……98

Chapter Four: “Tost O’er The Raging Main”: Phillis Wheatley’s Transatlantic Crossings in Late Twentieth-century African American Poetry……..141

Chapter Five: “212 Years Later, Did You Succeed?”: Thomas Jefferson and Phillis Wheatley Come Full Circle in Twenty-first-century African American Poetry…….170

Conclusion: “Follow Imagination Like a Lover…Into the Secret Rooms”: African American Writers Discover and Recover Phillis Wheatley……194

Works Cited…….201

Acknowledgements

There are many people to whom I am indebted for their contributions to this dissertation. I would like to thank my advisor, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., for his unwavering belief in my ability to finish this dissertation. Before I committed to attend Harvard and my heart was calling me home to UNC Chapel Hill, Professor Gates promised me that I had a new "uncle" at Harvard who would make Cambridge feel like home. He has kept that promise.

This dissertation would have never been completed without the generous feedback of Robin Bernstein, another member of my committee. Professor Bernstein read and provided copious commentary on countless drafts of each part of the dissertation. Professor Bernstein was the last member to join my committee, and she did so enthusiastically. Her enthusiasm for my project never faded, and it helped me stay the course in moments when I was losing faith.

My relationship with Elizabeth Alexander has been one of the highlights of my graduate school career. The opportunity to work with her was a long-time dream realized. Professor Alexander has taught me many things, but most importantly, she has taught me how to recover from setbacks and disappointments. She has inspired me to walk "into a light both brilliant and unseen."

Abby Wolf has been an unofficial committee member for the last year, and I would be remiss to not acknowledge her contributions to this dissertation. Last summer, she met with me almost weekly to help me write a dissertation of which I can be proud. I have to especially thank Abby for her relentless copy-editing. Her eyes catch everything that my eyes miss!

In addition to my committee, I would like to thank the staff of the H.T. Sampson Library and the Margaret Walker Center at Jackson State University for their assistance during my research trip to Jackson in the summer of 2014. I would like to especially thank Ms. Darlita Ballard, the archivist at the library during my time there, and Ms. Angela Stewart, the archivist at the MWC, for helping me find everything that I was looking for and many things that I was not looking for but am so grateful that I found. The staff at the British Library in London, England was also very helpful during the final year of the dissertation. I would like to thank Lisa Baskin for introducing me to Carol Holder at the BL, who, in turn, introduced me to the Americas team at the library, which consists of Mercedes Aguirre and Elizabeth Cooper as well as the staff at the Eccles Centre for American Studies led by Philip Davies and Francisca Fuentes.

I wrote most of this dissertation sitting in the Dobra Tearoom in Northampton, MA. I would like to thank the owners of Dobra, Alli and Joel Jukiro, for allowing me to use Dobra as a home base while I was writing. The ambiance, tea, wholesome meals, and especially the company nourished and inspired me. Thank you to all of the Devoteas and also to Joanna Jukiro for providing much needed work breaks.

Finally, I would like to thank my friends and family for their support. My long-time friends Jennifer Leach and Sharee Light have served as sounding boards and cheerleaders throughout this process, and I appreciate their support. I will be forever grateful to my mother for teaching me to read and write. The first book she taught me, *I Can Do It Myself* by Emily Perl Kingsley featuring Sesame Street's Ernie and Bert, has been a rallying cry for self-reliance and determination that has served me well throughout my life. Without these traits, I never would have been able to finish this dissertation. I

appreciate my brother, Kenneth Gainey, my step-father, Kirk Sanders, my niece Kambreen Bell, and my nephews Khyshone Bell, and Kenzie Gainey-Warren for always being proud of me, and my godparents Angelene and Herb Martin for always treating me like blood. I am grateful to my mother-in-laws, Maryanne O'Toole and Ann Culver, for always encouraging me to be a "Succulent Wild Woman." Last but certainly not least, I would like to thank my husband, Terrence O'Toole. He is the only person who has been here for every single day of this process. He has always told me that I could finish, but he also assured me that the world would not end if I decided that I did not want to. Knowing that I had his support either way gave me the courage to see this dissertation to the end. There are countless others whom I could thank for words of encouragement, favors, and other acts of kindness throughout this journey. Please know that your support is much appreciated and will not be soon forgotten.

Introduction: " Rescued by Our Imagination": African American Writers Remember Phillis Wheatley

Mneme begin. Inspire, ye sacred nine,
Your vent'rous Afric in her great design.
Mneme, immortal pow'r, I trace thy spring:
Assist my strains, while I thy glories sing:
The acts of long departed years, by thee
Recover'd in due order rang'd we see:
Thy pow'r the long-forgotten calls from night,
That sweetly plays before the fancy's sight.
-Phillis Wheatley "On Recollection"

…I wonder if the tongues
of that tribunal of good men

quizzing her turned to dust
in pure Latin and Greek.
We are blessed if we can see her

on the streets of Cambridge,
in her heroic couplets,
rescued by our imagination:
-Yusef Komunyakaa "Lament and Praise Song" from "Séance"

In her poem "On Recollection" Wheatley praises Mneme, the muse of memory, for her ability to recover "the acts of long departed years"; however, Wheatley could not have predicted that for centuries after the publication of *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* in 1773*,* she would have generations of African American writers to thank for recovering her "long-forgotten calls from night" through their recollections of the poet in their own literature. Yusef Komunyakaa similarly evokes the power of recollection in his poem "Séance." In a section of the poem subtitled "Lament and Praise Song," Komunyakaa describes Wheatley as being "rescued by our imagination." Komunyakaa's line captures the ways in which Wheatley's significance has been reiterated by dozens of African American writers through their treatment of her in their

own works. The numerous representations and remembrances of Wheatley throughout the African American literary canon indicate Wheatley's primacy to the African American literary tradition. Although it is unlikely that anyone foretold Wheatley's far-reaching influence slightly more than two hundred forty years ago when she first published *Poems*, the book was pioneering, as it was the first book of poetry published by an African American writer. It was also the first book of any kind published by an African American woman. With the publication of her *Poems*, Wheatley gave birth to the notion that people of African descent were capable of producing poetry, a creative output requiring great intelligence and imagination. Given the significance of its publication, one might think that this book and its author would garner praise commensurate with a great literary achievement; however, despite her firm place at the beginnings of the African American literary tradition, appreciation of Wheatley's work has been anything but stable. Wheatley and her poetry have fallen in and out of favor over the course of the more than two-century period since the publication of her book, but her presence in the African American literary imagination has remained constant during this time. From Jupiter Hammon's "An Address to Miss Phillis Wheatly (sic)," published in 1778, to Honorée Fanonne Jeffers's "Mastering" published in 2009, Wheatley has remained a popular subject of African American literature and criticism.

This dissertation chronicles African American literary history through the lens of African American writers' treatments of Phillis Wheatley, contemplating and complicating Wheatley's significance to the African American literary canon. Changes in the representations of Wheatley in the African American literary imagination reflect changes in the ways in which black writers see themselves and the role of African

American literature in the advancement of people of African descent. Despite alterations in the ways in which African American writers represent Wheatley over time, one trait that that they have in common is nostalgia or longing. Svetlana Boym articulates the ways in which collective nostalgia can be expressed in very different ways when she writes, "Longing might be what we share as human beings, but that doesn't prevent us from telling very different stories of belonging and nonbelonging" (Boym 41). Over time, African American writers express longing in relation to Wheatley in common, but the variability of their longings reflect the ever-evolving place of African Americans in the United States. Furthermore, although many scholars such as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., John C. Shields, and Vincent Carretta among others have contributed much to recent scholarship on Wheatley, there remains a dearth in the literature regarding Wheatley's significance to the African American literary tradition beyond the scope of her role as the nascence of the tradition. Through examining Wheatley's role as a recurring figure in African American literature and criticism, one can determine her importance to subsequent generations of black American writers and assess what various iterations of Wheatley reveal about African American literary history.

This dissertation examines the ways in which African American writers evoke Wheatley from the eighteenth to the twenty-first centuries. The chapters are organized chronologically, but each chapter focuses on common themes among African Americans' representations of Wheatley during a specific period of time. The project does not examine every representation of Wheatley during any particular era because not all of the representations of the poet in a specific time period fall within the themes addressed in each chapter. Central questions that this dissertation seeks to answer include: Why is

Wheatley such a focal point for African American writers from the eighteenth century through the twenty-first century?, How and why do the ways in which African American writers remember Wheatley change over time?, How does each writer's identity inform his or her representation of Wheatley?, and What do these African American writers hope to accomplish by evoking memories of Wheatley?

The Illusion of Memory and Nostalgia

Although Wheatley's presence in texts by African Americans is constant, the ways in which African American writers evoke her memory in these texts are not static. In his seminal work, *On Collective Memory*, Maurice Halbwachs argues, "Everything seems to indicate that the past is not preserved, but is reconstructed on the basis of the present" (39-40). This suggests that representations of Wheatley are inextricably linked to the historical moment in which they are conceived. When Halbwachs continues, "Collective frameworks are, to the contrary, precisely the instruments used by the collective memory to reconstruct an image of the past which is in accord, in each epoch, with the predominant thoughts of the society," he argues that the past is reassembled so that it aligns with the values of the society during the time of the reconstruction (Halbwachs 40). Halbwachs's theory regarding the reconstruction of memories would suggest that perceptions and representations of Wheatley at various points in history reflect the mores of the society at the time that the representation is crafted. Halbwachs also argues that memories are by definition distortions of the original historical event or figure when he says, "Society from time to time obligates people not just to reproduce in thought previous events of their lives, but also to touch them up, to shorten them, or to complete them so that, however convinced we are that our memories are exact, we give

them a prestige that reality did not possess" (Halbwachs 51). This assertion implies that the representations of Wheatley that emerge throughout the African American literary tradition are not accurate reflections of the poet. African American writers not only tailor their representations of Wheatley based on their contemporary moment but also craft their own versions of Wheatley with the objective of creating a complete memory of Wheatley that clarifies all of the unanswered questions regarding her life and work. According to Halbwachs, those memories are necessarily distorted. No matter the representation of Wheatley, whether it is from the eighteenth century, the twenty-first, or sometime in between, they all forge memories of Wheatley that are distorted to suit their own needs.

Furthermore, longing, a more specific mode of remembering, figures prominently in African American writers' portrayals of Wheatley. Halbwachs argues that we often have an "…illusory appearance of past…" and "…given few exceptions, it is the case that the great majority of people more or less frequently are given to what one might call nostalgia for the past" (Halwachs 49). For Halbwachs, this "illusory" or "nostalgic" view of the past leads us to reconstruct a past that is far less complex and far more simplistic and idealistic than it was in real time. Svetlana Boym also writes about longing and nostalgia in her book *The Future of Nostalgia*. Boym introduces the term as she conceives it when she writes,

> Nostalgia (from *nostos*—return home, and *algia*—longing) is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy. Nostalgic love can only survive in a long-distance relationship. A cinematic image of nostalgia is double exposure, or a superimposition of two images—of home and abroad, past and present, dream and everyday life. The moment we try to force it into a single image, it breaks the frame or burns the surface. (Boym xiii-xiv)

This definition applies to African American memories of Wheatley in two different ways. First, although Wheatley is a person and not a locale, as the site of origin for African American literature, she is, in a sense, a home to which writers throughout the African American literary tradition attempt to return. They reconstruct memories of Wheatley with the hope of establishing their version of an ideal, fantastic origin story for African American literature. Second, in addition to thinking of Wheatley herself as a home for which they feel a nostalgic longing, African American writers long to strengthen the connection between Wheatley and her African homeland which, in turn, reinforces these writers' connection to Africa. However, there is an inherent incongruence between the eighteenth-century poet and the nostalgic memories of her that African American writers evoke. Despite this incongruence, for many African American writers throughout history, Wheatley stands in as an ancestor who connects them and the African American literary tradition to African cultural traditions.

Despite some African American writers' strong desire to connect Wheatley and thereby themselves to African cultural traditions, Wheatley's work was undoubtedly influence by Western cultural traditions. Furthermore, in their attempts to connect Wheatley to Africa and bolster the African American literary tradition, African American writers often find themselves under the influence of white writers as well. More specifically, although this dissertation treats African American representations of Wheatley, the influence of two white Americans, namely, Thomas Jefferson and Margaretta Matilda Odell, must be examined. Their impact and influence on African American writers' depictions of Wheatley is significant and inescapable.

Jefferson and Odell's Representations and Reverberations

Thomas Jefferson, primary author of the Declaration of Independence and the man who would become our nation's third president, in his infamous assessment of Wheatley's poetry became one of African American literature's first critics. Furthermore, Margaretta Matilda Odell with her 1834 memoir of Wheatley established the foundation for all subsequent references to Wheatley's biographical background. In *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley: America's First Black Poet and Her Encounters with the Founding Fathers*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. declares, "If Phillis Wheatley was the mother of African-American literature, there is a sense in which Thomas Jefferson can be thought of as its midwife" (Gates 50). In the section of *Note on the State of Virginia* titled "Laws" Jefferson submits his infamous censure of African American writers in general and Wheatley specifically:

> Misery is often the parent of the most affecting touches in poetry. Love is the peculiar oestrum of the poet. Among the blacks is misery enough, God knows, but no poetry. Their love is ardent, but it kindles the senses only, not the imagination. Religion indeed has produced a Phyllis Whatley (sic); but it could not produce a poet. The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism. (Jefferson 99-100)

Jefferson contends that neither love nor misery among African Americans has been sufficient inspiration for poetry. He argues that African Americans are capable of experiencing emotion, but not creative, original thought. He singles out Wheatley claiming that her poetry is evidence of religious refinement but not intellectual and artistic capabilities. Jefferson takes his disparagement of Wheatley a step further when he says that the poems "published under her name are below the dignity of criticism," as he suggests that she may not have even written the poems that bear her name. Finally, he

dismisses the need for any specific criticism of her work by saying that her poems are not even worthy of serious analysis.

William H. Robinson considers Jefferson's influence on African American literature when he writes, "Indeed, much of early Wheatley criticism is essentially rebuttal of Jeffersonian disdain" (qtd. in Gates 50). Although one could easily interpret the almost universally glowing nineteenth-century African American portrayals of Wheatley as these writers' rebuttal of Jefferson's critique, few African American writers from the nineteenth century mention Jefferson by name in their assessments of Wheatley. In addition to Gates and Robinson, there are a number of other more recent African American critics who explore the relationship between Jefferson and Wheatley including, Addison Gayle, Jr. and Houston A. Baker, Jr. who notes that Jefferson's critique, "…may have set the chorus off, but its echo was heard as far away as Europe. And the debate concerning Wheatley's intellectual virtues and limitations has extended to our own century" (Baker 9).

Just as it seems that all African American writers riff on Jefferson's critique in their assessments of Wheatley work, it seems that all African American writers refer back to Margaretta Matilda Odell when presenting biographical details about Wheatley. Odell, Wheatley's most often-cited memoirist, published her account of Wheatley's life in 1834, fifty years after Wheatley's death. Very little is known about Odell, and her 1834 publication of a biography of Wheatley's life along with a reissuance of her poems only identifies Odell in the last sentence of the "memoir" as, "a collateral descendant of Mrs. Wheatley,… familiar with the name and fame of Phillis from her childhood" (Odell 29). Despite an utter lack of verification of any of Odell's claims about the poet, many

African American writers include details from Odell's account of Wheatley's life in their own presentations of Wheatley. In fact, almost every writer who critically or creatively engages Wheatley as a subject evokes Odell in some way.

Some evoke Odell simply by repeating particulars from Odell's memoir in their own brief biographies of Wheatley's life while others conjure Odell in creative interpretations of the occurrences that she relays. There are a few incidents from Odell's story that emerge again and again in representations of Wheatley by African American writers. The first relates to her physical condition upon her arrival in Boston in 1761. In Odell's memoir she relates: "The poor, naked child (for she had no other covering than a quantity of dirty carpet about her like a fillibeg (sic)) was taken home in the chaise of her mistress, and comfortably attired. She is supposed to have been about seven years old, at this time, from the circumstances of shedding her front teeth" (Odell 9-10). This description of Wheatley recurs throughout representations of Wheatley. For example, in Shirley Graham Du Bois's young adult novel *The Story of Phillis Wheatley*, the first time Wheatley is identified in the novel is when a boy says, "Look at that,…a little naked savage!" (Du Bois 19). In Doris E. Saunders's poem "Rite of Passage" and in Margaret Walker's poem "Ballad for Phillis Wheatley," both refer to Odell's claim about Wheatley's missing teeth. The image of Wheatley naked with missing teeth comes to serve as a marker of not only her age but also her vulnerability at the time of her arrival in Boston.

Another aspect of Odell's narrative that is often repeated is the notion that Wheatley retained only one memory of Africa once she arrived in America. Odell writes: "She does not seen (sic) to have preserved any remembrance of the place of her nativity,

or of her parents, excepting the simple circumstance that her mother poured out water before the sun at his rising—in reference, no doubt, to an ancient African custom" (Odell 10). A number of African American writers evoke this scene of Wheatley's mother performing a morning ritual including, Naomi Long Madgett in her poem "Phillis" and Vinie Burrows in the second scene of her dramatic performance, *Phillis Wheatley Gentle Poet, Child of Africa: A Portrait in Nine Scenes.* This image of Wheatley's mother performing a presumably African ritual often serves as a bridge connecting Wheatley and thereby her literary descendants to the mother continent.

All that we know about Wheatley's premature death is also gleaned from Odell's account. Odell relates details about Wheatley's tragic end when she writes,

> The woman who had stood honored and respected in the presence of the wise and good of that country which was hers by adoption, or rather compulsion, who had graced the ancient halls of Old England, and rolled about in the splendid equipages of the proud nobles of Britain, was now numbering the last hours of life in a state of the most abject misery, surrounded by all the emblems of squalid poverty!...the friends of Phillis, who had visited her in her sickness, knew not of her death…A grand niece of Phillis's benefactress, passing up Court Street, met the funeral of an adult and a child: a bystander informed her they were bearing Phillis Wheatley to that silent mansion 'where the wicked cease from troubling, and the weary are at rest.' (Odell 23-24)

According to Odell, Wheatley's tragic, premature death illustrates the poet's precipitous drop from acclaimed writer to anonymous retainer. Odell claims that when Wheatley died, she was mourned unceremoniously, but in his book *Phillis Wheatley: a Biography of a Genius in Bondage*, Vincent Carretta challenges Odell's account of Wheatley's death and indicates that notices of Wheatley's death were published in America and London.[1]

[1] See Carretta, Vincent. Phillis Wheatley: a Biography of a Genius in Bondage. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2011. 190. Print.

Odell concludes her account of Wheatley's life and death by expressing concern about Wheatley's legacy when she remarks, "Here and there we find a solitary pilgrim, belonging to the days of the years that are gone, treasuring Phillis's poems as a precious relic. But when they shall have passed away, who will remember her?" (Odell 24). Odell contends that Wheatley's significance has been obscured by time, and she worries that Wheatley's contributions will be forgotten because the number of "pilgrim[s]" keeping her memory alive is few. Fortunately, Odell's concerns about Wheatley's legacy could not have been more unwarranted. However, given that African American literature was still in its infancy in 1834, Odell never could have predicted the ways in which Wheatley's life and work would be remembered among African American writers. For many African American writers, whether they view her positively or negatively, Wheatley looms large in their work. Although Wheatley has a place in American literature more broadly and has been the subject of criticism as well as creative works by white Americans, the fascination with Wheatley and the longing to reconstruct her memory does not run as deeply as it does in the African American literary tradition.

On "Strange Longings"

Indeed, this fascination with Wheatley is the source of many "strange longings." Naomi Long Madgett's poem "Phillis" is the origin of this term. In the poem, Madgett assumes Wheatley's perspective to give voice to the eighteenth-century poet's silence regarding Africa, slavery, her seemingly whole-hearted embrace of Christianity, and her adoption of Western conventions in her poetry. In the poem's fourth line, Wheatley voices a yearning for her mother's support, which she styles as "strange longings." Although this poem is explored in depth in the third chapter, it is important to establish

the meanings of this term here, as it serves as the title of the project. The following definitions of the verb "long" as it is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* are applicable to the notion of "longing" as it is evoked both in Madgett's poem "Phillis" and throughout the dissertation:

1. to grow longer; to lengthen.
2. To lengthen, prolong.
3. To depart.
4. To cause to pass over a certain distance.
5. To have a yearning desire; to wish earnestly…Also, to be restless or impatient *till* (something is attained). ("Long")

Although it appears as the last definition in the series, the fifth definition of "long" is most relevant to the term as it relates to this project. In the poem "Phillis," a "chill wind" is responsible for, "Stirring strange longings for the sturdy back / I used to lean against for warmth and comfort / When I had grown too tall to ride" (Madgett 96). Wheatley has a "yearning desire" and "wish[es] earnestly" for bygone days when she could appreciate her mother's support. Wheatley could also be "restless or impatient *till* (something is attained)," namely, her reunion with her mother. Wheatley describes her longings as "strange" or "unfamiliar, abnormal, or exceptional to a degree that excites wonder or astonishment; difficult to take in or account for; queer, surprising, unaccountable" ("Strange"). Wheatley's longings exemplify this definition for a number of reasons. First, when the "chill wind" conjures these "strange longings," it calls to mind a memory that may have been long-forgotten, making it feel "unfamiliar or abnormal." Second, the longings may "excite wonder or astonishment" because Wheatley may have thought that her memories of her mother were long-lost, making their sudden appearance inspire "wonder" and "astonishment." Third, because this longing was bittersweet, as it both remembers her mother and highlights the insurmountable distance between them, it is

"difficult to take in." Finally, the longings are "queer" and "unaccountable" because Wheatley knows that the possibility of her reuniting with her mother is highly unlikely, yet this knowledge does not abate her longing.

The first two definitions of "long[ing]" as a "lengthen[ing]" or "prolong[ing]," are also applicable to the concept of "strange longings" as it is utilized in Madgett's poem and this dissertation. Madgett depicts Wheatley's "longing" as something that "lengthens" and "prolongs" the amount of time Wheatley spends mourning the loss of her mother and her motherland, and it is "strange" that she would subject herself to such torture. The third definition of "long[ing]" as a "depart[ure]" is relevant to the term "strange longings" as well. In Madgett's poem, when Wheatley feels these "strange longings" she departs from her present-day reality and escapes to a time before her enslavement. Again, it is "strange" that Wheatley would make this departure, as it exacerbates her sense of loss for an irreparable past. In this departure, the fourth definition of "long" applies, as Wheatley's imagination is made to "pass over a certain distance," specifically the Atlantic Ocean when her memory transports her back to Africa. Finally, this imaginary return to Africa, is "strange" because Wheatley feels ambivalent about the concept of homeland as it relates to her experience. Madgett's term "strange longings" has a number of meanings, but all of them speak to Wheatley's sense of being caught between, and this ambivalence pervades the work of African American writers' representations of Wheatley. Although each representation of Wheatley examined in this dissertation indicates "strange longings," the nature of these longings differs from one era to another, and articulating these differences is the focus of each chapter.

Portrayals of Wheatley From Periodicals to Poetry

The first chapter focuses on longing and its effect on portrayals of Wheatley in African American periodicals at the turn of the twentieth century. Representations of Wheatley in these periodicals from 1890-1906 are almost universally reverential. During this time, known as the "nadir" of African American history and culture, African American writers relied on Wheatley as evidence of African American intellectual and artistic capability. These writers also depicted Wheatley as an aspirational figure whom African Americans could employ as a model for their own success. Longing is fundamental to any aspiration, as any person aspiring to something greater naturally is "restless and impatient *till*" she achieves her goal.

Furthermore, the underlying premise of both of these depictions of Wheatley is that African American literature generally and Wheatley more specifically are capable of uplifting the race. In the first category of portrayals, Wheatley raises the race by providing evidence of African Americans' humanity and intellectual equality. In the second category of portrayals, Wheatley elevates the race by serving as a pinnacle of African American achievement. Implicit in the second type of portrayals is the notion that if all African Americans followed Wheatley's example, racism could be eradicated because prejudiced people would finally realize that African Americans were intellectually competent and pious, much like Wheatley. However, there is an inevitable tension underlying these portrayals of Wheatley. By presenting Wheatley as an example of African Americans' humanity and aptitude, these African American writers are placed in a difficult position. If they choose not to promote their own representations of black

Americans, only the racist portrayals would remain. However, their decision to address these racist assertions tacitly indicates that they, too, have internalized a belief in their own inferiority. Ultimately, a longing for physical safety as well as social and political equality dictated African American portrayals of Wheatley at the turn of the twentieth century, as African Americans were not guaranteed even the most basic human rights in America at that time.

Over the course of the years between the turn of the twentieth century and 1919, African American writers begin to represent Wheatley in ways that more forcefully reject the internalized racism that characterized portrayals of the poet in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the second chapter, African American writers of the "New Negro" period shift the focus from somewhat blithe biographical accounts typical of the nineteenth century to more discerning evaluations of Wheatley. In an attempt to usher in the era of the "New Negro," Alain Locke and other men writing during this time acknowledge Wheatley's accomplishments and critique her shortcomings concurrently, suggesting that both perspectives are necessary to refashion African American literary criticism as a genre that both appreciates and analyzes its subjects. Because white American writers and critics did not devote much, if any, space in their work to trying to prove their race's humanity through their production of literature, their black American counterparts in this era begin to turn away from evaluating African American literature based on such a degrading premise. By taking this tack, these critics hoped to elevate African American literature to the same plane as white American literature.

Based on African American male critics' standards for literary achievement during the time, which emphasized "newness" as well as race consciousness in African

American literature, Wheatley's work ran contrary to their expectations. More specifically, because Wheatley had been used so often as "evidence" of African Americans' intellectual capacity, she often received inordinate criticism from these men who hoped to supersede the criticism of an earlier era with their novel approach to evaluating African American literature. Their demands for race consciousness were also rooted in the notion that African American literature was a relatively new phenomenon, one that wanted to emulate white literature's presumed preoccupation with art over activism as well as establish itself as a definitively "Negro" American entity. By rejecting Wheatley, they reject the notion that African American literature must prove African Americans' humanity and capacity, innovating the ways in which African American literary criticism had been approached to that point, and augmenting their own places in the burgeoning African American literary canon by minimizing Wheatley's significance to the tradition due to her supposed lack of race consciousness. The African American men writing during this period long for the opportunity to relinquish the necessity to prove their equality, and they also long for Wheatley to be a definitively "African" genesis of African American literature. Their longings lead them to dismiss Wheatley as the mother of the African American literary tradition and emphasize the ways in which they can distinguish themselves from her.

Picking up Wheatley's story again, nearly thirty-five years after the New Negro period, the third chapter examines the significance of black feminists' representations of Wheatley at the festival named in her honor at Jackson State University in 1973. Although there were representations of Wheatley during the time between the New Negro Period and the Festival, Wheatley was not treated as consistently or as thoroughly as she

had been in previous eras or would be in subsequent eras. The time period following the New Negro movement only raised the bar for race consciousness, and Wheatley often fell short. The women who gathered for the Phillis Wheatley Poetry Festival to commemorate the bicentennial of the publication of *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* essentially resurrected Wheatley as a pioneer and a fundamental figure in the burgeoning of African American literature. In addition to poetry, critical essays and a dramatic production were also written especially for the festival. In the very conception of the Festival, there is an underlying assumption that Wheatley's work had not been properly celebrated and evaluated. The work produced for the Festival often laments the harsh and flawed manner by which male critics judged Wheatley's work. The writers contend that factors such as Wheatley's enslaved status, age, gender, audience, and historical moment should be taken into account when assessing her work. In addition to arguing that the content of Wheatley's work had been underestimated, many of these women contend that it is not the content of Wheatley's work that matters most. The mere existence of Wheatley's voice is remarkable, significant, and worthy of celebration because it made the voices of other black women possible. Finally, in their works addressing Wheatley, these women project their ambivalence about Wheatley's adoption of Christianity and Western culture onto the eighteenth-century poet by suggesting that she felt a similar ambivalence about these aspects of her life. Furthermore, according to the women of the Festival, Wheatley desired to reestablish her severed connection to her African culture. Their portrayals of Wheatley as longing for her homeland were, in fact, the women of the festival expressing their own yearning for closer proximity to an African past and a definitively African component of African

American literature. For these women, Wheatley serves as a point of connection between them and their otherwise distant and convoluted African heritage.

After covering 1973 in chapter three, chapter four spans the last two decades of the twentieth century, treating poems published in the 1980s and 90s. The poems treated in this chapter share a thematic thread; they all remember Wheatley's Middle Passage voyage. At times these writers depict Wheatley's journey directly, but at other times they address her Middle Passage trip by way of her second and third transatlantic crossings from Boston to London and back in 1773. Whatever route these African American writers take, they all present Wheatley's transatlantic crossings as symbolic of the ambivalence and instability that characterized the eighteenth-century poet's identity. During these crossings, Wheatley physically occupied the space between Africa, Europe, and America, which was representative of the ways in which Wheatley embodied the convergence of these three cultures. Much like the participants of the Phillis Wheatley Poetry Festival, these late twentieth-century poets complicate many of the previous depictions of Wheatley, as they portray Wheatley as possessing Du Bois's notion of "double consciousness" being both "an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body" (Du Bois 8-9). This interpretation of Wheatley reiterates African Americans' longing for an integrated identity and their longing to discover this identity by way of examining Wheatley's life and work.

In the final chapter of the dissertation, the treatment of Phillis Wheatley in the African American literary imagination comes full circle, as it examines the relationship between Wheatley and Thomas Jefferson, the figure who arguably provoked African

American writers' to produce such a copious amount of literature on Wheatley in the first place. William H. Robinson, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Houston Baker, Jr. all contend that Jefferson instigated much of African American writers' early criticism on Wheatley, but I argue that this impulse to produce literature and criticism about Wheatley extends to the current day. Chapter five explores twenty-first century representations of Wheatley and Jefferson in African American poetry and argues that Wheatley's relationship with Jefferson is salient to African American writers, as it forces all Americans to contend with the dissonance that typifies the founding fathers' practice of petitioning England for their liberty while depriving African American slaves of theirs. Through their exploration of the relationship between Wheatley and Jefferson, these twenty-first century poets interrogate the "fathers" of the country and the documents that they produced, which serve as the foundation for our nation. These poets force their readers to contend with the hypocrisy of America's underpinning and express a longing for the promises of Jefferson and his Declaration to be fulfilled for men and women of all races.

Imagination, Aspiration and Representation

Throughout the African American literary imagination, Wheatley continuously resurfaces as a specter haunting African American writers. The persistence of renderings of the poet spanning four centuries of literature provides evidence of African American writers' preoccupation with Wheatley. Although Wheatley's recurrence over the course of the African American literary tradition is relatively steady, there are periods in which her appearances are scant, and the nature of the representations themselves vary widely especially when considered over time. These variances can be accounted for when one considers the following: the act of remembering is more so reconstruction than

preservation; people tend toward reconstructing memories that are more positive, more complete, and more pristine than the original event that is being remembered; and people are motivated to reconstruct memories on the basis of their present circumstances. The nostalgia and longing that typify memories of Wheatley are symptoms of the aspirational condition of African Americans over the course of their time in America. Although their aspirations may change, the state of longing is consistent throughout the African American literary imagination, and this longing dictates the ways in which African American writers depict Wheatley.

Chapter One: "We Love to Rehearse It": Wheatley as Indication and Inspiration In African American Periodicals, 1890-1906

On November 1, 1890, the state of Mississippi ratified a new constitution that included the implementation of so-called "literacy tests" as a means of barring African Americans from voting. Although such tests became almost ubiquitous in the South during the long tenure of Jim Crow, Mississippi was the first state to use literacy as a prerequisite to the franchise. It is, of course, both calculated and ironic that the very states that criminalized teaching slaves to read during the antebellum period were now using the dearth of educational opportunities for African Americans as a tactic for depriving them of their right to vote. Just as Mississippi and other states were instituting literacy tests to disenfranchise blacks, African American periodicals were advocating their own version of literacy as a measure of deservedness. This is not to suggest that these African American writers supported the use of literacy tests to impede African Americans from voting. However, they did promote the notion that by producing literature, especially when that literature espoused middle-class values, African Americans could prove themselves human, equal, moral, and therefore worthy of the rights and respect that the Declaration of Independence along with the Constitution promised them.

More specifically, African American writers of this time utilized portrayals of Phillis Wheatley, a "representative" figure of the race, to serve as an exemplar of African Americans' capacity for intelligence and respectability. During the time period treated in this chapter, (1890 to 1906), African American periodicals were often a platform for portrayals of representative men and women who embodied respectability. Although

they were publishing in African American periodicals, black writers of the period intended to reach a biracial audience. For whites, particularly those prejudiced against African Americans, black writers of the time used Wheatley and other representative men and women to provide evidence of the capacity of blacks to attain intellectual and moral refinement. For blacks, representative African Americans like Wheatley were to serve as role models for their intellectual and moral attainment. These exemplars' representativeness and respectability were intended to influence the behavior of both blacks and whites. Black writers hoped that these representative men and women would inspire all African Americans to strive for middle-class values, and the authors "…emphasized reform of individual behavior and attitudes both as a goal in itself and as a strategy for reform of the entire structural system of American race relations" (Higginbotham 187). In turn, these writers believed that if African Americans could demonstrate their respectability, they would "expose race relations as socially constructed rather than derived by evolutionary law or divine judgment" (Higginbotham 192). Furthermore, they believed that this revelation would force whites to end discriminatory practices based on race. During this time, African American writers' portrayals of Wheatley employ both the concepts of representativeness and respectability as viable channels through which African Americans could gain the full rights of citizenship and eliminate the racial violence that came to characterize the period.

The concept of representativeness in relation to African Americans has its origins in the debate regarding literature as evidence of humanity that reaches back to at least the

seventeenth century.[2] For at least two hundred years, there were advocates of slavery claiming that Africans' supposed lack of a written literary tradition made them less than human and therefore fit for slavery. This assertion led abolitionist down what has become the very long road of using the writing of people of African descent as evidence of their humanity and the injustice of their enslavement. In his *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. chronicles the origins of African American literary criticism, noting that the specter of the debates regarding literature as a sign of humanity has been present since the nascence of the African American literary tradition:

> Indeed, the earliest discrete examples of written discourse by the slave and ex-slave came under a scrutiny not primarily literary. Black formal writing,…was taken to be collective as well as functional. Because these narratives documented the black's potential for 'culture'—that is, for manners and morals—the command of written English virtually separated the African from the Afro-American, the slave from the ex-slave, titled property from fledgling human being. Well-meaning abolitionists cited these texts as proof of the common humanity of bondsman and lord….(Gates 4)

Gates describes the origins of African American literary criticism as having very little to do with actual critical assessment of the literature. Instead, the literature was simply a tool through which African Americans could provide evidence of their race's intellectual aptitude.

Furthermore, Gates specifically refers to Wheatley's role in this project of proving the intellectual capacity of African Americans when he remarks, "Well before her book of verse was to appear, Phillis, 'a free Negro Girl,' had been called upon as a living

[2] In *Figures in Black*, Gates remarks, "At least since Purchas published his Pilgrimage in 1611, Europeans sought to measure the 'sublimity' of Africans by their progress in the so-called arts and sciences" (Gates15)

refutation of the charge of innate Negro inferiority and, concomitantly, as an ideal example of the miraculous effects of a shift in environment" (Gates 69). Gates alludes to the eighteenth-century debate concerning whether supposed differences among groups of people are the result of "nature" or "nurture." Some of the men involved in this debate, such as Benjamin Rush, cited Wheatley as evidence of the "progress" that members of allegedly "inferior" groups of people could make when given the proper environment. Given the ways in which abolitionists employed African American literature, Gates argues that from its inception, African American literature has been a political instrument.

However, despite the literary accomplishments of people of African descent, including Wheatley, the notion that black people were incapable of producing literature persisted, and African American writers felt compelled to respond, as Gates indicates when he says,

> So insistent did these racist allegations prove to be, at least from the eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries, that it is fair to describe the subtext of the history of black letters as this urge to refute the claim that because blacks had no written traditions they were bearers of an inferior culture. The relationship between European and American critical theory, then, and the development of African and Afro-American literary traditions, can readily be seen to have been ironic indeed. Even as late as 1911, when J.E. Casely-Hayford published *Ethiopia Unbound* (called the first African novel), that pioneering author felt compelled to address this matter in the first two paragraphs of his text. (Gates 25-26)

Gates points to the greatest irony of the history of African American literature and literary criticism—many black writers felt obligated to take on the task of proving that people of African descent were capable of writing as they were, in fact, in the midst of the act of writing. Furthermore, Gates contends, "The peculiar history of Wheatley's reception by critics has, ironically enough, largely determined the theory of the criticism

of the creative writings of Afro-Americans from the eighteenth century to the present time" (Gates 79).

Despite African American writers' focus on representativeness, in his book, *Black American Writing from the Nadir: The Evolution of a Literary Tradition 1877-1915*, Dickson D. Bruce, Jr. notes, "Black writers were hardly representative of the black population as a whole during this period. They may be described without oversimplification as members of the black middle class…" (Bruce 4-5). Furthermore, the social class of the African American authors during this time greatly influenced their literary choices regarding the subjects and content of their work, which Bruce corroborates when he writes,

> But such a middle-class orientation was especially clear in the works of post-Reconstruction black writers. In regard to religion, they gave expression to a middle-class piety that confirmed the pride in decorum one finds in other contexts. And they showed their devotion to other middle-class virtues—temperance, culture, and refinement—as well. (Bruce 7-8)

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, African American writers' preoccupation with middle class values reflects their investment in what Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham terms the "politics of respectability."

In her book *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*, Higginbotham outlines the beliefs and goals that drove black Baptist women to promote and pursue adherence to middle-class values. Although many of the values they endorsed had much in common with white middle-class values at the time, they were not motivated by a desire to simply imitate whites. As the wording of Higginbotham's concept suggests, for these women, the pursuit of respectability went hand-in-hand with the pursuit of political rights for African Americans. When

Higginbotham writes, "The politics of respectability as conceived by the black Baptist women, formed an integral part of the larger resistance that would eventually nullify unjust laws," she contends that underlying the politics of respectability is a belief that African Americans could gain equality by demonstrating not only their humanity but also their capacity for refinement (Higginbotham 193). They believed that by practicing proper "manners and morals" they could prove themselves worthy of equal rights, and when Higginbotham writes, "The Baptist women's emphasis on respectable behavior found expression in the writing of most black leaders of the time, male and female alike, and was perceived as essential to racial self-help and dignity," she argues that this line of thinking informed not only the women of the black Baptist church and other religious organizations but also secular writing at the time (Higginbotham 192, 188).

These writers' focus on representativeness was closely related to the politics of respectability, as the heroic men and women whom they often chose as subjects for their writing were sometimes not only evidence of the intellectual capabilities of African Americans but also evidence of their spiritual capabilities as well. Furthermore, in the primarily biographical treatments of Wheatley in African American periodicals from 1890-1906, just as much, if not more, attention is paid to Wheatley's intellectual refinement as her religious refinement. Wheatley's centuries-long role as the ultimate example of the African's aptitude along with her focus on piety as evidenced by the very title of her book of verse made her an ideal subject for African American writers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Through their treatments of Wheatley, these writers promoted the concepts of representativeness and the politics of respectability as a means of agitating for civil rights.

Michael Fultz describes the ways in which the notion of representativeness weighed heavily on many early twentieth-century black writers who published in African American periodicals when he writes in his article " 'The Morning Cometh': African American Periodicals, Education and the Black Middle Class, 1900-1930,"

> Since particularly during the 1900-1910 period the black middle class perceived that they and the race as a whole, were 'on trial' or needed to 'measure up,' higher education figured prominently in providing 'evidence' to whites that blacks had the ability, discipline, and brains to achieve academic distinction. (Fultz 105)

Fultz also writes in " 'The Morning Cometh,' " "It is as if African-Americans in the pre-war period, particularly, in this case, the black middle-class, needed to affirm repeatedly the education and moral roots of their accomplishments. The reiteration, itself, was the reverse echo of the extent to which these attributes were denied by Southern whites and many Northerners as well" (Fultz 105). Fultz suggests that through the content of African American periodicals, African Americans sought to saturate the press with examples of black Americans' intellectual and moral triumphs to overcome the barrage of racist representations of African Americans that dominated the mainstream media. For these African Americans, Wheatley functioned as a site of longing as well because they hoped that by calling attention to her excellence they would be able to combat stereotypes and lift African Americans out of the abyss of racism from which they yearned to escape.

Given the use of early African American literature as a political tool, it is not surprising that early African American critics read Wheatley's work, "primarily in nonliterary terms and for other than literary purposes" (Gates 73). Furthermore, when Gates notes that Wheatley's poems were, "cited so frequently as 'the' example of the mental and aesthetic capacity of the African slave" and that in Wheatley criticism, "biographical facts are more highly refined than is the criticism of her verse," he calls to

mind the treatment of Wheatley in African American periodicals from 1890-1906 (Gates 74).

During this time period, presentations of Wheatley in African American periodicals primarily fell under the category of biographical writing. In his book *Faithful Account of the Race: African American Historical Writing in Nineteenth-Century America*, Stephen G. Hall describes such texts as, "Closely connected to biographical genres and perhaps the antebellum romantic concept of representative men and women" (Hall 170). He also states that these texts,

> …functioned as sites for the edification of the race….they included pictures of eminent African American men and women and featured lengthy reprints of articles, speeches, and various commentaries designed to provide guidance and instruction for the race. Obviously, this form of representation stood in stark contrast to mainstream portrayals of African Americans as degenerate buffoons who were unable to manifest the higher virtues of civilization. (Hall 171)

Hall notes the importance of biographical writing in both providing models of exemplary achievement upon which African Americans could model themselves as well as presenting a counterexample to the predominating narrative of African American inferiority. However, more was at stake in these biographies than "provid[ing] a heroic portrait of a race" (Hall 174). With these accounts, African Americans sought to "reflect upon and engage the most pressing issues of their day. These issues included violence and social repression, black degeneracy, social Darwinism, and intellectual lampooning of black ability" (Hall 174). Implicit in Hall's assessment is an argument for African Americans' belief in the power of representativeness through biography to cure social ills, including racial violence, an issue upon which their very lives depended. Given this belief, it is not surprising that "These works were the most frequently advertised in the

leading African American periodicals of the time, such as the *A.M.E Church Review*, *Voice of the Negro*, *Colored American*, and *Southern Workman*" (Hall 152).

At least one of the leaders of the *A.M.E. Church Review*, founded in 1884, explicitly articulates the large task at hand for publications produced by African Americans. During the infancy stage of the *A.M.E. Church Review*, Bishop Henry McNeal Turner wrote a letter to the magazine's first editor, Benjamin Tucker Tanner, delineating what was at stake in the production of the publication, writing:

> 'The literature of the world is the history of the world, call its different branches by whatever name you please; and a people, race, country, or Church that has no history has no literature, and where there is no literature there is no development, progress or respectability. The world knows nothing of their worth, because it knows nothing of their history….Our words and ideas must be carried, conveyed, conducted.' (qtd. in Bullock 98)

The A.M.E Church's bishop views the magazine as an instrument that was put in place to aid African Americans, in general, and the A.M.E. Church, more specifically, in providing evidence for its progress and respectability. Turner also articulates an inextricable connection between literature and history. He argues that you cannot have one without the other, and the presence of both is necessary to signal progress and respectability in a group. Turner's statements helped shape the periodical's content, and his influence on the magazine is evident six years later when Reverend William H. Yeocum published his essay, "Phillis Wheatley—The First African Poetess" in the *A.M.E Church Review* in January 1890.

Reverend Yeocum evokes Wheatley both as evidence of African intellectual capacity and as an inspirational role model for African Americans living in the last decade of the nineteenth century. In his opening paragraph, Yeocum indicates the primary use of Wheatley in African American publications at the time when he says,

> In various newspapers and periodicals we had seen references to her [Wheatley's] great ability—that the variety and thoughtfulness of her poems gave every evidence or indication that, though of ebony hue, her mind was as fertile and active as that of any other race, of whatever color. (Yeocum 329)

Yeocum notes that the predominating reason that Wheatley appears in newspapers and periodicals is as evidence of African American intellect. Furthermore, Yeocum points to the importance of representative men and women of the race in making "those who are prejudiced against the race" aware of the accomplished men and women of the race (Yeocum 331). He suggests that these prejudiced people should, "read history, for a specimen of Africa's great men; of statesmen, of soldiers, of scholars, men of science, able writers, poets and novelists" (Yeocum 331). For Yeocum, Wheatley stood among "Africa's great [wo]men" as one who provided "sure evidence that what Africa has been in ages past it may be again in the near future" (Yeocum 331). Although Yeocum specifically expresses hope in the future of Africa, he tacitly indicates his hope for the future of African Americans. Yeocum argues that through exposure to representative men and women, those who believe African Americans to be inferior would be forced to concede the equality of the races. Yeocum quotes at length from three of Wheatley's poems, but his assessment of her verse is best summarized by his remark that "This volume of Phillis Wheatley contains thirty-seven poems, and the variety of her subjects will convince the learned and thoughtful of any race that she had an active giant mind" (Yeocum 331).

In addition to positing Wheatley as evidence of African Americans' intellectual parity with whites, Yeocum presents Wheatley as an example after which African Americans should model themselves. He notes that one value of Wheatley's example is its ability to, "stimulate, encourage and inspire our young men and women to seek

education" (Yeocum 329). More specifically, Yeocum explicitly expresses one goal of the dissemination of his article as the hope that Wheatley's story, "might somewhat inspire our young people" (Yeocum 329). Yeocum concludes the poem by explicitly linking his treatment of Phillis Wheatley to the project of racial uplift that pervaded the *A.M.E. Church Review* when he directly addresses the young people who may be reading his article:

> …the time must come—it shall come—when your writings, like those of Phillis Wheatley, will be perused with pleasure and profit. Write on! Write on! Young men, young women, give your thoughts to the world; for it will be like casting bread upon the waters, it shall return and be gathered after many days. Yours, for God and the elevation of the race. (Yeocum 333)

Yeocum connects the ideas of representativeness and respectability in his conclusion in two ways. First, he employs biblical allusion, Ecclesiastes 11:1 specifically, to advise young black men and women to contribute to the project of racial uplift. By referring to the Bible, Yeocum reminds the youth whom he addresses that middle-class religious values as they are delineated in Christianity's foundational text should dictate their behavior. His insistence that they make their contribution through writing harkens back to the earliest impulse of African American literature to prove the race's deservedness through writing, thereby practicing the concept of representativeness. Second, the last sentence of Yeocum's article, "Yours, for God and the elevation of the race," explicitly links aspiring to Christian virtues, the basis for respectable values, to uplifting the race through representativeness.

Five years after Yeocum's article appeared in the *A.M.E Church Review*, Katherine Tillman published her essay "Afro-American Women and Their Work" in 1895, with the intention of proving that African American women have made significant

contributions to the advancement of their people. Tillman articulates her objective when she writes, "My motive is to show to the public the part that our women have played in the great drama of Negro progress" (Tillman 277). When Tillman refers to the "public" it is unclear exactly whom this group includes. While the *Review* was an organ for the A.M.E. Church, an organization founded by African Americans, it is clear from Bishop Turner's directive that he imagines the *Review* reaching a larger, multi-racial audience, one that includes those who need convincing regarding the progress and respectability of African Americans. With Turner's scope in mind, it is likely that Tillman includes people who are not African Americans in her notion of the "public." However, she makes it clear that those who need convincing regarding the value of African American *women* to the race are not limited to people outside of the race. Tillman argues that black women have been underappreciated among African Americans when she says, "Quite recently an Afro-American editor assumed a look of grave importance, and dipping his goose quill into the printer's ink threw out the following challenge: 'What have the women of the race done for its elevation anyway?' I shall answer that question with interesting facts which cannot be disproved" (Tillman 277). Tillman takes on the task of providing evidence of the value black women have added to the progress of the race.

By writing an article that is largely a litany of African American women's achievements, Tillman demonstrates her investment in representativeness; however, her commitment to respectability is also explicitly articulated in the article. When in the midst of celebrating African American women in the professions of medicine and dentistry, Tillman encourages women who may feel eternally relegated to domestic service to use domestic work as a "stepping stone to that grander and nobler existence for

which we crave" (Tillman 284). She then rather abruptly endorses the politics of respectability before presenting the accomplishments of women in law:

> A terrible charge has been made against us as a race. We have been charged with mental inferiority; now if we can prove that with cultivated hearts and brains, we can accomplish the same that is accomplished by our fairer sisters of the Caucasian race, why then, we have refuted the falsehood. Many of us give up too easily. Because we are Negroes and are poor, we feel that it is our duty to crush our aspirations and be contented to dwell in the valley of humiliation, when we might be upon mountains, heralding some joyous message to the hungry multitudes at our feet. We owe it to God and to the Negro race, to be as perfect specimens of Christian womanhood as we are capable of being. (Tillman 284)

Like other advocates of representativeness and respectability, Tillman places a significant portion of the responsibility for racial progress upon African Americans' shoulders. When she says that African Americans require "cultivated hearts and brains," she promotes the notion that they need both intellectual and moral refinement to refute beliefs in their inferiority. While Tillman does not draw from the lexicon of racial progress of the period, as she does not use commonly employed terms such "raise," "elevate," or "uplift," she communicates her message of African Americans' potential to ascend through an image of upward mobility. She utilizes the metaphor of moving from the "valley of humiliation" to the "mountains" to signal the possibility of racial uplift. Tillman also communicates the ideas of racial uplift as a never-ending cycle of responsibility when she suggests that once her readers emerge atop the mountain, they have an obligation to share "some joyous message to the hungry multitudes at [their] feet" (Tillman 284). For Tillman, it is not sufficient for one to improve one's own condition while other African Americans are continuing to be degraded. Tillman also clearly delineates the connection between serving God and serving the race when she claims that African Americans are obligated to both. Furthermore, although she does not

explicitly state the possible political benefits that may be gained if African Americans were to prove their intellectual and moral equality, the assertion is implicit in her invocation of representativeness and the politics of respectability.

Tillman presents Phillis Wheatley as a representative woman of the race who has contributed much to the progress of her people. When Tillman mentions Wheatley she says,

> From the bitter night of bondage the soil of Ph[i]llis Wheatley, a native African poetess of great merit, who was received with honor in England, and Frances Ellen Watkins, also a poetess had blossomed, like the fragile violets that greet us first of all the flowers in early spring. Ph[i]llis has performed her mission and gone to rest, while Frances in the person of Mrs. Harper the gifted authoress and lecturer is sill living and actively engaged in the work of elevating her people. (Tillman 280)

Tillman compares slavery to nighttime while she compares Wheatley to "fragile violets" that are the first to bloom at the beginning of spring. By deeming Wheatley among the "fragile violets" that emerge at the beginning of spring, Tillman portrays Wheatley as a forerunner to African American literature. Furthermore, Tillman suggests that Wheatley was able to "bloom" without sunlight since she was in "the bitter night of bondage" and the flowers that symbolize Wheatley bloom at the beginning of spring after a long period of darkness and frigid temperatures. Tillman implies that Wheatley was able to survive and even thrive despite the fact that she did not have everything that she needed to grow. When she says that Wheatley has, "performed her mission and gone to rest," Tillman suggests that Wheatley served her race by means of her literary accomplishments. Through her metaphors about Wheatley's emergence despite seemingly insurmountable difficulties, Tillman depicts Wheatley's success as remarkable, and it is this exemplary characteristic that makes her a perfect woman to represent the race.

Wheatley also appears as a model of representativeness and respectability in another African American periodical, *Colored American Magazine,* whose mission can be summarized by its subtitle: *An Illustrated Monthly Devoted to Literature, Science, Music, Art, Religion, Facts, Fictions, and Traditions of the Negro Race; A Co-operative Journal by Prominent Negro Statesmen, Scientists and Teachers, Together with Other Celebrated Authors.* In *The African American Periodical Press 1838-1909,* Penelope Bullock states, "During the first four years, under the editorial charge of Walter Wallace and Pauline Hopkins in Boston, the *Colored American Magazine* was primarily a literary periodical. It featured short stories, serialized novels, poetry, and book reviews; it also devoted much space to a series of articles on history, biography, and travel" (Bullock 112).

Given the *Colored American Magazine's* interest in literature, history, and biography, it is not surprising that Phillis Wheatley appears in articles during the Boston years of the magazine.

Robert W. Carter's 1901 article in *Colored American Magazine*, "The Opening Century," reflects his concern with representativeness and respectability. Carter opens his piece by declaring, "The intellectual, moral and social condition of the Negro race is now vastly different to what it was at the coming in of the nineteenth century" (Carter 307). Within the first sentence of the article, Carter alerts readers that he is concerned with the "intellectual, moral and social" state of African Americans. For Carter, these three realms are equally important, as success in all three areas was necessary to gain equality. More specifically, he asserts that instead of being judged on what he terms "color" men should be "recognized and admitted according to behavior, education and

intellectual ability" (Carter 308). This assertion is an argument for the importance of representativeness, as he subtly argues that there are men with these qualities who represent the capacity for the refinement of the race as a whole. He also makes a case for the politics of respectability by evoking the black middle class's preoccupation with propriety and academic achievement as the criteria upon which equality would be merited. Carter cites Wheatley as an example of a person of African descent who accomplished much intellectually, morally, and socially, noting that her "natural refinement and extraordinary attainment" served as a refutation of ethnologists' claims that people of African descent were closer to animal than human (Carter 308). By presenting Wheatley as a counterexample to racist discourses that portrayed people of African descent as sub-human, Carter is engaging in the praxis of representativeness. Interestingly, like Tillman before him, Carter compares Wheatley to a flowering plant when he writes that Wheatley, "under the kind care of Mrs. Wheatley bloomed and blossomed like fervent flowers in May" (Carter 308). However, while Tillman focuses on the unlikelihood of Wheatley's growth given her environment, Carter contends that it was the nurturing environment that Susannah Wheatley fostered that allowed for Wheatley's development. When Carter argues that "With Phillis Wheatley it was as it would have been with others of her race had they received similar treatment and been allowed the same opportunity," he asserts that any ignorance that exists on the part of African Americans is not due to an inherent ineptitude, but is instead the result of a lack of opportunity (Carter 308). While many often viewed Wheatley as an exception to the rule regarding black inferiority, Carter contends that many others of Wheatley's ilk would have been discovered had they been given the chance. As a model of both

intellectual and moral refinement, Carter's depiction of Wheatley advanced the *Colored American Magazine's* agenda, which was to submit evidence of the capability of African Americans to master both scholarly and sacred pursuits, providing a much needed counter narrative to the prevailing racist discourse that permeated the mainstream media. Finally, Carter's renderings of Wheatley and other representative men and women indicate his belief in the potential for these counter narratives to convince racists that African Americans deserved all of the rights afforded to white Americans.

One of the editors of the *Colored American Magazine*, Pauline Hopkins, more than a year after Carter's article, began publishing a series in the magazine, "Famous Women of the Negro Race," in which she engages both representativeness and the politics of respectability through her renderings of Wheatley and others exemplary women of the race. Hopkins's "Famous Women" series followed a similar series called "Famous Men of the Negro Race." Lois Brown in her book *Pauline Hopkins: Black Daughter of the Revolution*, quotes V.P. Franklin when describing Hopkins's motivation for publishing historical and biographical features in the *Colored American Magazine*. Franklin characterizes the aim of many African American writers at the time as " 'race vindication' " (qtd in L. Brown 286). According to Franklin, many of these writers were guided by a desire to " 'deconstruct the discursive structures erected in science, medicine, the law, and historical discourse to uphold the mental and cultural inferiority of African peoples' " (qtd. in L. Brown 286). Hopkins in her biographical sketches for "Famous Women of the Negro Race" wants to not only highlight the accomplishments of Wheatley and other African American women but also argue for their achievements as representative of the capabilities of African American people more generally.

Furthermore, Hopkins contends that African Americans can achieve advancement through both sacred and secular training, promoting the politics of respectability.

In the first section of an installment of "Famous Women of the Negro Race—Some Literary Workers," Hopkins outlines her overarching goal for the article—the engagement of African American women in racial uplift through morality. Hopkins evokes the primacy of morality in the first section of the article when she writes that the most important responsibility of African American women is, "to help clear the moral atmosphere by inculcating a clearer appreciation of the Holy Word and its application to every day living" (Hopkins 277). By placing her article featuring representative women of the race in the context of religious devotion, Hopkins contends that there is a correlation between living by the teachings of the Bible and living as a representative woman who uplifts her race. This focus on presenting exemplary African American women who embody virtuousness reveals Hopkins's dedication to both representativeness and respectability.

Hopkins argues that black women have already contributed to the reputation of the race when she says, "From the time that the first importation of Africans began to add comfort and wealth to the existence of the New World community, the Negro woman has been constantly proving the intellectual character of her race in unexpected directions; indeed, her success has been significant" (Hopkins 278). When Hopkins goes on to say "Let the women then, without adverse criticism, continue to help raise the race by every means in their power, and at the same time raise our common country from the mire of barbarism," she not only challenges African American women to make contributions for the sake of racial uplift but also for the sake of improving the national climate. Taking a

strong stance in favor of the politics of respectability, Hopkins subtly argues that if African American women can uplift their race, the achievements of the race will alter others' perceptions of black people in America. This uplift and record of achievement will, in turn, deliver America from what Hopkins describes as "barbarism," referring to the racial violence against black people that threatened both the lives of African Americans and the humanity of white perpetrators.

Hopkins indicts not only racists as oppositional agents working against African American women engaged in racial uplift but also African American men who criticize black women for being active political agents. She suggests that sexism among African American men is as much an impediment to the work of African American women as is racism among white Americans. In this statement, Hopkins challenges African American women to bear their fair share of responsibility for the direction of the race and the nation despite the numerous hindrances that they must combat to do so.

Hopkins presents the story of Phillis Wheatley in the second section of the article as a means of inspiring African American women to answer the call to action that she issues in the first section of the article. Hopkins begins the section treating Wheatley writing, "It was a curious phenomenon, in the midst of oppression and wrong, the discovery of so great a genius in the guise of a fragile child of a despised race" (Hopkins 278). In her characterization of Wheatley, there are a few key words: "curious phenomenon," "genius," "fragile," and "despised" (Hopkins 278). The first two words/phrases highlight Wheatley's exceptionalism. Hopkins suggests that Wheatley's intellectual aptitude was rare and her opportunity to develop her intellect was unlikely. She emphasizes the disadvantages under which Wheatley flourished when she describes

her as "fragile" and a member of a "despised" group (Hopkins 278). Hopkins's representation of Wheatley casts the poet as an exemplary member of the race whose excellence provides proof of intellectual equality between the races. However, by focusing on the fact that Wheatley achieved despite the limitations placed on her due to her race, gender, enslaved status, and age Hopkins holds Wheatley up as an example to which other African American women could aspire.

The inspiration that Hopkins and other African Americans garner from Wheatley's accomplishments is reiterated when Hopkins writes,

> The story of Phillis Wheatley's life is common history with all classes of people, yet, we love to rehearse it, renewing our courage, as it were, for the struggle of life, with live coals from the altar of her genius. To quote Carlisle, it was: 'Like a little well in the rocky desert places, like the sudden splendor of heaven! People knew not what to make of it.' (Hopkins 278)

Hopkins's assertion articulates one of the reasons that Wheatley appears as a topic of interest in African American periodicals of this period. According to Hopkins, African American writers of the period took pleasure in reiterating Wheatley's rise from the depths of enslavement to the unlikely position of international luminary because it confirmed that their longing to ascend was, in fact, possible if they took the best advantage possible of their opportunities. Her quotation from Thomas Carlyle suggests that Wheatley's biography, like water in the desert, provides African Americans with much needed hope for survival in the midst of the racial turmoil that typified the times in which they lived. With this characterization, Hopkins implies that reiteration of Wheatley's story is not superfluous, but absolutely necessary for African Americans' continued existence in an increasingly hostile environment. By presenting Wheatley as a representative woman of the race, Hopkins intended to inspire her diverse audience in

two ways. First, she hoped that by making racists aware of Wheatley's brilliance, they would concede that African Americans were, in fact, human and halt the scourge of racial violence that was so prevalent during that era. Second, she hoped that Wheatley's own ascent out of oppression despite seemingly insurmountable circumstances was one that African American women would replicate to elevate themselves and their people despite the obstacles of race, class, and gender.

However, the enterprises of representativeness and respectability that Hopkins and others practiced was not without it drawbacks. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham notes one such critique of the politics of respectability when she writes, "Respectability's emphasis on individual behavior served inevitably to blame blacks for their victimization and, worse yet, to place an inordinate amount of blame on black women" (Higginbotham 202). Furthermore, implicit in the very notion of racial uplift is the belief that African Americans are to some degree responsible for their unjust treatment. In the case of representativeness, African American writers' presentation of exemplary men and women as replicable models, simplifies the feasibility of all African Americans finding success through the integrity and industry these men and women of the race exemplified. More specifically, Hopkins's dedication to representativeness is an example of her unflagging belief in the power of romance to maintain African Americans' hope for an improvement in their condition. Brown delineates the role that romance and legend plays in Hopkins's biographical and historical writing when she writes,

> Hopkins softened the gory details of racial oppression and violence…As a result, Hopkins's historical writings clarified the ways in which she defined romance. For her, romance was a state of existence that persisted in the face of oppression. It offered unwavering protection to certain persons, and it prevented moral, physical, and emotional damage in the face of social and political evil. (Brown 291)

We have already seen romance and legend at work in Hopkins's comparisons of Wheatley to two extraordinary finds—a well in the desert and heaven. While both are possible to discover, neither is commonplace. However, despite the difficulties involved in finding these two items, Hopkins holds them up as trophies that are possible to win through diligence.

Hopkins's inclination toward eliding the gory details of slavery and focusing on Wheatley's exceptionalism is reflected in her portrayal of Wheatley's story. Hopkins glosses over the transactional nature of sales made at the slave market by saying that Susannah Wheatley decided to purchase Wheatley because her "heart was touched" by Wheatley's condition (Hopkins 278). She also begins her narrative of exceptionalism when it comes to Wheatley by describing her as " a good looking child" (Hopkins 278). When Hopkins writes that Wheatley was, "just imported from the African coast," her choice of the word "imported" to describe Wheatley's enslavement understates the circumstances by which Wheatley had come to be in America (Hopkins 278). "Imported" is a euphemism for "kidnapped" or "enslaved," which are much more accurate and frank expressions to articulate the process by which Wheatley was brought from Africa to America. When Hopkins describes Wheatley's physical condition in the slave market by saying she, "appeared to be suffering from the effects of the sea-voyage" she makes it seem as if Wheatley is simply experiencing seasickness after a pleasure cruise (Hopkins 278). She remains silent on the horrors of the Middle Passage that Wheatley witnessed during her forced migration from Africa to America.

Hopkins employs a strategy of understatement and omission to ensure that Wheatley's story is not too pitiful because she wants to valorize rather than victimize

Wheatley. When Hopkins writes, "In the family the little negress met with the kindest treatment, her genius demanding that she be treated as an equal and a companion. Indeed, she was an object of attraction, astonishment and attention with all refined and highly-cultured society at the home of the Wheatleys and abroad," she reiterates Wheatley's inspirational exceptionalism (Hopkins 278). In Hopkins's depiction of the Wheatley household, the obstacles of race, class, and gender have been overcome by aptitude and assiduousness.

Although Hopkins presents Wheatley as a person with "uncommon brightness" she does insinuate that her African American readers are capable of rising up from the mire of racism through hard work and propriety just as Wheatley did. Once again, Hopkins disregards the inevitable frictions that must have occurred as a result of Wheatley's rubbing up against the boundaries erected to preserve race, class, and gender lines in the eighteenth century. In Hopkins's account of Wheatley, the poet's acceptance was unanimous and unequivocal. It is worth noting that the only villain who appears in Hopkins's account of Wheatley's life is the poet's husband, John Peters. In the penultimate paragraph of the section on Wheatley Hopkins writes, "Phillis married Dr. Peters, a man of her own race, described by some as having considerable talents, and by others as of a mean nature that envied the achievements of the cultured woman he had married. Be this as it may, she did not long survive, her health declined rapidly, and she died in 1780, at the age of twenty-six" (Hopkins 279). By labeling Wheatley as "cultured" she implies that Peters was not. When Hopkins differentiates between Wheatley and Peters this way, she subtly reinforces the importance of respectability and suggests that discounting its importance can prompt a precipitous drop from the heights

to which one has ascended. She also implies that Wheatley's death was somehow caused by her marriage to Peters. With this illustration of the consequences of failing to maintain respectability at all times, Hopkins reminds readers of her initial charge that they promote morality by utilizing the Bible to guide their lives. She also makes a connection between impropriety and death that accomplishes two goals. First, it advances Hopkins's belief that a lack of religious devotion inevitably leads to spiritual death. Second, it invokes the notion that without hard work and propriety, African Americans would never achieve equality in the eyes of whites who would do them harm. In the absence of equality, African Americans would continue to succumb to the racial violence.

Hopkins's belief that righteousness was the antidote to racial hatred informed her depiction of Wheatley in her final paragraph. She implicitly advocates for moral fortitude on the part of African Americans once again when she writes, "The style of her writings is pure; her verses full of beauty and sublimity; her language chaste and elegant" (Hopkins 279). Her appreciation for the purity and chastity of Wheatley's work more so reflects Hopkins's agenda of utilizing moral fortitude to promote racial uplift than it reflects Hopkins's considerable competency in literary criticism. The righteousness of Wheatley's work is the main source for Hopkins's admiration of the poet's verse. For her, it is through the production of literature, art, science, etc., that corroborates the morality of African Americans that racial equality will be realized. In the same paragraph, Hopkins laments Wheatley's premature death and concludes the account by declaring, "She still accomplished her destiny which was by the development of her genius to show to the world the injustice done her race" (Hopkins 279). According to Hopkins, although Wheatley did not write explicitly about the oppression of people of African descent, she

promoted their cause by providing evidence of African Americans' respectability and academic acumen. Hopkins believed that neither white allies nor racists would be able to permit or perpetrate violence against African Americans once evidence of their intellect and decency had been substantiated. Hopkins's presentation of Wheatley as an exemplary, but replicable model of virtue and aptitude advances her mission of racial uplift through representativeness and respectability.

In his article "Phillis Wheatley—A Study," published in *Colored American Magazine* in 1904, George Gilbert Walker, much like Hopkins, presents Wheatley's religious conversion and intellectual success as her most laudable qualities, which other African Americans should emulate for the sake of racial uplift. Walker introduces Wheatley as, "The child of West African savages, herself a savage at the time of her capture, having behind her unnumbered generations of savagery and heathenism, this little Negro, nevertheless, was marked by the Parnassian sisters as their ward and singer" (G. Walker 56). Walker's description of Wheatley and her ancestors reflects his belief in the superiority of Christianity over Wheatley's native culture and faith. Walker paints Wheatley as a "savage" prior to her arrival in America to promote the potential for transformation through religious conversion. According to Walker, Wheatley had to overcome her inborn "savagery and heathenism" to become a world-renowned poet. He suggests that adopting Christian principles is as necessary for earthly success as it is for heavenly rewards. By presenting Wheatley's conversion as a prerequisite for her accomplishments, Walker tacitly advises his readers that righteousness is possible for them, and it is also a vehicle through which they can overcome obstacles such as race, class, and gender.

Walker also argues that Wheatley's work reflects a number of influences, but its morality was the result of her acceptance of Western ideals. When Walker says, "Thus her native genius was fashioned and adopted; and her poems embody all the sweetness and pathos of the African, the strength and piety of the Anglo-Saxon, the pity and longing of her enslaved people," he contends that the emotional aspects captured in her poetry are a credit to her African influences while her morality is the result of "Anglo-Saxon" values (G. Walker 57). Again, Walker suggests that African Americans must embrace Christianity if they are to maximize their potential. Walker continues to mark Wheatley's African heritage as the antithesis of Western values when he says, "Phillis Wheatley merits the judgment of being the only Negro, who during slavery, through culture coupled with her own native wit, rose to a status on a plane with those of the other race" (G. Walker 58). By distinguishing between "culture" and Wheatley's "own native wit," Walker implies that "culture" is only found in Western society. However, Walker does state that Wheatley's "wit" or intelligence is "native" or inherent, attributing her aptitude to her African heritage. Walker makes the case that both are necessary for advancement. Since according to his argument African Americans are born with "native wit," they only need to accept Western culture, Christianity in particular, to put themselves in a position equal to whites.

Although Walker presents Christianity as a vehicle to success that is accessible to everyone, he also contributes to the narrative of Wheatley's incomparability to fuel his African American readers' aspirations. Walker holds Wheatley up as someone who proved that she was equal to whites when he says,

> And to-day we can find no truer poet, black or white than this little African singer. The Negroes have not produced her equal; she remains unique in the

> annals of the Blacks in America as the product of education applied to a savage child of inherent ability the white race knows no rarer spirit, no loftier ambition. (G.Walker 58)

Walker also claims that Wheatley surpasses both African Americans and whites in her talents. By presenting Wheatley as a person of unrivaled genius, Walker challenges his African American readers to aim high in hopes of reaching Wheatley whom he renders as a representative woman and the epitome of achievement.

In keeping with his endorsement of representativeness, Walker contends that the success of African Americans as a group is tied to individual examples of excellence such as Wheatley. Walker concludes his discussion of Wheatley writing:

> And the capacity of her people, assimilation and adoption, is wondrously portrayed in her assuming as her speech and type those of the Anglo-Saxon whose history and literature is one grand development of spiritual and natural forces. That she succeeded in this is matter for thought and confidence. Hers was a situation in which all her acumen was put to the test. She rose and sang. We have well-nigh forgotten the song; but let us revive her memory, and give hushed adoration to our poet, the poet of her race, the poet of her race's history, the master of another race's civilization; the inspired chanter of the emotions of the soul, the gracious black girl, Phillis Wheatley. (G. Walker 58)

Walker lauds Wheatley for her ability to master the speech and "civilization" of "Anglo-Saxon" culture. Walker marries acquired religion with "natural" or innate intelligence when he says that Anglo-Saxon history and literature are, "one grand development of spiritual and natural forces" (G. Walker 58). He also asserts that Wheatley's pursuit both of Christianity and earthly knowledge makes her a viable model to emulate when he says her success in both arenas is "matter for thought and confidence" (G. Walker 58). He argues that Wheatley rose to the occasion when she was called upon to prove her race's capacity for intellectual and religious refinement and for that she should be appreciated. Walker also contends that memories of Wheatley and her achievements need to be

brought to the fore because Wheatley allowed herself to be a conduit through which other African Americans could travel on their way to the their ultimate destination—equality.

In the *Voice of the Negro*, another African American periodical of the time period, Kelly Miller, famed alumnus and leader of Howard University, corroborates Hopkins's and Walker's claims regarding the role of biography, a key mode of representativeness, in racial uplift. Miller begins his article "Achievements of the Negro Race," published in 1905 in the magazine, by asserting his perspective about the power of biography to represent the race. He writes:

> The individual is proof of the race, the first fruit and unfoldment of its potency and promise. The glory of any people is perpetuated and carried forward by the illustrious names which spring among them….Every race or nation, and indeed every well defined group of men, delight to point to their illustrious individuals as illustrative and exemplary of its possibilities….A despised people may well glorify its conspicuous individuals, for it is through them alone that they may hope to gain the world's recognition and esteem. (Miller 612)

Miller contends that successful African Americans whose achievements gain the attention of members outside the race serve as an indication of the potential of all African Americans to flourish. Just as Hopkins declares that "we love to rehearse" the story of Phillis Wheatley, Miller declares that all groups "delight" to identify members of the group who have accomplished great feats. Miller also concurs with Hopkins's and Walker's assertion that eminent members of the race serve as evidence of the promise of all African Americans.

While the theme of Miller's opening paragraph delineates the role of well-regarded African American biography in gaining the respect of whites, later in the article he also emphasizes that the biographies assist in establishing ideals toward which African Americans could strive. This is another commonality shared by Hopkins, Walker, and

Miller. Miller articulates his position when he writes, "The distinguished names which spring from among a people are the most effective standards of stimulus to the budding powers and aspirations of their youth" (Miller 612). For Miller, telling the stories of renowned African Americans affords other members of the race, especially young people, exemplars toward which they can aspire. Miller succinctly summarizes this dual role of celebrated African Americans when he writes, "They serve as both and argument and an inspiration. They show the American people that the Negro at his best, is imbued with their own ideas and strives after their highest ideals. To the Negro they serve as models of excellence to stimulate and encourage his hesitant and disheartened aspirations" (Miller 614). Miller also argues that in addition to serving as intellectual role models, many representative men and women of the race are spiritual role models as well when he says,

> The chief sin chargeable to the slave regime is that it obscured the mind from knowledge and the soul from God. But the smothered soul of the Negro broke through even this obscuring veil and justified its kinship with the great human spirit. Phillis Wheatley and Benjamin Banneker and Frederick Douglass attested the intellectual and spiritual kinship of the Negro with his more favored fellow men. They furnished the fullest proof that 'skins may differ, but affection dwells in the white and black the same.' (Miller 613)

He contends that the pious examples of Wheatley and others prove that all African Americans are capable of religious attainment, tacitly suggesting that their capacity for salvation renders them worthy of civil rights. Although Miller's direct treatment of Phillis Wheatley does not stray very far beyond relating the basic facts of her life, by highlighting Wheatley's intelligence and her reception among prominent white men and women of her time, Miller implies that Wheatley provides proof of the intellectual and spiritual promise of African Americans. He also implicitly encourages African

Americans to follow her example for the betterment of not only themselves but also the race.

In the year following Miller's treatment of Wheatley in the *Voice of the Negro*, Benjamin Griffith Brawley presented a more extensive article titled "Phillis Wheatley" in which he seeks to not only relay a biographical account of the poet's life but also address what he considers vastly discordant criticism of Wheatley. It is fitting that Brawley's account in the *Voice of the Negro* is the last treated in this chapter not simply because it occurs last within the chronology but because it reflects a transition in the ways in which African American writers approach Wheatley. Brawley's chronicle does, like others of the era, portray Wheatley as an exceptional person. However, unlike others publishing in African American periodicals during this period, Brawley takes an interest in Wheatley that moves beyond holding her up as a counter example to narratives of racial inferiority or as an aspirational figure.

He reiterates the well-known examples of Wheatley's genius, which certainly adds to the lore surrounding the poet, but he also attempts to evaluate her poetry objectively and separately from the agenda of racial uplift. When Brawley opens his essay "Phillis Wheatley," published in the *Voice of the Negro*, he writes,

> By her genius Phillis Wheatley won the praise of the foremost men of Boston, and of George Washington; by her grace and power she made friends in the highest social circles of England, and as the years have passed her name has gathered to itself a legendary significance for remarkable talent. On the other hand Thomas Jefferson said that her poems were beneath the dignity of criticism. The New International Encyclopedia says that 'of real poetic ability she was totally destitute' and other judgments are equally harsh. Where is the truth between these conflicting opinions? (Brawley 55)

In the opening passage, Brawley posits the main purpose of his essay. He attempts to resolve the paradox that would come to characterize African American writers'

representations of Wheatley. He questions how she could be so revered among some writers and so eviscerated among others. It is worth noting that the examples that Brawley provides of both laudatory and inordinately harsh literary criticism of Wheatley are the perspectives of white Americans. Brawley does not really have a tradition of literary criticism treating Wheatley to which he can refer.[3] He is at the precipice of what could truly be called African American literary criticism of the poet. As this chapter illustrates, African American presentations of Wheatley had been primarily in the mode of biography until this point.

Brawley's goal is to present an objective analysis of Wheatley's poetry. He encourages critics to keep the limitations Wheatley faced in mind when they critique her work when he says, "It must be remembered that every one of the poems in the volume was written by a girl not yet twenty years old" (Brawley 57). Brawley suggests that Wheatley's circumstances should be taken into consideration when judging her shortcomings. Furthermore, he declares, "The remarkable thing is not that some of the poems are weak, but that the book as a whole exhibits such evenness of construction. If few are very, very good fewer are very, very bad" (Brawley 57). Here, Brawley advocates that critics take a more balanced viewpoint when evaluating Wheatley's work rather than simply extolling her virtues or excoriating her deficiencies without any nuance.

---

[3] There are other African Americans writing on Wheatley at the time and before it, but their treatment of Wheatley could not be categorized as literary criticism. See Penn, Garland Irving. "The Progress of the Afro-American Since Emancipation"; Washington, Booker T. *A New Negro for a New Century: An Accurate and Up to Date Record of the Upward Struggles of the Negro Race*; Terrell, Mary Eliza Church "The Progress of Women" and "Address Delivered at the International Congress of Women in Berlin Germany, June 13th"; and Cooper, Anna Julia. *A Voice From the South.*

Brawley presents a very balanced view of Wheatley after quoting from the poet's "Hymn to the Morning." He assesses the poem and remarks, "With reference to this poem it is sufficient to point out the general smoothness, the beauty of the opening lines, and on the other hand the tame conventional treatment and the weak ending" (Brawley 58). In this sentence, Brawley points out the positive attributes of Wheatley as well as the negative. He continues:

> The chief fault with the poems of Phillis Wheatley is their artificiality. If she had not felt bound by the limitations of a certain fashion of verse-writing she might have given to the world less conventional work….It must be remembered, however, that the first work of a poet is generally imitation….Moreover it takes years to cultivate a style….Shakespeare was over thirty before he was at ease and Milton saw years of parliamentary struggle before he perfected his mighty line. (Brawley 59)

In this passage, Brawley finds Wheatley's struggles to find her voice comparable to the struggles of some of the finest writers in the history of the English language.

Brawley contends that Wheatley should not be the focus of inordinate, disproportionate criticism considering her age at the time when most of her work was produced, the limitations of her exposure to good literature, the time period in which she wrote, and the brevity of her career. When referring to George Moses Horton, Scipio Moorhead, and Phillis Wheatley, Brawley concludes, "There is something pathetic and thrilling in the struggles of these early children for the higher life. They were simply among the first of a line of those whose souls thrill with the message of beauty, and who labor more and more to give it adequate expression" (Brawley 59). Brawley's final appraisal of Wheatley's work reflects Wheatley's significance and shortcomings as he sees them. His work sets the stage for subsequent African American writers who feel

both excitement about the work that this young artist created under duress as well as disappointment with the lack of race consciousness in her work.

Although Brawley does not really engage in the politics of representativeness or respectability, his approach is not typical of his time. During the last decade of the nineteenth through the turn of the twentieth century, African American writers were very much invested in portraying accomplished African Americans as representatives of the race whose intellect and piety demonstrated African Americans' deservedness of civil rights. Despite the fact that, " racial uplift ideology [was] thus one of unconscious internalized racism" on the part African Americans, they had no choice but to hold fast to the notion that they could elevate the race through academic and religious training (Gaines 6). Without the prospect of racial uplift, they would be rendered powerless in the struggle to attain their civil rights. Because of the very real prospect of literacy as both potential ingress and impediment to the vote, African American writers' fixation on the race's capacity for intellectual attainment is particularly politically expedient. Wheatley's pursuit of education and her preoccupation with "…Various Subjects, Religious and Moral" made her a particularly viable representative of respectability. Furthermore, since Wheatley was able to garner some degree of success, which ultimately abated her enslavement, she was the embodiment of African Americans' longing to not only succeed but more importantly survive.

Chapter Two "One Looks In Vain For Some Outburst": Phillis Wheatley and the New Negro, 1919-1938

For many familiar with African American history, the year 1919 is best known by its bloody moniker the "Red Summer." This label refers to the violence against African Americans that characterized the period. Riots in which racist whites viciously targeted African Americans erupted in cities such as Washington, D.C., Chicago, and Charleston. Despite the brutality that has become synonymous with the year, as Emily Bernard posits in her book chapter "The New Negro Movement and the Politics of Art," 1919 was also "a year marked by triumph and optimism" (Bernard 269). Bernard points to the glorious parade that was organized in Harlem to welcome home the 369th Infantry Regiment, an all-black unit that earned the prestigious Croix de Guerre for their valor in World War I, as a symbol of Harlem's optimism about the future. Bernard argues that the parade, "with its music, spirit, and dignity – was more than a spectacle. It was an articulation of hope that gave way to a growing, infectious certainty that an equitable cultural victory could be won by the art and artists of the Harlem Renaissance" (Bernard 269). The optimism that marked the Harlem Renaissance, which is also known as the New Negro movement, is reflected in its writers' outlook regarding the role of literature and literary criticism in African American culture. While African American writers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries most certainly had high hopes for the power of African American literature to yield equal rights for black people, "New Negroes" had artistic goals for African American literature that were in some ways loftier than those of black writers of earlier periods. The changes in African American writers' ambitions for

their tradition are exemplified by the changes in these writers' treatment of Phillis Wheatley.

Although, as Bernard notes, the New Negro Movement was characterized by contradiction, there are some commonalities in the ways in which African American men, in particular, portray Phillis Wheatley. Many African Americans writing at the turn of the twentieth century primarily promoted biographies of Wheatley because they presented her achievement as a solution to the nation's so-called Negro problem. The African American men writing during the subsequent era commended Wheatley on her achievements, but rejected unmitigated praise of Wheatley in an attempt to develop a "new" tradition in African American literary criticism, one that relieved African American literature of the duty of proving the intellectual capabilities of African Americans and promoted the notion of artistic achievement as the ultimate marker of literary success.

With this standard in mind, many African American men writing during this time find Wheatley to be important but inadequate. She had come to represent the opposite of the tradition that they were trying to develop. Up to that point, black and white writers alike primarily utilized Wheatley and her work as evidence of African Americans' humanity, aptitude, and respectability. Furthermore, Wheatley and her work did not explicitly express the race consciousness let alone the race pride for which Alain Locke and others advocated in their work of the period. This emphasis on race pride and race consciousness springs from a longing that New Negroes felt for a distinctly African origin of African American literature. They also yearned for the writing of their period to demonstrate the lasting influence of African culture on African American culture,

distinguish black American culture from that of white Americans, and prove that there were artistic gifts that African Americans alone could bestow upon the world. This mutli-faceted agenda made Wheatley a particularly vulnerable target for the attacks of those seeking to present a New Negro to the world. However, for the African American women treating Wheatley during this period, the eighteenth-century poet still stands as a revered forerunner. The difference between depictions of Wheatley by African American men versus African American women is comparable to Nathan Huggins's explanation for the difference between white and black Americans' anxiety regarding the status of their cultures vis-à-vis the European standard:

> All Americans, white as well as black, were provincials of a European tradition, Anne Bradstreet no less than Phyllis Wheatley (sic), Thomas Nelson Page no less than Charles Waddell Chesnutt. But Negroes, being one notch further removed from 'belonging,' were less likely (or less quickly) to gain the perspective that would show the way to transform their own experience into art, free from the corpselike clutch of past formalism and manner. (Huggins 232)

For Huggins, although the desire to descend from a "respected tradition" was an anxiety felt by both black and white American artists, because they were deemed even further from artistic capability than white Americans, African American writers more strongly coveted the approval of cultural gatekeepers who could deem their creative output "Art." Huggins argues that this heightened desire ultimately led the men of the Harlem Renaissance to mostly conform to traditional standards, imitating rather than innovating. Because African American women were another "notch further removed from 'belonging' " than black men, they took fewer risks in their treatment of Wheatley and did not deviate from the older approaches to the eighteenth-century poet. Unlike many of their male counterparts, African American women continued to both hold Wheatley up as a model and cling to her as the nascence of the African American literary tradition.

Although Alain Locke presents the "New Negro" as a unified, cohesive concept, as his use of the definite article in his seminal text's title suggests, there were a number of interpretations of the concept both during the time that Locke published *The New Negro* and before its publication. In his essay "The Trope of a New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black," Henry Louis Gates, Jr. delineates the history of the New Negro from 1895 to 1925. Pointing to an editorial in the *Cleveland Gazette*, Gates describes the New Negroes of 1895 as African Americans who wanted "to be recognized by their 'education, refinement, and money' " (Gates 136). This characterization of African Americans' aspirations in the late nineteenth century corroborates the ways in which black writers are presented in the first chapter of this dissertation. They were primarily concerned with middle-class values and subscribed to the notion that by proving their intellectual, artistic, and moral capabilities to racist naysayers, they would eradicate racism and gain equal rights. About five years later, Booker T. Washington, Fannie Barrier Williams, and N.B. Wood presented their book, *A New Negro for a New Century: An Accurate Up-to-date Record of the Upward Struggles of the Negro Race*, which sought to both chronicle African Americans' progress and reform the images of blacks as depicted in "stereotypes scattered throughout plantation fiction, black face minstrelsy, vaudeville, racist pseudoscience and vulgar Social Darwinism" (Gates, Trope 137). Again, these goals are compatible with the attitudes of the African American writers treated in the first chapter. In 1904, John Henry Adams published two essays, " A Study of the Features of the New Negro Woman" and "The New Negro Man" in the *Voice of the Negro*. Both essays not only explicate the personality features of the New Negro but also describe the physical features of the New

Negro in an attempt to counter the racist portrayals of black men and women that typified the era. Once again, this approach is similar to the manner in which middle-class African American writers depict their African American subjects, including Wheatley from the end of the nineteenth century through the early years of the twentieth.

However, by 1919, A. Phillip Randolph had appropriated the term New Negro and with four essays in the *Messenger*, all with titles that approximate "The New Philosophy of the [New] Negro," he paints the New Negro as "a militant, card-carrying, gun-toting socialist who refused to turn the other cheek" (Gates, Trope 147). Randolph states in his August 1920 essay that the New Negro's " 'social methods are: education and physical action in self defense. That education must constitute the basis of all action, is beyond the realm of question. And to fight back in self defense, should be accepted as a matter of course. No one who will not fight to protect his life is fit to live" (qtd. in Gates, Trope 147). As anyone who reads Alain Locke's essay, "The New Negro" will immediately realize, Randolph's New Negro is not the one whom Locke evokes in his title. In *Representing the Race: A New Political History of African American Literature*, Gene Jarrett corroborates the notion that Locke's iteration of the New Negro marked a distinct evolution of the term when he writes, "…Locke's popular collections shifted New Negro ideology from political radicalism to romantic culturalism, an ideological turn pivoting on proclamations that African American art and culture were undergoing rebirths of extraordinary proportions" (Jarrett 80).

Gates also argues that through Locke's depiction of the New Negro, he attempted to,

> …both to codify and launch a second New Negro literary movement…it transformed the militancy associated with the trope and translated this into an

> apolitical movement of the arts. Locke's New Negro was a poet, and it would be in the sublimity of the fine arts, and not in the political sphere of action or protest poetry, that white America (they thought) would at last embrace the Negro of 1925, a Negro ahistorical, a Negro who was 'just like' every other American, a Negro more deserving than the Old Negro because he had been reconstructed as an entity somehow 'new.' (Gates, Trope 147)

Locke's New Negro, unlike the New Negro of Washington, Adams or even Randolph, eschews the notion that African Americans would ultimately gain equal rights through their production of literature. Washington and Adams believed refinement, intellectual and moral, would facilitate racial uplift, and while Randolph thought that education was important for self-improvement, he thought that education without agitation was futile. Locke articulates his disdain for what Kevin Gaines calls "uplift texts" when he writes in the foreword to *The New Negro*, "Until recently, except for occasional discoveries of isolated talent here and there, the main stream of this development has run in the special channels of 'race literature' and 'race journalism' " (Locke xxvi).[4] Locke opposes the idea of "race literature" and "race journalism," because he recognizes that these modes of literature are borne out of internalized racism when he writes in his essay "The New Negro":

> Similarly the mind of the Negro seems suddenly to have slipped from under the tyranny of social intimidation and to be shaking off the psychology of imitation and implied inferiority. By shedding the old chrysalis of the Negro problem we are achieving something like a spiritual emancipation. Until recently, lacking self-understanding, we have been almost as much of a problem to ourselves as we still are to others. But the decade that found us with a problem has left us with only a task. The multitude perhaps feels as yet only a strange relief and a new vague urge, but the thinking few know that in the reaction the vital inner grip of prejudice has been broken. (Locke 113)

---

[4] In *Faithful Account of the Race*, Stephen Hall notes that Kevin Gaines coined the term "uplift texts" in his book *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century*. See Hall, Stephen. *Faithful Account of the Race* p. 251

Locke also acknowledges that by addressing the "Negro problem" through writing, black writers are taking on a "task" that has little to do with artistry and everything to do with politics. He contends that African American literature is no longer, and perhaps never was, a viable means of solving the so-called Negro problem when he writes, "It does not follow that if the Negro were better known, he would be better treated" (Locke 115). Locke rejects the premise that ignorance is the basis for prejudicial thoughts and practices against African Americans. He therefore rejects the notion that the job of African American literature should be to reveal blacks' deservedness through their production of literature or through their portrayals of respectable characters or themes.

Although Locke's position frees African American writers from their obligation to demonstrate the race's potential for refinement, his argument does not liberate them from all racial responsibilities in their art. Locke is careful to articulate that he does not seek to "whitewash" African American literature when he says in the foreword to *The New Negro,* "There is a renewed race-spirit that consciously and proudly sets itself apart" (Locke xxvii). Locke suggests that African Americans should express race consciousness and race pride in their literature. Moreover, he argues that it is through the development of art that reflects a unique and definitive black culture that black Americans will gain recognition for the gifts that they have to offer to America. Locke posits the attitude of the New Negro as follows:

> In this new group psychology we note the lapse of sentimental appeal, then the development of a more positive self-respect and self-reliance; the repudiation of social dependence, and then the gradual recovery from hyper-sensitiveness and 'touchy' nerves,…and finally the rise from social disillusionment to race pride, from the sense of social debt to the responsibilities of social contribution, and offsetting the necessary working and commonsense acceptance of restricted conditions, the belief in ultimate esteem and recognition. Therefore the Negro to-day wishes to be known for what he is, even in his faults and shortcomings, and

> scorns a craven and precarious survival at the price of seeming to be what he is not. He resents being spoken of as a social ward or minor, even by his own, and to being regarded a chronic patient for the sociological clinic, the sick man of American Democracy. For the same reasons, he himself is through with those social nostrums and panaceas, the so-called solutions of his 'problem,' with which he and the country have been so liberally dosed in the past. Religion, freedom, education, money—in turn, he has ardently hoped for and peculiarly trusted these things; he still believes in them, but not in blind trust that they alone will solve his life-problem. (Locke 116)

Locke contends that the New Negro discards internalized racism by eschewing the premise that all portrayals of African Americans necessarily be representative of the race. He also explicitly discounts the teachings of black writers of the previous generation who promoted, "Religion, freedom, education, [and] money" as channels through which equality would be achieved. He rejects the notion that African American writers' primary objective should be the betterment of the race at the expense of creative expression. However, he does not argue that the New Negro should abandon race altogether, but should instead exhibit "race pride" in an effort to shift perceptions of black Americans as a social problem with an artistic solution.

Locke's dismissal of race consciousness on one hand and his promotion of it on the other is somewhat paradoxical. Nathan Huggins articulates the crux of this conflict when he writes,

> So, black believers in America's capacity to absorb Negroes, and in the black man's potential, bore the onus of race while they promoted individualism….But what is really remarkable is that these black yea-sayers, in their struggle to uphold the American virtues of progressivism, individualism, and self-reliance, were obliged by circumstances to be group-conscious and collective. (Huggins 141)

Black intellectuals like Locke reveled in the idea of an essential black culture that could be revealed by talented black artists, but he rejected the idea of essentialism when it came to the notion of representativeness. His distaste for representative literature was driven

by his aversion to art as propaganda. Locke articulates the source of his abhorrence for propaganda when he writes, "My chief objection to propaganda, apart from its besetting sin of monotony and disproportion, is that it perpetuates the position of group inferiority even in crying out against it. For it lives and speaks under the shadow of a dominant majority whom it harangues, cajoles, threatens, or supplicates" (Locke 260). Once again, Locke brings to the fore the implicit internalized racism that was often lying just below the surface of portrayals of Wheatley by African American writers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries obscured by the rhetoric of representativeness and respectability.

Although most African American men writing from 1919-1938 eschewed representativeness, Carter G. Woodson, a noted historian, still endorsed Wheatley as proof of African Americans' intellect. Furthermore, Woodson's assessment of Wheatley in his book *The Education of the Negro Race Prior to 1861: A History of the Colored People of the United States from the Beginning of Slavery to the Civil War*, published in 1919, perhaps explains why Arnold Rampersad describes Woodson as "the only notable absentee" from Locke's *The New Negro* (Rampersad xiii). After identifying Wheatley as a "brainy person of color" Woodson offers his evaluation of Wheatley:

> Phyllis (sic) Wheatley's title to fame, however, rested not on her general attainments as a scholar, but rather on her ability to write poetry. Her poems seemed to have such rare merit that men marveled that a slave could possess such a productive imagination, enlightened mind, and poetical genius. (Woodson 89-90)

While many before him chose to emphasize Wheatley's intellectual ability, Woodson emphasizes her ability to write poetry as the primary reason for her fame. Woodson's description of Wheatley also tacitly promotes representativeness when he remarks that

readers, "marveled" at Wheatley's intellectual ability, suggesting that Wheatley's "productive imagination, enlightened mind, and poetical genius" provided evidence of the capability of all people of African descent. Woodson closes his discussion of Wheatley writing,

> Glancing at her works, the modern critic would readily say that she was not a poetess, just as the student of political economy would dub Adam Smith a failure as an economist. A bright college freshman who has studied introductory economics can write a treatise as scientific as the *Wealth of Nations*. The student of history, however, must not 'despise the day of small things.' Judged according to the standards of her time, Phyllis (sic) Wheatley was an exceptionally intellectual person. (Woodson 90)

Woodson implies his contemporaries are not attentively assessing Wheatley's poetry when he says that critics are "glancing at her works." He compares Wheatley to Adam Smith suggesting that although her work now seems pedestrian, she was revolutionary for her time. He also alludes to Zechariah 4:10 when he says that modern critics must not "despise the day of small things." In the fourth chapter of Zechariah, an angel speaking to Zechariah says,

> Moreover the words of the Lord came unto me, saying, 'The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this house: his hands shall also finish it, and thou shalt know that the Lord of hosts hath sent me unto you. For who hath despised the day of small things? For they shall rejoice, and shall see the plummet in the hand of Zerubbabel with those seven.' (King James Bible, Zech 4. 8-10)

With this allusion, Woodson compares Wheatley to Zerubbabel. Just as Zerubbabel laid the foundation of the temple, Wheatley laid the foundation of African American literature. When the angel asks Zechariah, "For who hath despised the day of small things?," he wonders who has looked at the foundation of the temple and minimized its importance or even disparaged it. The angel suggests that the temple will not always be a "small thing," as it will become something greater. Woodson uses this same phrase to

argue that critics should not look at Wheatley's body of work as a "small thing" or as some translations of the verse read, "small beginning." Woodson asserts that critics should not disparage Wheatley or minimize her importance because it is easy to look back on the "small beginning" and find it inadequate in comparison to what comes after it.

Woodson also advocates for Wheatley's role as a representative woman in two of his chapters in *The Negro in Our History,* published in 1922. In chapter four "The Negro and the Rights of Man," Woodson notes that during the time of the Enlightenment, two African Americans stood out for their intellect—Phillis Wheatley and Benjamin Banneker. Woodson says of Wheatley:

> In the very beginning of her career she exhibited the tendency to write poetry. While present-day criticism would not classify her as a poet, she was, in her time, a writer of such interesting verse that she was brought into contact with some of the best thinkers of that period. All of them were not seriously impressed with her actual contribution to literature, but they had to concede that she had decidedly demonstrated that Negroes had possibilities beyond that of being the hewers of wood and drawers of water for another race. (Woodson 69)

Although he contends that Wheatley is misjudged by the critics of his day, he concedes that Wheatley's ultimate achievement is that she proved the intellectual capability of African Americans, clearly engaging in the politics of representativeness. Moreover, Woodson tempers some of the praise for Wheatley's work that he puts forth in his *Education of the Negro*. In that text, Woodson defends Wheatley's status as an important poet who was revolutionary for her time. He also credits her with establishing the African American literary tradition. However, in this assessment, Woodson is not as adamant about Wheatley's poetic abilities. In this evaluation of Wheatley's work, Woodson is slightly less glowing in his appraisal of her significance. This trend is

emblematic of changing attitudes about the aims of African American literature in the twentieth century.

Despite espousing a position in direct contention with Locke's conception of the New Negro when he argues in "Criteria for Negro Art" that "…all art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists," W.E.B. Du Bois's treatment of Phillis Wheatley is still very much in line with that of Locke and other African American men writing after the first decade of the twentieth century (Du Bois 259). Du Bois promotes Wheatley as "easily the pioneer" of African American literature in his essay "The Negro in Literature and Art" originally published in 1913 in *The Annals of the American Academy* (Du Bois 300). By describing Wheatley as a "pioneer," he identifies her work as the nascence of African American literature. His description also suggests that Wheatley's work is important because it sets the stage for all subsequent African American literature.

However, in his next assessment of Wheatley's work seven years later in 1920 in *Darkwater,* he presents Wheatley as refined but lacking talent. In the chapter "The Damnation of Women" Du Bois says of Wheatley:

> They know less of a not more worthy, but a finer type of black woman wherein trembles all of that delicate sense of beauty and striving for self-realization, which is as characteristic of the Negro soul as is its quaint strength and sweet laughter. George Washington wrote in grave and gentle courtesy to a Negro woman, in 1776, that he would be, 'happy to see' at his headquarters at any time, a person 'to whom nature has been so liberal and beneficial in her dispensations.' This child, Phillis Wheatley, sang her trite and halting strain to a world that wondered and could not produce her like. Measured today her muse was slight and yet, feeling her striving spirit, we call to her still in her own words: 'Through thickest glooms look back, immortal shade.' (Du Bois 177)

In this passage, Du Bois compares Wheatley to Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth when he says that Wheatley is a "finer type of black woman." He describes Wheatley as

"finer" because she was educated unlike Tubman and Truth. She was also not a strong physical presence like Tubman and Truth, instead her value was her intellect. Du Bois also states that Wheatley's "delicate sense of beauty and striving for self-realization" is a feature of African Americans' character, which is a slight indication that Wheatley is in some ways representative of other people of African descent. However, Du Bois 's treatment of Wheatley does not approach that of his predecessors who held her up as evidence of African Americans' capacity for intellectual refinement, as Du Bois does not offer Wheatley as an infallible model. He describes her poetry instead as "trite" and "halting," suggesting that Wheatley's poetry was both unremarkable and uncertain. Du Bois asserts that Wheatley was not a great poet by the standards of his time, and does not promote the eighteenth-century writer on the grounds of representativeness or respectability. He alludes to Wheatley's "On the Death of Dr. Samuel Marshall." This line, "Through thickest glooms look back, immortal shade," is an apostrophe to the deceased Samuel Marshall in which Wheatley asks Marshall, the "immortal shade," to look back on the living "through thickest glooms" or death. Du Bois calls Wheatley the "immortal shade" and asks her to look back through death to the African Americans of the early twentieth century, presumably to observe how far black writers had come since the publication of her trailblazing text in 1773.

Du Bois's treatment of Wheatley becomes increasingly critical as he continues to write about her four years later in *The Gift of Black Folk* published in 1924.
When Du Bois mentions Wheatley specifically, he describes her as a "pioneer," but he goes on to says that "Phyllis (sic) Wheatley was an American writer of Negro descent just as Dumas was a French writer of Negro descent. She was the peer of her best

American contemporaries but she represented no conscious Negro group" (Du Bois 306). Here Du Bois explicitly categorizes Wheatley as an African American writer who did not write for African Americans.

After another four years pass, Du Bois publishes his essay, "The Negro in American Literature," in *Epworth Herald* in which he evaluates the contributions of early African American writers. In this essay, published in 1928, Du Bois explains the origins of African American literature when he says:

> It began back in colonial times, through the slave, slavery sought to become articulate. It was, of course, a tremendous experience—so tremendous as to call for, in any adequate expression, the finished artist and genius. The persons, on the other hand, who came forward, were ill-educated, for the main part, and inexperienced souls. Yet their writing had always an intense sincerity with here and there, some little flash of genius. (Du Bois 70)

Because Du Bois begins his description of early African American literature with the colonial era, and Wheatley was the most famous African American poet of that time period, it is likely that this appraisal of early African American writers is one that Du Bois would apply to Wheatley. According to Du Bois, enslaved African Americans wrote as a means of articulating the experience of slavery. However, he argues that to effectively express the experience of slavery, which he describes as a "tremendous experience," would require a writer of considerable genius with access to the best education. Du Bois indicates that those early African American writers who did emerge were incapable of reaching the heights required to successfully state the extent of their suffering due to their lack of education and experience. Perhaps this dearth accounts for Wheatley's inability to verbalize her experience as a slave. Du Bois suggests that the "tremendous experience" of slavery was perhaps too tall a task for Wheatley to take on overtly in her writing.

Du Bois alludes to Wheatley's use as a representative figure, but he rejects uncritical assessments of the poet that are afraid to objectively evaluate her work for fear of undermining her representativeness and leaving the equality of African Americans open to question:

> We think, of course, first of Phyllis (sic) Wheatley, uninteresting as much as much of her work was and steeped in eighteenth century mannerisms. And yet her influence on her contemporaries—her extraordinary personality quite apart from what she wrote—makes her a figure in American literature. Her life was a contradiction of the whole theory of slavery, a little black heathen writing in a foreign tongue with all the suavity and circumlocutions and even classical allusions of her day. George Washington made obeisance before her. The Countess of Huntingdon and Benjamin Franklin accepted dedications, and in addition, here and there, breaking through the veil, are little plaintive words and phrases of real literature. (Du Bois 70)

Du Bois commends Wheatley on her mastery of the poetic modes of her contemporary moment, yet he argues that this very mastery is to blame for her "uninteresting" verse. He seems to promote representativeness by asserting that, "Her life was a contradiction of the whole theory of slavery," but stops far short of holding Wheatley up as a flawless role model as did many African American writers prior to the Harlem Renaissance. He also concedes that Wheatley's work sometimes displayed what he describes earlier as a "little flash of genius." Du Bois evokes his famous metaphor from *The Souls of Black Folk* when he describes Wheatley as "breaking through the veil." In this instance the veil represents not only slavery and oppression, but also the conventions of European culture. When Du Bois insists that Wheatley's work does contain, "little plaintive words," he condescendingly suggests that she does at times subtly decry slavery, but he still finds her work insufficient.

In 1919, Benjamin Griffith Brawley publishes his book *Women of Achievement* and in the introduction Brawley, to a certain degree, portrays Wheatley as both representative and respectable when he writes,

> The first Negro woman to strike the public imagination was Phillis Wheatley, who even as a young girl wrote acceptable verse. Her Poems on Various Subjects published in 1773 at once attracted attention, and it was fitting that the first Negro woman to become distinguished in America should be one of outstanding piety and nobility of soul. (Brawley 19)

Brawley remarks that it is fitting that Wheatley was known for her religious devotion and suggests that African American women are inclined to be pious. He implies that Wheatley's piety was representative of African American women's demeanors. It is noteworthy that although Brawley in an earlier passage describes Wheatley as "unusual and specially gifted," he later describes her poetry as just "acceptable." This seeming contradiction between these two characterizations is typical of Brawley's treatment of Wheatley.

In the year prior to his publication of *Women of Achievement*, Brawley devotes an entire chapter to Phillis Wheatley in his book *The Negro in Literature and Art in the United States* in which he promotes her as an exceptional person but presents her shortcomings as a writer. This approach is similar to his earlier assessment of Wheatley in an article in the *Voice of the Negro* in 1906. She is the first writer whom he covers in his book; this implies that Brawley considers Wheatley the progenitor of African American literature. He encourages his early twentieth-century readers to take the extraordinary circumstances under which Wheatley wrote into consideration when they evaluate her work:

> If in light of twentieth century opportunity and methods these attainments seem in no wise remarkable, one must remember the disadvantages under which not only

> Phillis Wheatley, but all the women of her time, labored; and recall that in any case her attainments would have marked her as one of the most highly educated women in Boston. (Brawley 13)

In this passage, Brawley constructs Wheatley's identity in terms of gender. He remarks that Wheatley was at a disadvantage based on her gender rather than because of her race or enslaved status. He comments that Wheatley would have been one of the most educated women in Boston, suggesting that her level of education was not only impressive for an enslaved person but also for a woman of any race during that time. When Brawley first mentions Wheatley's poetry with any specificity, he writes, "She was about fourteen years old when she seriously began to cultivate her poetic talent; and one of the very earliest, and from every standpoint one of the most interesting of her efforts is the pathetic little juvenile poem, 'On Being Brought from Africa to America' "(Brawley 13-14). Brawley does not elaborate on why he found this poem to be one of Wheatley's most interesting pieces. However, he does describe the poem as a "pathetic," "little," and "juvenile" (Brawley 14). These three words summarize Brawley's critical assessment of Wheatley's poem.

Although this description may seem very critical at first glance, it is actually a way of shielding Wheatley from criticism. His description of the poem as "pathetic" suggests that readers should take pity on its author. He implies that Wheatley's seemingly benign description of her enslavement should evoke pity in readers. He asserts that readers should not overstate the importance of this one poem when he calls the poem "little." He also emphasizes Wheatley's age at the time of writing the poem when he describes it as "juvenile." Each of these words that he uses to describe Wheatley's poem,

"pathetic," "little," and "juvenile," suggest that Brawley does not want Wheatley's legacy to be decided based on this single poem.

After Brawley concludes his relation of Wheatley's life, he explains Wheatley's significance when he writes,

> At the time when she was most talked about, Phillis Wheatley was regarded as a prodigy, appearing as she did at a time when the achievement of the Negro in literature and art was still negligible. Her vogue, however, was more than temporary, and the 1793, 1802, and 1816 editions of her poems found ready sale. In the early years of the last century her verses were frequently to be found in school readers. (Brawley 27)

He states Wheatley's importance based on the how widespread her readership was during the late 18th and early 19th century. He claims that her legacy has lasted even as the fascination with her status as an educated slave had waned. Brawley brings up early criticism of Wheatley's work when he says, "From the first, however, there were those who discounted her poetry. Thomas Jefferson, for instance, said that it was beneath the dignity of criticism" (Brawley 27). Brawley also mentions that interest in Wheatley's work during his contemporary moment was increasing when he says, "For a variety of reasons, especially an increasing race-consciousness on the part of the Negro, interest in her work has greatly increased within the last decade" (Brawley 27-28). It is worth noting that Brawley does not comment on race consciousness within Wheatley's poetry, yet he cites race consciousness as the reason for interest in Wheatley's work. He suggests that contemporary African American readers were proud of Wheatley's accomplishments as a black woman. Brawley does not mention that the same race consciousness that attracted many to her work also caused many to eschew her poetry for its supposed lack of race consciousness.

Brawley continues to present a balanced perspective of Wheatley that both lauds her accomplishments and indicates her limitations. Brawley puts forward more specific analysis of Wheatley's poetry when he says:

> We are thus left with sixteen poems to represent the best that Phillis Wheatley had produced by the time she was twenty years old. One of the longest of these is 'Niobe in Distress for Her Children Slain by Apollo, from Ovid's Metamorphoses, Book VI, and from a View of the Painting of Mr. Richard Wilson.' This poem contains two interesting examples of personification (neither of which seems to be drawn from Ovid), 'fate portentous whistling in the air,' and 'the feather'd vengeance quiv'ring in his hands,' though the point might easily be made that these are little more and a part of the pseudo-classic tradition. (Brawley 29-30)

The critic emphasizes the fact that Wheatley produced these poems when she was very young. Once again, this is an attempt to safeguard Wheatley against harsh criticism of her work. He argues that Wheatley penned, "two interesting examples of personification," but he does not explain what makes them interesting (Brawley 29). However, almost as soon as Brawley states that these examples are interesting, he tempers his comment by saying that Wheatley does "little more" than imitate the classic tradition.

Brawley goes on to contend that Wheatley's enslavement is one reason for her limitations as a writer. When he writes, "One would suppose that Phillis Wheatley would make of 'An Hymn to Humanity' a fairly strong piece of work. It is typical of the restraint under which she labored that this is one of the most conventional things in the volume, " Brawley assumes that Wheatley would have much to say about humanity, and perhaps inhumanity, due to her status as a slave (Brawley 30). Furthermore, he claims that her poem was "conventional" because Wheatley was working under the restraints of being a woman, being black, and being a slave. Brawley points out that these factors

limited what she could say, and perhaps more significantly, what would be published. However, he does not completely excuse her for being "conventional," and Brawley criticizes Wheatley's classicism again when he remarks,

> It is unfortunate that, imitating Pope, Phillis Wheatley more than once fell into his pitfalls. Her diction—'fleecy care,' 'vital breath,' 'feather'd race'—is distinctly pseudoclassic…Then, of course, any young writer working under the influence of Pope and his school would feel a sense of repression. If Phillis Wheatley had come on the scene forty years later, when the romantic writers had given a new tone to English poetry, she would undoubtedly have been much greater. (Brawley 31-32)

Although Brawley argues that the time in which Wheatley wrote had a negative influence on her work, he also says, "Even as it was, however, she made her mark, and her place in the history of American literature, though not a large one, is secure," establishing Wheatley as an indelible figure in the pantheon of early American writers. (Brawley 32) Brawley avoids identifying Wheatley in terms of race to ensure that her legacy is not limited to African American literature.

In this final assessment of Wheatley, Brawley echoes the writers of a bygone era when he seemingly presents Wheatley as a model of respectability:

> Hers was a great soul. Her ambition knew no bounds, her thirst for knowledge was insatiable, and she triumphed over the most adverse circumstances. A child of the wilderness and a slave, by her grace and culture she satisfied the conventionalities of Boston and of England. Her brilliant conversation was equaled only by her modest demeanor. Everything about her was refined. More and more as one studies her life he becomes aware of her sterling Christian character. In a dark day she caught glimpse of the eternal light, and it was meet that the first Negro woman in American literature should be one of unerring piety and the highest of literary ideals. (Brawley 32)

Brawley seems equally impressed with Wheatley's religious devotion and intellectual achievements and both serve as markers of her refinement. Brawley describes Wheatley's time as a "dark day" because she was enslaved, and what he describes as the

"eternal light" could double as both God's light and the light of knowledge. Brawley's portrayal of Wheatley as praiseworthy but imperfect is typical of African American men writing during the Harlem Renaissance.

When Benjamin Brawley takes up Wheatley again in his chapter "The Revolutionary Era" from his 1921 book *A Social History of the American Negro,* his praise of Wheatley is subdued, especially when compared to his earlier assessments. Brawley refers to Wheatley in conjunction with Benjamin Banneker at the very end of the chapter. He devotes most of the chapter to the history of slavery during the time of the American Revolution and the history of the African American churches and benevolent societies during this period. Brawley begins his discussion of Wheatley writing:

> All told, by 1800 the Negro had received much more education than is commonly supposed. Two persons—one in science and one in literature—because of their unusual attainments attracted much attention. The first was Benjamin Banneker, and the second was Phillis Wheatley. (Brawley 74-75)

Brawley makes the point that although the achievements of Wheatley and Banneker stand out, they were not the only African Americans during the Revolutionary period who attained education. Brawley describes Wheatley saying, "Phillis Wheatley, after a romantic girlhood of transition from Africa to a favorable environment in Boston, in 1773 published her *Poems on Various Subjects*, which volume she followed with several interesting occasional poems" (Brawley 75). Although it seems curious that Brawley describes Wheatley's transition from Africa to Boston as "romantic" given that this "transition" involved enslavement, his word choice here could be a comment on the perception that Wheatley's enslavement was slavery in its least destructive form.

Brawley's word choice also intimates that the popular notion that Wheatley's enslavement was without hardship is "romantic" or fictitious.

Brawley's waning admiration for Wheatley reflects the changes in the representations of Wheatley between 1906 and 1921. He describes her poetry as "interesting," and he also says "in conversation even more than verse-making she exhibited her refined taste and accomplishment" (Brawley 75). This second assessment suggests that Brawley considers Wheatley's poetic skills to be subordinate to her conversational skills. Brawley concludes his discussion of Wheatley writing, "Thus even in a dark day there were those who were trying to struggle upward to the light" (Brawley 75). In this conclusion, Brawley characterizes education and freedom as light and slavery and ignorance as darkness. This metaphor will reappear throughout the period from both male and female writers, in literary criticism and creative writing.

In his 1922 preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, James Weldon Johnson charges African American literature with a tall task:

> A people may become great through many means, but there is only one measure by which its greatness is recognized and acknowledged. The final measure of the greatness of all peoples is the amount and standard of the literature they have produced. The world does not know that a people is great until that people produces great literature and art. No people that has produced great literature and art has ever been looked upon by the world as distinctly inferior. (Johnson vii)

Johnson argues that African American writers and artists have the considerable duty of ensuring that those who would consider them otherwise recognize their race as great. This is a heavy burden for any creative person to carry, and it is by these standards that Johnson assesses the writers whom he includes in his preface. Johnson's assertion that African American literature should prove the race's greatness very much aligns with

Locke's contention that African Americans could demonstrate their contribution to the country and the world through their art.

Johnson concedes that Wheatley has made a contribution to American literature declaring, "But, even so, the American Negro has accomplished something in pure literature. This list of those who have done so would be surprising both by its length and the excellence of the achievements…Such a list begins with Phillis Wheatley" (Johnson xxi). Johnson's description of Wheatley's work as "pure literature" is complimentary and insinuates that Wheatley's work helps African Americans in their quest for recognition. Johnson begins his assessment of Wheatley's work when he writes:

> Phillis Wheatley has never been given her rightful place in American literature. By some sort of conspiracy she is kept out of most of the books, especially the text-books on literature used in the schools. Of course, she is not a *great* American poet—and in her day there were no great American poets—but she is an important American poet. Her importance, if for no other reason, rests on the fact that, save one, she is the first in order of time of all the women poets of America. And she is among the first to issue a volume." (Johnson xxii)

Johnson takes Wheatley's race into consideration when he compares her verse with Anne Bradstreet's. When comparing Wheatley's poem "On Imagination" with Bradstreet's "Contemplation," Johnson highlights the differences between the two women saying, "Let us strike a comparison between the two. Anne Bradstreet was a wealthy, cultivated Puritan girl, the daughter of Thomas Dudley, Governor of Bay Colony. Phillis as we know, was a Negro slave girl born in Africa" (Johnson xxiii). Johnson suggests that Wheatley's poetry is more impressive than Anne Bradstreet's because Wheatley was an enslaved African girl for whom English was not a native language.

Despite the fact that Johnson thinks that Wheatley out-performs Bradstreet, he does not believe that either is a great poet. Johnson qualifies his assessment when he writes:

> Phillis Wheatley's poetry is the poetry of the Eighteenth Century. She wrote when Pope and Gray were supreme; it is easy to see that Pope was her model. Had she come under the influence of Wordsworth, Byron or Keats or Shelley, she would have done greater work. As it is, her work must not be judged by the work and standards of a later day, but by the work and standards of her own day and her own contemporaries. By this method of criticism she stands out as one of the important characters in the making of American literature, without any allowances for her sex or her antecedents. (Johnson xxiv)

Although Johnson does not think Wheatley is great, he does think she is important. Earlier in the preface, he suggests that her importance should be evaluated on the basis of her gender. However, in his later assessment he argues that notwithstanding her gender or her background, she is an important poet for what she accomplished in her writing.

Johnson also evaluates Wheatley's poetry on its race consciousness and finds it lacking:

> It is curious and interesting to trace the growth of individuality and race consciousness in this group of poets….Only very seldom does Phillis Wheatley sound a native note. Four times in single lines she refers to herself as 'Afric's muse'…But one looks in vain for some outburst or even complaint against the bondage of her people, for some agonizing cry about her native land. In two poems she refers definitely to Africa as her home, but in each instance there seems to be under the sentiment of the lines a feeling of almost smug contentment at her own escape therefrom….In the poem addressed to the Earl of Dartmouth, she speaks of freedom and makes a reference to the parents from whom she was taken as a child, a reference which cannot but strike the reader as rather unimpassioned. (Johnson xxvii-xxviii)

For Johnson, despite Wheatley's explicit assertion of her African identity, her race consciousness is inadequate and her race pride is absent altogether. Later J. Saunders Redding in his 1938 book *To Make A Poet Black* echoes Johnson's sentiments regarding Wheatley's attitude towards her blackness in very similar language when he writes,

> There is no question but that Miss Wheatley considered herself a Negro poet: the question is to what degree she felt the full significance of such a designation. Certainly she was not a slave poet in any sense in which the term can be applied to many who followed her. She stood far outside the institution that was responsible for her. As for the question of degree, though she refers to herself time and again as an'Ethiop,' she seems to make such reference with a distinct sense of abnegation and self-pity. (Redding 8-9)

Redding's suggestion that Wheatley feels a sense of denial and "self-pity" about her blackness corroborates Johnson's assertion that readers detect from Wheatley descriptions her African homeland, "a feeling of almost smug contentment at her own escape therefrom" (Johnson xxviii). Like Johnson, Redding assesses Wheatley's work on its race consciousness and race pride and finds it lacking.

Furthermore, Johnson notes that Wheatley has a direct connection to Africa and its heritage, but he contends that Wheatley does not embrace this heritage. Because many of the writers of the Harlem Renaissance sought to bring to the fore distinctly African components of African American culture, it is likely that Johnson resented Wheatley's lack of engagement with her African culture. Nathan Huggins explains the impetus for this reorientation toward Africa when he writes,

> The Negro intellectuals were attempting to build a race and define a culture. If there was validity in the notion of distinctive racial cultural contribution, it must be in the special experience of the race itself. So the whole people and the whole Afro-American experience had to be searched and exploited for clues to heritage. Folk materials and the expression of the common man had to be the essence of such a tradition. But heritage also demanded a continuity in the past, the transit of culture. When the promoters of the New Negro looked back to find his origins, or when they tried to discuss racial culture, they were always thrown back upon Africa. (Huggins 78-79)

The New Negroes of the Harlem Renaissance longed for a direct connection to Africa because of what Huggins describes as the sense of "rootlessness and placelessness" of the African American experience (Huggins 82). Johnson and others begrudged Wheatley for

denying them a definitively African beginning of African American literature. If this African origin were in tact, African Americans would have an inviolate argument for black literature as a truly African American tradition that emerged from the space where African and American cultures converge.

In his final assessment of Wheatley's work Johnson's appraisal is both laudatory and disparaging:

> What Phillis Wheatley failed to achieve is due in no small degree to her education and environment. Her mind was steeped in the classics; her verses are filled with classical and mythological allusions. She knew Ovid thoroughly and was familiar with other Latin authors. She must have known Alexander Pope by heart. And, too, she was reared and sheltered in a wealthy and cultured family,--a wealthy and cultured Boston family; she never had the opportunity to learn life; she never found out her own true relation to life and her surroundings. And it should not be forgotten that she was only about thirty years old when she died. The impulsion or the compulsion that might have driven her genius off worn paths, out on a journey of exploration, Phillis Wheatley never received. But, whatever her limitations, she merits more than America has accorded her. (Johnson xxx)

Johnson believes that Wheatley did not accomplish enough in terms of her skill and her race consciousness. However, he believes that her shortcomings are explicable when one considers the time in which she wrote, the circumstances under which she wrote, and her age at the time of her greatest productivity. Ultimately, Johnson's assessment of Wheatley's work sets the tone for other critics of the Harlem Renaissance.

James Weldon Johnson revisits Wheatley in 1928 near the beginning of his essay, "The Dilemma of the Negro Author" in which he announces the African American author's entrance onto the main stage of American literature:

> The Negro author—the creative author—has arrived. He is here. He appears in the lists of the best-sellers. To the general American public he *is* a novelty, a strange phenomenon, a miracle straight out of the skies. Well, he is a novelty, but he is by no means a new thing.
>
> The line of American Negro authors runs back for a hundred and fifty year, back to Phillis Wheatley, the poet. Since Phillis Wheatley there have been

> several hundred Negro authors who have written books of many kinds. But in these generations down to within the past six years only seven or eight of the hundreds have ever been heard of by the general American public or even by the specialists in American literature. (Johnson 378)

In his opening paragraph, Johnson implies that prior to his contemporary moment, the African American author existed, but he had not "arrived." According to Johnson, African Americans' presence on bestseller lists and their discovery by white readers signal their arrival. While Johnson contends that there is a long tradition of African American literature that begins with Wheatley, he also claims that the African American author is a novelty in his contemporary moment. He seems to contradict himself with this assertion; however, when Johnson says that the African American author is novel, but not "a new thing," he means that the interest in their work is novel despite the fact that their existence dates back several generations.

Johnson's use of the word "novelty" to describe the African American author of his times is curious since the term can describe not only a new thing, but also "an often useless or trivial but decorative or amusing object, esp. one relying on the newness of its design" ("Novelty"). It is doubtful that Johnson is proposing that the African American author does not merit being highly regarded. However, his word choice does suggest that the African American author is not taken seriously by his new audience, but is only popular due to his seeming recency.

It is apt that Johnson evokes the notion of novelty regarding the African American author and then mentions Phillis Wheatley. By saying that the African American author is not a new thing and then citing Wheatley as the nascence of African American literature, Johnson suggests that Wheatley was a "new thing" and a "novelty." This suggestion encourages readers to consider Wheatley's extraordinary reality due to her

position as a woman, an African by birth, and an enslaved person. Johnson implies that because Wheatley was a novelty, whites' interest in her work was because of its rarity rather than because of its merit. This implication is not incompatible with Johnson's assessment of Wheatley work in his preface to *The A Book of American Negro Poetry*, in which he intimates that her work is more remarkable for its historical significance than for its literary merit.

In his essay, "The Negro in Poetry," originally published in *Negro World* in 1923, John Edward Bruce argues that none of the early African American poets, including Wheatley, were "great" writers. Bruce begins his history of early African American poets with Phillis Wheatley writing:

> No article or essay dealing with Negro poets would be complete without some reference to that dainty little African maiden, Miss Phillis Wheatley, who more than one hundred years ago achieved the great distinction and honor of being the first of her sex in this country to write and publish a book of poems. (Bruce 410)

It is worth noting that Bruce is mistaken when he says that Wheatley was the first woman in American to write and publish a book of poems. As James Weldon Johnson points out in his preface to *The American Book of Negro Poetry*, Anne Bradstreet was the first woman to write and publish a book of poems in America. It is also noteworthy that Bruce does not comment on Wheatley's poetry in his introduction of the poet, but rather he remarks on her "daintiness" and presumably her youth when he describes her as "little."

Bruce also argues that from the very beginning of African American literature, whites have been assessing the merits of African American writers and endorsing or rejecting their work accordingly:

> When Miss Phillis Wheatley was budding forth as the poetess of the Revolution, a galaxy of the most distinguished and celebrated white men, including John Hancock, the first signer of the Declaration of Independence, put the seal of their approval upon her book and her master took a solemn oath, duly signed and delivered that she, with her own hand and out of her own African brain, composed and wrote the pieces bearing her name. (Bruce 412)

Here, Bruce emphasizes parts of Wheatley's body, namely, her hand and her brain to call attention to the fact that Wheatley's black body was conspicuous in the production of her poetry. Many could not reconcile the fact that her "African brain" was able to produce the poetry ascribed to her. Bruce critiques not only the practice of whites endorsing or rejecting African American literature but also the practice of African Americans accepting these endorsements or rejections in the place of their own judgments. Ultimately, Bruce argues that Wheatley was talented, but does not consider her work great. Bruce ends his essay saying, "This is not quite the Negro's day in literature. He is dead now but he is soon to arise with healing in his wings" (Bruce 413). This statement is ironic because Bruce writes this essay in 1923, during the flowering of African American literature that would later come to be known as the Harlem Renaissance. He is in the midst of a period of great production of African American literature, but he is too close to see it.

Like Bruce, William Stanley Braithwaite in his essay "The Negro in Literature" originally published in 1924 in the *Crisis*, concedes Wheatley's historical significance but finds her poetry lacking in literary merit. This essay was later republished in Locke's *The New Negro* in 1925 under the title "The Negro in American Literature." Braithwaite compares Wheatley to Anne Bradstreet in much the same vein as Johnson:

> The Negro as a creator in American literature is of comparatively recent importance. All that was accomplished between Phyllis (sic) Wheatley and Paul Laurence Dunbar, considered by critical standards, is negligible, and of historical

> interest only. Historically it is a great tribute to the Race to have produced in Phyllis Wheatly (sic) not only the slave poetess, in eighteenth-century Colonial America, but to know she was as good, if not a better poetess, than Ann (sic) Bradstreet, whom literary historians give the honor of being the first person of her sex to win fame as a poet in America. (Braithwaite 186)

For Braithwaite, Wheatley's accomplishments vis-à-vis Bradstreet are impressive given the very different circumstances under which they wrote. However, Braithwaite dismisses the critical significance of Wheatley's work without presenting any of her poetry as evidence to substantiate this claim. It is worth noting that unlike other critics of the era who criticize Wheatley for not treating slavery or other African American themes in her work, Braithwaite does not require such treatment of great poets. In fact, he disliked Claude McKay's more race conscious poetry calling him, "a violent and angry propagandist, using his natural poetic gifts to clothe arrogant and defiant thoughts" (Braithwaite 187).

Originally published in 1926 in the *Anthology of Magazine Verse and Yearbook of American Poetry* edited by William Stanley Braithwaite, Alain Locke's essay "The Negro Poets of the United States" promotes the development of a literary tradition that is uniquely African American. Locke begins the essay with a reference to Wheatley: "Negro poets and Negro poetry are two quite different things. Of the one, since Phillis Wheatley, we have had a century and half; of the other, since Dunbar, scarcely a generation" (Locke 422). In this introduction, Locke contends that African American poets do not necessarily produce African American poetry. According to Locke, African American poetry is "a poetry of Negro life and experience" (Locke 422). For Locke, Wheatley, whom he cites as the first African American poet, did not write African American poetry. Locke continues, "Phillis Wheatley chirping however significantly in

the dawn of the American Revolution…has only a distant promise" (Locke 423). When Locke describes Wheatley's writing as "chirping," he could be comparing Wheatley's poems to the songs of birds. However to "chirp" can also mean "to utter words feebly and faintly" ("Chirp"). This second meaning is similar to the description that Du Bois provides when he characterizes her work as "halting" in *Darkwater*. In this last comment regarding Wheatley Locke says:

> George Horton, Albery Whitman, Frances Watkins Harper at least established our poetic literacy, and nourished the ambition of a singing people to master the provinces of language. They were well-recognized in their day, perhaps as exceptions, but at least not as Phillis Wheatley was, as a controversial prodigy. (Locke 423)

Locke makes a comment similar to Kelly Miller in his essay about Howard University. Both point out that Wheatley was considered, as Miller puts it, "a freak of nature" (Miller, Howard 314). For many, Wheatley's accomplishments were not evidence of African American intellectual capability. For Locke, Wheatley's importance lies in the fact that she was a pioneer who set the stage for future more "promising" poets. Wheatley's poetry was a necessary stepping-stone on the way to the development of what Locke terms "Negro poetry."

In his essay "Propaganda—or Poetry" published in 1926 in *Harlem*, Alain Locke contemplates how black poets can produce what he describes above as "Negro poetry" without reducing their work to propaganda. In the second paragraph of the essay, Locke puts forth his own history of African American poetry as it pertains to the relationship between poetry and race consciousness when he writes,

> Negro expression from the days of Phyllis (sic) Wheatley was pivoted on a painfully negative and melodramatic sense of race. Self-pity and its corrective of rhetorical bombast were the ground notes of the Negro's poetry for several generations. The conversion of race consciousness from a negative sense of

> social wrong and injustice to a positive note of race loyalty and pride in racial tradition came as a difficult and rather belated development of spiritual maturity. (Lock 261)

In this passage, Locke marks Wheatley as the point of origin for African American poetry, but contends that she birthed a tradition of self-loathing, self-pity, or self-aggrandizing when it came to the topic of race. Like others, he longs for a sophisticated expression of race consciousness in Wheatley's work and the work of other early African American writers so that the African American literary tradition can be unified under a common racial designation.

In his essay "The Negro Renaissance," which first appeared in *Palms* in 1926, Walter White attempts to provide readers with an introduction to the latest developments in African American poetry. In the course of this introduction, White marks Wheatley as the beginning of African American poetry when he says:

> Nor is this form of expression a new thing. Beginning in 1761 when a Negro girl, eight years old, Phillis Wheatley, was landed at Boston, sold as a slave, and later wrote creditable verse, on down through Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes, the stream has been unbroken though it has changed its course many times. (White 232)

White emphasizes that African American poetry has a long lineage that dates back to the days of Phillis Wheatley. Like many critics of this era before him, White describes Wheatley's poetry as "creditable," but does not endorse Wheatley as a true poet.

Thomas L. G. Oxley in his 1927 essay "Survey of Negro Literature, 1760-1926" published in the *Messenger* also expresses strong reservations about Wheatley's merit as a black poet:

> Phillis Wheatley was a singular genius indeed; she was a girl genius and she never sounds a native note. She kept close to the white man's ideas. She wrote the white man's poetry—the poetry of Gray and Pope. She wrote nothing of her picturesque Africa, nor sounded a note against the vile institution of servile

> oppression under which her people groaned. Her heart gave her lips no lyric music, nor sonnets to land the Nubian skin of her people. (Oxley 339)

Oxley identifies Wheatley as a genius and emphasizes her youth and gender when he describes her as a "girl genius." Oxley expresses disappointment that Wheatley did not depict her homeland or decry slavery in her work. He also contends that Wheatley's poetry did not express the sentiments of Africa or its people, but instead was a reflection of her devotion to "the white man's ideas." For Oxley, there was nothing "African" about Wheatley or the origins of African American literature. Ultimately, Oxley marks Wheatley as an extraordinary talent while he also laments her lack of race consciousness and race pride in her work: "Phillis Wheatley was highly religious and sincere. She deserves a far greater respect than America has accorded her. She was the first American Negro woman to show any remarkable literary perfection" (Oxley 339). Like Johnson before him, Oxley maintains that despite her shortcomings, Wheatley has not been afforded her proper place in American literary history.

One critic who refused to concede that Wheatley was a poet of any significance was Wallace Thurman. In his essay, "Negro Poets and Their Poetry," originally published in *The Bookman* in 1928, Wallace Thurman presents a brief account of the history of African American poetry as well as a critical synopsis of the noteworthy poets of his contemporary moment. Thurman begins his account by recognizing Jupiter Hammon as the first black American to publish poetry. He describes Hammon's poetry as "religious exhortations, incoherent in thought and crudely excepted" (Thurman 415). Thurman swiftly moves on to his treatment of Phillis Wheatley. His treatment of the poet is unforgiving to say the least. He begins his assessment of Wheatley by comparing her to

Hammon saying that she, "wrote better doggerel than her older contemporary Hammon" (Thurman 416). Thurman proceeds to pen an exacting critique of Wheatley:

> She knew Pope so well that she could write like a third-rate imitator of him. Phillis in her day was a museum figure who would have caused more of a sensation if some contemporary Barnum had exploited her. As it was, she attracted so much attention that many soft-hearted (and, in come cases, soft-headed) whites and black have been led to believe that her poetry deserves to be considered as something more than a mere historical relic." (Thurman 416)

For Thurman, Wheatley is a figure to be discussed as a part of history rather than literature. He argues, much like Thomas Jefferson whom he quotes, that Wheatley's work does not deserve serve serious critical attention. He insults not only Wheatley's work, but also any critic who disagrees with his assessment of her work.

Thurman continues to disparage Wheatley's work and the critics who appreciate it when he writes,

> Heretofore every commentator, whether white or black, when speaking of Phillis Wheatley, has sought to make excuses for her bad poetry. They have pointed out that Phillis lived and wrote during the eighteenth century, when to quote from the introduction to White and Jackson's Poetry of American Negro Poets, 'the great body of contemporary poetry was turgid in the style of debased Pope.' It would be too much, they continue to expect, 'a poet of Phillis Wheatley's rather conventional personality to rise above this influence.' In his preface to The Book of American Negro Poetry, James Weldon, Johnson contends that 'had she come under the influence of Wordsworth, Byron, Keats, or Shelley, she would have done greater work.' Does it smack too much of less majesty to suggest that perhaps Phillis wrote the best poetry she could have written under any influence, and that a mediocre imitations of Shell[e]y would have been none the less (sic) mediocre than a mediocre imitation of Pope? Phillis was also influenced by the Bible, but her paraphrases of the Scriptures are just as poor as her paraphrases of 'debased Pope.' (Thurman 416-417)

Thurman takes a very strict approach to literary criticism that discounts the ways in which factors outside of the text can help fashion the text for better or for worse. Thurman also fails to evaluate the reasons behind assessments of Wheatley that laud the poet more than he. He asks readers to consider the possibility that Wheatley wrote the

best poetry that she could have written under any circumstances; however, he neither questions how other critics have arrived at their perspectives on Wheatley, nor considers the potential motivations for critics to arrive at more adulatory readings of Wheatley. Because he fails to ask these questions, he misses the opportunity to truly understand Wheatley's significance to African American letters.

Although all of the aforementioned writers have been men, African American women were also evaluating Wheatley's significance to the tradition during this period, but their portrayals of Wheatley tend to be more generous than those of their male counterparts. In fact, African American women's depictions of Wheatley during the era often harken back to the somewhat trivial renderings of Wheatley from the nadir that were primarily concerned with the poet's biography rather than her body of work. When Irene M. Gaines published her essay, "Colored Authors and Their Contributions to the World's Literature," a work of creative nonfiction, in *The Messenger* in 1923, her assessment of Wheatley is far less critical than the appraisals of the poet by men of this era. Gaines's essay is a trip through the fictitious World's Literature Building. She takes readers through three different halls: Historians' Hall, Fiction Hall, and Poets' Hall. It is in the Poets' Hall that Gaines meets Wheatley. She says:

> Here I also found the little African girl, Phillis, who in 1761 was sold in a Boston slave market to a very cultured and loving woman, Mrs. John Wheatley, who grew to love little Phyllis dearly and trained her in the fine arts. There were many beautiful poems written from the depths of her pure young heart between the years of 1763 and 1784. The poem addressed to Gen. George Washington brought to her a lovely letter of thanks from the father of our country. Her translation of one of Ovid's stories was widely published in Europe. (Gaines 320)

Like some other critics, Gaines chooses to emphasize Wheatley's youth and origins by calling her "the little African girl." Like many of the African American writers from the nadir, Gaines' depiction of Whealtey is complimentary without qualification.

In her essay, "The Task of Negro Womanhood," published in 1925 in Locke's *The New Negro,* Elise Johnson McDougald, much like Katherine Tillman in her "Afro-American Women and Their Work," details both the struggles and the accomplishments of African American women. McDougald spends time discussing the progress of African American women in several lines of work until she finally comes to the subject of artistic expression. She writes:

> In the fields of literature and art, the Negro woman's culture has once more begun to flower. After the long quiescent period, following the harvest from the pen of Phyllis (sic) Wheatley, Negro women dramatists, poets, and novelists are enjoying a vogue in print. (McDougald 377)

In this mention of Wheatley, McDougald utilizes metaphor to describe Wheatley's work. She describes her poems as "harvest" from her pen. In this description, McDougald compares Wheatley's poems to the fruits of labor. McDougald cites Wheatley as the origin of the flowering of African American women's literature that happens during the Harlem Renaissance.

Educational pioneer Mary McLeod Bethune wrote her "A Philosophy of Education for Negro Girls" in 1926 in which she outlines her goals for educating African American girls and treats the history of educating black girls from the time of Wheatley. She describes Phillis Wheatley as an enslaved, yet educated African girl:

> Only those with extraordinary talents were able to break the shackles of bondage. Phyllis (sic) Wheatley is to be remembered as an outstanding example of this ability—for through her talents she was able to free herself from house hold (sic) cares that devolved upon Negro women and make a contribution in literary art which is never to be forgotten. The years still re-echo her words. 'Remember,

> Christians, Negroes, black as Cain May be refined, and join the Angelic train.' (Bethune 84)

Bethune describes Wheatley's intellectual gifts as "extraordinary." When Bethune describes the "shackles of bondage" she is referring to physical as well as mental enslavement. Wheatley was able to surmount her mental enslavement through education, and her education, in turn, led to her physical emancipation. Bethune suggests that Wheatley's impact on not only African American literature but also literature on a wider scale should not be underestimated. Bethune chooses to close her discussion of Wheatley by quoting the last line of Wheatley's poem, "On Being Brought From Africa to America." This choice is somewhat ironic given that most critics deem this poem as Wheatley's most controversial, and it is often presented as evidence of Wheatley's "whitewashed" perspective of slavery. Arguably, Bethune chooses this line because its sentiment supports the argument that she makes about Wheatley's extraordinary intellect being the reason why she was able to "break the shackles of bondage." Wheatley proved through her intellectual and spiritual training that Africans were capable of "join[ing] the Angelic train" because they were also God's children endowed with all the same mental and emotional capabilities as whites (Wheatley 18). With this allusion Bethune evokes both the politics of representativeness and respectability. When Bethune says, "The years still re-echo her words," she asserts that Wheatley's work is still relevant to Bethune's contemporary audience.

Like John Wills Menard in his 1879 poem "Phillis Wheatley," Carrie Williams Clifford uses apostrophe and addresses Wheatley directly in her poem "To Phyllis Wheatley" from her collection *The Widening Light*, published in 1922. The first two lines of the poem read, "No! Not like the lark, didst thou circle and sing,/High in the

heavens on morn's merry wing" (Clifford 22). In these lines, Clifford contrasts Wheatley to a skylark, a bird which, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary,* is known for "its early song, and the height it attains in contrast with the low position of its nest" ("Lark"). In these opening lines, Clifford says that unlike the lark, who acts as a symbol of freedom in the poem, Wheatley did not have the ability to fly high and sing every morning. Because Wheatley was enslaved, she could not "fly" or transcend the boundaries of her enslavement, and she could not "sing" or write poetry freely.

In lines three and four, when Clifford writes, "But hid in the depths of the forest's dense shade, / There where the homes of the lowly were made," she continues with the bird metaphor (Clifford 22). Just as the lark and its heights are symbols of freedom, the "depths of the forest's dense shade" are symbols of slavery. Clifford describes Wheatley's nest as a home that was humble and describes Wheatley in similar terms.

Clifford's next two lines read, "Thou nested! Though fettered, thou frail child of night, / The melody trilled forth naïve delight" (Clifford 22). In line five, Clifford praises the fact that Wheatley "nested" or made a place for herself in the world despite the oppression that she faced. Clifford suggests that this is a remarkable achievement given Wheatley's enslaved status. Wheatley's enslavement was her "night." Furthermore, she was a "child of night" both literally and figuratively, as she was a juvenile when most of her poetry was written, and she was a product or "child" of the metaphorical "night" of slavery. In lines seven and eight, Clifford extends her metaphor comparing slavery to night when she writes, "And all through the throes of the night dark and long, / Earth's favored ones harkened thy ravishing song" (Clifford 22). Clifford remarks that despite the mental anguish that she suffered due to slavery, Wheatley produced "ravishing"

poetry. Clifford lauds Wheatley wholeheartedly and chooses to neither critique nor criticize Wheatley's poetry. This approach is unusual when compared with the ways in which African American men of the period were denouncing Wheatley as an unfit mother of the tradition.

Clifford highlights Wheatley's African background to vicariously connect twentieth-century African American poets to Africa through Wheatley. The ninth and tenth lines read, "So plaintive and wild, touched with Africa's lilt; / Of wrong small complaint, sweet forgiveness of guilt--" (Clifford 22). Once again, Clifford emphasizes Wheatley's suffering by describing her as "plaintive." When she describes Wheatley as "wild" she suggests that the poet is so because of her African origins. The second half of the ninth line contradicts the first half. In the beginning of the line, Clifford highlights Wheatley's suffering, but in the second half she classifies Wheatley's poetry as a "lilt," which is characterized as a cheerful song. It seems that Clifford is pointing out the inherent contradiction in Wheatley's work. She produced lighthearted poetry despite the fact that she was in a severely disadvantaged position as an enslaved person. Clifford paints Wheatley as a Christ-like figure in line ten when she remarks that Wheatley did not complain about the wrongdoing that was perpetrated upon her, and instead forgave the perpetrators of their guilt. Through this characterization of Wheatley, Clifford lauds the eighteenth-century poet's Christian principles and revives nineteenth-century portrayals of Wheatley that emphasize her piety.

In the next couplet, Clifford writes, "Oh, a lyric of love and a paean of praise, / Didst thou at thy vespers, Dark Nightingale, raise," once more indicating that Wheatley's verse expressed optimism despite her subjugated position (Clifford 22). Given that a

paean is a song of praise for deliverance from war, Clifford suggests that Wheatley was thankful for her survival. Clifford is not implying that Wheatley is thankful for being enslaved and subsequently Christianized, but rather that she is thankful for surviving the horrors of the Middle Passage and her continuous bouts with ill health. Clifford revisits her original bird metaphor in line twelve, identifying Wheatley as a "Dark Nightingale" in direct contrast with the lark whom she mentions in the beginning of the poem. Unlike the lark that is known for singing in the morning, the nightingale is known for singing at night as its name suggests. Clifford resurrects her metaphor that equates night with slavery. Clifford reiterates that Wheatley's poetry was produced during the "night" when she characterizes Wheatley's poetry as "vespers" given that vespers are prayers said in the evening. Clifford concludes the sonnet with the lines, "So sweet was the hymn rippling out of the dark, / It rivaled the clear morning song of the lark" (Clifford 22). Clifford asserts that Wheatley's poetry that was produced despite her enslavement is equally as impressive as poetry produced during the "day" or in freedom. Ultimately, Clifford depicts Wheatley as a remarkable figure whose example is worth replicating and does not engage in the rhetoric of the New Negroes who cite Wheatley as an inauspicious beginning of the African American literary tradition.

Like Carrie Williams Clifford, Dorothy Guinn uses night or darkness as a metaphor for slavery in her play, *Out of the Dark,* published in 1924. The subject of scene two is slavery. Guinn describes the days before emancipation when she writes, "Dark were these days of long ago. Strange was the new land; stranger still were the people who enslaved hundreds and hundreds of men. You well know the horrors of slavery. But have you ever seen the gleams of light shining out of the dark?"(Guinn 5).

The playwright compares slavery to darkness and the African Americans who achieved despite of slavery as "gleams of light." Guinn introduces Wheatley when she writes,

> Listen, kind friends, for on my scroll are these recorded. Once when a slave ship laden with human cargo arrived in Boston, a delicate little slave girl of seven years was brought on shore. The child was purchased by a Mrs. Wheatley and named Phillis. The kind mistress, finding the child very bright, gave her a good education. Phillis Wheatley, as she grew, developed a talent for writing poetry for which she was commended by high and low. On one occasion she wrote a poem in honor of George Washington. Listen to one of her poems. (Guinn 5)

Guinn mostly relays a brief biography of Wheatley, as it seems her primary purpose in writing the play is to expose the audience to the accomplishments of African Americans. Guinn is not at all critical of Wheatley and speaks of her in an admiring tone.

After Guinn's introduction of Wheatley, she reimagines the most famous image of the poet. Before Wheatley begins to speak, the stage directions say, "[Curtain opens in rear of stage. She is seated writing, as in the well-known picture]" (Guinn 5). In these directions, Guinn refers to the only surviving picture of Wheatley, an engraving by Scipio Morehead that serves as the frontispiece for her book. In the engraving, Wheatley is pictured with her eyes gazing forward and her hand on her chin as if she is in deep thought. She is holding a pen that she is using to write what one presumes is a poem. There is a pot of ink and a book to her left. This scene from her frontispiece circumscribes Wheatley within a frame that reads, "Phillis Wheatley, Negro Servant to Mr. John Wheatley, of Boston." By choosing to have Wheatley's character reenact this scene in a live production, Guinn dismantles the visual, and metaphorical margins that the words in the frame place on Wheatley.

Guinn also revises the commonly rehearsed narrative that suggests that Wheatley did not speak for herself. Finally, the audience hears Wheatley's voice when she says,

"At last it is done. Let me read part of this poem aloud to see how it sounds" (Guinn 5). Then Wheatley's character proceeds to read from the poem " On Imagination." The fact that Wheatley is staged writing her poem alone suggests that Wheatley's poetry was produced independently. Like the reenactment of Wheatley's engraving, the presentation of Wheatley's poetry as a product of her own imagination defies the notion that Wheatley was a reflection of her masters' agendas. Guinn has Wheatley read from what most consider her best poem. Wheatley's character reads the fourth stanza of "On Imagination":

> *Imagination!* Who can sing thy force?
> Or who describe the swiftness of thy course?
> Soaring through air to find the bright abode,
> Th'empyreal palace of the thund'ring God,
> We on thy pinions can surpass the wind,
> And leave the rolling universe behind:
> From star to star the mental optics rove,
> Measure the skies, and range the realms above.
> There in one view we grasp the mighty whole,
> Or with new words amaze th'unbounded soul. (Wheatley 66)

In these lines, Wheatley addresses imagination directly using apostrophe. The question in the first line of the stanza is somewhat ironic. Wheatley questions whether anyone can sufficiently capture the power of imagination in writing, yet she herself attempts to do so in the very poem in which she questions the possibility. In the third line of the stanza, it becomes clear that she is comparing imagination to a bird. Wheatley claims that those flying on the wings of imagination, for example artists, can move faster than the wind and move beyond the boundaries of the universe. When Wheatley says, "Measure the skies, and range the realms above / There in one view we grasp the mighty whole," she suggests once again that the imagination allows artists to break boundaries. In the last line in the stanza, Wheatley refers to literary artists or writers more specifically claiming

that writers can create unique poetry that surprises readers and writers and frees their souls.

It is fitting that Wheatley suggests that good poetry is capable of liberating readers and writers because it was her poetry that allowed her to be relieved of her duties as a slave. It is also worth noting that the bird imagery in Wheatley's poem is reminiscent of the Clifford's avian symbolism in her poem addressed to the eighteenth-century poet. For Wheatley, the ability to use her imagination was akin to freedom. By including these lines from "On Imagination" in the play, Guinn contends that despite the darkness of slavery, some "light," which for Guinn symbolizes knowledge and freedom, was present in the lives of some African Americans, including Wheatley. Although for the men who exemplified Locke's "New Negro" Wheatley symbolized the antithetical "Old Negro," for the women of the Harlem Renaissance, Wheatley was a "light" that shone out of the darkness of slavery.

Inherent in the concept of the New Negro lies the notion that there is an Old Negro from whom one must turn away. For Locke and many of his ilk, Wheatley was the prototypical Old Negro, whose portrayals as the unblemished epitome of black refinement had become cliché. Because nineteenth and early twentieth century African American writers created such a large body of work depicting Wheatley in this vein, the men of the Harlem Renaissance felt that they needed to work even harder to dismantle these representations. In *Harlem Renaissance*, Nathan Huggins's analysis of James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* concludes that in that case of Johnson's novel, "…the message is clear that civilization, virtue, honor, gentility, and success were qualities of individuals, not races" (Huggins 145). Johnson and other men

featured in Locke's *The New Negro* rejected earlier representations of Wheatley, in part, because they corroborated the racist notion that African American needed to prove their intellectual and moral refinement as a race whereas whites were afforded the opportunity to succeed and fail as individuals.

However, this desire for individual expression did not stop Locke's New Negroes from advocating race consciousness and race pride as a means of demonstrating their unique artistic contributions and not proving their equality. In fact, embracing African heritage was a common practice during the Harlem Renaissance. When Huggins writes, "…it was tradition at which these black artists were groping" he describes the New Negro's desire to connect to this ancestral culture as a longing for a definitively African American literary tradition (Huggins 228). Because Wheatley could have authored a more distinctly African-influenced body of work, many men of the Harlem Renaissance resented Wheatley's seeming refusal to do so. Finally, for the men of the Harlem Renaissance, the lack of rigorous assessment of Wheatley's work during the nadir in addition to Wheatley's lack of race consciousness, made her sterile soil from which their creative Renaissance could not flower.

Chapter Three: "Wasn't It Good Sister?": The Phillis Wheatley Poetry Festival, 1973

A number of events occurred in 1973 that were significant to the development of feminism in general, and black feminism in particular. At the beginning of the year, on January 22, 1973, the Supreme Court of the United States handed down the Roe v. Wade decision that established access to abortion as a constitutional right for women. Another event germane to women's health, the publication of the first commercial edition of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, also took place in 1973. Of particular interest to black feminist history, the group Black Women Organized for Action was founded in San Francisco in January of 1973. Similarly, the National Black Feminist Organization was founded in New York City during a conference that took place between November 30, 1973 and December 2, 1973. Between the founding of these two pioneering groups of black feminists, another gathering of black women, the Phillis Wheatley Poetry Festival, took place at Jackson State College from November 4-7 in Jackson, Mississippi.

As the director of the Institute for the Study of History, Life and Culture of Black People at Jackson State University, Margaret Walker[5] conceived, planned, and organized the Phillis Wheatley Poetry Festival. The Festival was an unprecedented gathering of black women writers at Jackson State who aimed to give voice to the eighteenth century poet while also voicing their own narratives, some of which mirrored Wheatley's story. Attending a celebration of Paul Laurence Dunbar's centennial birthday in Ohio motivated Margaret Walker to plan the Festival to commemorate the bicentennial of the publication

[5]At the time of the Phillis Wheatley Poetry Festival, Margaret Walker also used her married name, Alexander, in addition to her first name and maiden name. However, she is now most often referred to by her maiden name in professional contexts. For example, the archive and museum dedicated to the poet at Jackson State University is called the Margaret Walker Center.

of *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. Walker thought Wheatley's book was worthy of acknowledgement similar to the attention that Dunbar had received. However, the purpose of the Festival was not only to celebrate Wheatley's accomplishments but also to evaluate her significance to black women writers two centuries after the publication of her book. In a document titled "A Story-Report of the Phillis Wheatley Poetry Festival" Walker ponders the link between Wheatley and contemporary black women writers:

> If one black woman in America was published in 1773, how many black woman poets in 1973? I began to count and I realized more than a dozen. Soon I settled on twenty prominent black women writing and publishing poetry. Why not invite them to come and celebrate Phillis Wheatley's bicentennial? (M. Walker 1)

Walker contemplates Wheatley's legacy in terms of the proliferation of black women poets that have come after her. She views the development of black women writers from a singular instance in the case of Wheatley in Boston in 1773 to almost two dozen black women writers in Jackson in 1973 as proof of Wheatley's enduring legacy. The African American women writers presented in this chapter use the platform of the Festival to advance a black feminist agenda that both promotes the notion of a discrete African/African American culture as espoused by the Black Arts/Black Power Movements and provides a counter narrative to the movements' sexist relegation of black women writers including Wheatley to an inferior status. These women venerate Phillis Wheatley as a resilient foremother who overcame a multitude of obstacles to found the African American literary tradition and also highlight her African ancestry in an attempt to reinforce their own African heritage and the ancestral roots of African American literature.

By holding the Phillis Wheatley Poetry Festival, Margaret Walker sought to right wrongs that she felt had been committed not only against Wheatley but also against other black women writers. When Walker says that black women writers have "always been tokens….The textbooks haven't included them no matter how well received or critically acclaimed they were. And this is one of the reasons we're having this festival. Our young people have got to be educated to all that has been hidden," she provides her rationale for creating an event that featured the work of black women writers exclusively (qtd in Hunter 28). For Walker, to lift Wheatley to her proper place among the pantheon of black writers was to lift all black women writers by association. Furthermore, Walker sought to compensate for the exclusion of Wheatley and other black women writers from prominent positions in history books and from serious treatment in critical evaluations by making Wheatley the subject of the Festival and making the composition of the participants consist solely of black women writers. Because neither Wheatley nor the black women who gathered in Jackson had adequate space in mainstream literary circles or the male-dominated African American literary scene, Walker sought to provide these women with a platform to feature their work. The Phillis Wheatley Poetry Festival aimed to recover and the promote Phillis Wheatley, a significant figure in black women's literary history whom the aforementioned groups had suppressed.

The four most dominant black male writers in the decades between the Harlem Renaissance and the Festival, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka, were either silent, dubious, or extremely critical of Wheatley's value to African American literary history. While Ellison and Baldwin were mostly silent about Wheatley's significance, Wright presents a rather dubious assessment of

Wheatley's significance to the African American literary tradition in his introduction to *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* by St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton and his essay "Literature of the Negro in the United States" from *White Man, Listen!*, and Baraka dismisses her significance outright. Baraka, who is arguably the most well known figure from the Black Arts Movement that flourished during the period just prior to the Phillis Wheatley Poetry Festival, addresses Wheatley explicitly in his essays, "The Myth of a 'Negro Literature'" in 1966 and the "The Revolutionary Tradition in Afro-American Literature" in 1974. In his chapter "The Myth of 'Negro Literature' " from his collection titled *Home: Social Essays*, Amiri Baraka argues that there is a dearth of "Negro" literature and resents the mediocrity that in his estimate characterizes what has been identified as "Negro" literature up to that point. He presents his argument frankly in the opening sentences of the essay. He writes:

> The mediocrity of what has been called 'Negro Literature' is one of the most loosely held secrets of American culture. From Ph[i]llis Wheatley to Charles Chesnutt to the present generation of American Negro, the only recognizable accretion of tradition readily attributable to the black producer of a formal literature in this country, with a few notable exceptions, has been of an almost agonizing mediocrity. (Baraka 105)

In his assessment, Baraka only mentions two African American writers by name, and he cites Wheatley specifically as an example of the limitations of African American literature. Since Wheatley is often considered the point of origin for the African American literary tradition, Baraka attempts to destabilize the very foundation upon which the allegedly inadequate tradition is based.

Baraka expresses his distaste for Wheatley's poetry in particular when he says, "Ph[i]llis Wheatley and her pleasant imitations of 18th century English poetry are far, and finally, ludicrous departures from the huge black voices that splintered southern nights

with their *hollers, chants, arwhoolies, and ballits"* (Baraka 106). Baraka holds up the guttural, musical cries of African Americans during slavery as the most rudimentary examples of authentic African American cultural production. He marks Wheatley's poetry as an example of deviation from that culture. He presents Wheatley's supposedly acquired, Eurocentric poetry in stark contrast with the supposedly instinctive, presumably Afrocentric cries of the enslaved. Baraka's description of Wheatley's poetry as "pleasant" is a thinly veiled insult. He suggests that Wheatley's work should have been unpleasant, presenting a horrific depiction of slavery. Instead, Wheatley's work features many poems on abstract ideas such as "imagination," "providence," and "virtue" as well as a number of elegies. When Baraka calls Wheatley's poems "imitations," he criticizes Wheatley's decision to adopt the style of her day as evidence of her lack of originality, and fails to recognize her adoption of this style as a prerequisite for Wheatley's entrance into the literary, political, and religious discourses of her era. Baraka resents Wheatley's work due to his own biases about class and the literary modes of eighteenth century. It is also worth noting that Baraka specifies the South as the location of the slaves' cries. With this reference, he locates the South as the source of African American culture, and he also elides the history of slavery in the North, further distancing Wheatley from what he considers African American culture.

Baraka alludes to Wheatley when he writes, "The Negro as a writer, was always a social object, whether glorifying the concepts of white superiority as a great many early Negro writers did" (Baraka 112). Baraka refers to Wheatley when he mentions "early Negro writers" (Baraka 112). He describes the African American writer as "a social object" because he or she has always been burdened with the task of proving the

competence of their race. Baraka contends that African American writers wrote to help advance the race in society rather than for the sake of art alone. He also downgrades the writers whom J. Saunders Redding calls the "forerunners" to sycophants who perpetuated the very ideas that justified their enslavement. Baraka tacitly refers to Wheatley again when he characterizes some African American poetry as a "hideous imitation of Alexander Pope" (Baraka 113). He once again disparages Wheatley's models and also declares Wheatley's attempts to emulate these models a failure. By pronouncing African American literature, generally, and Wheatley, more specifically, as illustrations of imitative mediocrity, Baraka discredits the notion that a distinct, identifiable, and credible African American literary tradition begins with Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral.* He instead contends that Wheatley's verse and much that came after it simply tried to appeal to middle class whites and did not reflect the experience of working class or poor African Americans. According to Baraka, for any art to be truly labeled "Negro" it must be rooted in the "lowest classes of Negroes" (Baraka 106).

Baraka's essay "The Revolutionary Tradition in Afro-American Literature," originally published in 1974, reiterates his opinions on Wheatley from "The Myth of a 'Negro Literature,' " published twelve years earlier, as he denies that Wheatley and Jupiter Hammon mark the beginning of the African American literary tradition. He articulates his position when he writes,

> In Afro-American literature for instance we have been taught that its beginnings rest with the writing of people like Phillis Wheatley and Jupiter Hammon. Ms. Wheatley writing in the eighteenth century is simply an imitator of Alexander Pope. It was against the law for black slaves to learn to read or write, so Ms. Wheatley's writings could only come under the 'Gee whiz, it's alive' category of Dr. Frankenstein checking out his new monster. Also Wheatley's writing abounds with sentiments like 'Twas mercy brought me from my pagan land,' evincing gratitude at slavery—that the European slave trade had actually helped

> the Africans by exposing them to great European culture: which be the monster remarking how omniscient be her creator! (Baraka 139)

Like in "Myth," Baraka relegates Wheatley's verse to rudimentary impersonation of Pope's poetry. He also argues that Wheatley's eighteenth century audience did not consider her work art, but rather evidence that a select few of the enslaved could exhibit feats of academic competence approximating the authentic intellectual ingenuity of whites. This sentiment echoes Baraka's claim in "Myth" that African American writers were more "social object[s]" than artistic agents whose work was valued independently of its implications for the advancement of African Americans. Although Baraka laments the African American writer as a "social object," by comparing Wheatley to Frankenstein's monster, he renders her inhuman, and therefore an object. Baraka says of Wheatley and Hammon "these two are pushed as Afro-American literature simply as a method of showing off trained whatnots demonstrating the glory of the trainer" he further objectifies Wheatley and Hammon as passive conduits for their masters' ideas (Baraka 139).

Baraka explicitly divests Wheatley of her position as a foremother for African American literature when proclaims, "this is not the beginnings of African American literature as a genre" (Baraka 139). More specifically, Baraka states that Wheatley and Hammon's work is "celebration of servitude" which is "not the ideological reflection of the Afro-American masses, but of their tormentors" (Baraka 140). Invested in the idea of a singular, essential black experience, Baraka sets a standard for African American literature that no writer can meet. Arguably, Baraka's criticisms of Wheatley are not only motivated by his belief in an essential black experience that privileges the art of the black lower classes over that of middle and upper class blacks but also motivated by Baraka's

sexism. Mary Helen Washington articulates this tendency among black male intellectuals to dismiss the significance of black women like Wheatley to the African American literary tradition when she writes,

> Women have worked assiduously in this tradition as writers, as editors, sometimes, though rarely, as critics, and yet every study of Afro-American narrative, every anthology of *the* Afro-American literary tradition has set forth a model of literary paternity in which each male author vies with his predecessor for greater authenticity, greater control of *his* voice, thus fulfilling the mission of his *forefathers* left unfinished. (Washington 33)

Washington goes on to critique those who would acknowledge the existence of black women writers but dismiss their significance to the African American literary tradition writing, "Women in this model are sometimes granted a place as a stepdaughter who prefigures and directs us to the real heir (like Ellison and Wright) but they do not influence the direction and shape of the literary canon" (Washington 33). Washington's observations explain the reticence of black male writers like Baraka to acknowledge the contributions of black women to African American literature, and she ultimately concludes, "Without exception Afro-American women writers have been dismissed by Afro-American literary critics until they were rediscovered and reevaluated by feminist critics" (Washington 34). Washington's assessment also reveals why Charles H. Rowell and Jerry W. Ward argue that Margaret Walker was uniquely suited to organize the conference. Rowell and Ward write:

> It required a person of her [Walker's] perspicacity to discern the implications of the publication of Phillis Wheatley's 1773 volume for 1973. It required a black woman with her vision to see that a celebration of the book's two hundredth anniversary could fill some blank pages of American history. (Rowell and Ward 2)

They contend that Walker's race and gender made her an appropriate person to organize the festival. As a black woman, Walker descends directly from Wheatley's literary

legacy making her particularly attuned to Wheatley's significance. Nikki Giovanni, a participant in the Festival, also described Walker as "the living personification of the spirit of Phillis Wheatley" (qtd. in Hunter 28). According to Charlayne Hunter, a writer for the *New York Times* who covered the Festival, Walker also saw "many parallels between what happened to Phillis Wheatley and is continuing to happen to black women and black men who try to get published today" (Hunter 28). Had the bicentennial of Wheatley's book been the sole reason for the Festival, it may not have been as successful. Walker discerned the parallels between Wheatley and the black women who participated in the Festival allowing her to make Wheatley's struggles relevant to the women who gathered at Jackson State.

Rowell and Ward further state the significance of the festival when they report, "It was the first gathering of the entire spectrum of black women poets in the twentieth century. And it is indeed significant that the Festival occurred in the South" (Rowell and Ward 3). One aspect that made the event unique was the diversity in terms of the writers' subject matters, places of origin, levels of celebrity, and ages. The Festival's location was also important for a number of reasons. It was significant because many Southern Historically Black Colleges and Universities are often marginalized because of erroneous beliefs about the South as a place plagued by ignorance and the North as the center of intellectual activity. Holding the Festival in the South was also important because it gave the event a sense of rootedness and homecoming, a theme very much reflected in the participants' choice to connect themselves to Africa via their ties to Wheatley. In Hunter's article, Carolyn Rodgers, a presenter at the Festival, is quoted as saying:

> 'As a child I grew up terrified and afraid of Mississippi because it was a place where the Klan ran wild and you were brutalized and afraid, and if you were from

> Mississippi, people snickered and sneered. So you didn't tell people. But really I feel as if I have touched home. Some root. Because I expected to come to a place where if you go home you see blood flowing in the streets.' (qtd. in C. Hunter 28)

Rodgers's statement captures the reluctance that many feel when given the opportunity to travel to the South, but she also captures a longing that many African Americans with Southern roots feel about their native land.

In her article "Phillis Wheatley Comes Home" published in *Black World* magazine, Carole A. Parks expounds on the ways in which the theme of home figured prominently in the works presented at the Festival:

> Listening to the various poets, it was easier to understand the complexities "home" has meant for Black Americans: the Africa evoked by Margaret Danner, long a devotee of our continental ancestors; the family traditions cherished by Gloria Oden; or perhaps, as Sonia Sanchez and Malaika Wangara examined, our status as a nation within a nation. Georgia-born Alice Walker…and Margaret Walker dealt with the untapped strengths, cultural reservoirs, and lessons the South still holds for us. (Parks 93)

It was appropriate that the festival in Wheatley's honor be held in the South. A number of the Festival participants locate Wheatley's home as Africa despite her career developing in Boston and London, and many of those same participants needed to reconnect with their inescapable, Southern roots despite their relocations to the North. The Festival was very much about celebrating origins and bestowing the appropriate value on these origins. This focus on African Americans' origins was emblematic of the influence of the Black Arts/ Black Power movement on the Festival. James Smethurst explains the movements' preoccupation with origins when he writes, "…a major aspect of most tendencies of the Black Power and Black Arts movements was an emphasis on the need to develop, or expand upon, a distinctly African American or African culture that stood in opposition to white culture or cultures" (Smethurst 15). The festival

participants' focus on their and Wheatley's African roots was an attempt to establish a distinctly African influence on the genesis and tradition of African American literature.

It was also significant that the Festival took place at Jackson State University. Three years earlier, Mississippi Highway patrolmen killed two black men during what was described by June Jordan as " 'that 28-second fusillade of unfettered murder' " on campus (qtd. in Hunter 28). Margaret Walker comments on the contribution that the Festival made toward both revealing the thorns and promoting the positive aspects of the South and Mississippi generally and Jackson State more specifically when she says, " 'All the terrible stuff wasn't a myth. America is like this—the horror is here, the corruption is here, the evil is here. But there is also some love and some beauty, as we see in this festival atmosphere' " (qtd. in Hunter 28). In addition to promoting healing from the tragic deaths of Phillip L. Gibbs and James E. Green, it is also especially significant that the Festival took place at an Historically Black College/University since stereotypes about the intellectual capacity of African Americans, lead some to underestimate the intellectual rigor of Historically Black institutions. Wheatley's aptitude was often doubted due to both her gender and race. The reputations of both Wheatley and Jackson State were evaluated and elevated as a result of the Festival.

Margaret Walker, the creator and organizer of the Phillis Wheatley Poetry Festival, sets the tone for the event by asserting that Wheatley's significance be evaluated in the context of her life circumstances. In the months preceding the Phillis Wheatley Poetry Festival in 1973, Walker shared her intentions for the festival in a recorded conversation with Nikki Giovanni. The two discuss writing, criticism, film, music, and the definition of art in the third chapter of *A Poetic Equation: Conversations Between*

Nikki Giovanni and Margaret Walker. During the conversation, Walker mentions Jackson State would be hosting the festival in honor of Wheatley. Giovanni responds, "And that will probably be the first critical look at Phillis Wheatley on such a large scale" (M. Walker 65). Giovanni's comment confirms the neglect that Wheatley and her work suffered during the two centuries between the publication of *Poems on Various Subjects* and the bicentennial celebration that was to take place in Mississippi. Walker reiterates the necessity of the celebration:

> That's why it's so important to honor Phillis Wheatley. Here's a woman in the late eighteenth century who had published a book and who had gotten notice in London as well as in this country. It's very important. But, you see, black people should be proud of that because, as a matter of fact, despite the fact that we were in slavery, white people didn't have anything more to show. They weren't doing any better and they weren't in slavery. (M. Walker 65)

In these sentences, Walker recognizes what a feat it must have been for Wheatley to compose verse in the circumstances under which she wrote. In addition, Walker argues that Wheatley's work was on par with the literature produced by white writers of the time. Walker expresses pride in the notion that in the face of oppression a black woman writer was able to produce literature and in doing so proved that a black woman writer could be just as competent as a white writer. Furthermore, Walker wonders whether a writer with Wheatley's talents could surpass her white contemporaries once delivered from bondage. Walker's assessment of Wheatley's work is significant because she puts Wheatley's work in context rather than judging her poetry based on the conventions of her own contemporary moment. She takes the circumstances under which Wheatley produced poetry into account when evaluating her importance.

In another essay "Phillis Wheatley and Black Women Writers" written in 1973, Walker once again asserts the necessity of considering Wheatley's gender and race when assessing the significance of Wheatley's accomplishments:

> The most important reminder for us is that it is indeed a woman who was the best-known black writer of her period, and when today, black women writers become as well known as Toni Morrison or Alice Walker, we are simply continuing a tradition begun by Phillis over two hundred years ago. (M. Walker 37)

Walker points out that it was not only Wheatley's race but also her gender that made her rise both remarkable and unlikely. In contrast to many of Wheatley's male critics, Walker takes the poet's life circumstances into account when assessing her contributions to African American letters. When Walker states, "Phillis Wheatley entered a world in which women wrote and spoke in a very different tongue. The world in which Wheatley lived was different, one which we should not take for granted," she encourages her readers to take Wheatley's historical moment into account when critiquing her or her poetry (M. Walker 27).

In her poem written for the occasion of the Festival, Walker focuses on the burdens placed upon Wheatley to illustrate how Wheatley's work was shaped by her experiences as a slave. In her poem "A Ballad for Phillis Wheatley" the first two lines read, "Pretty little black girl / standing on the block" (M. Walker 96). By describing Wheatley as "pretty" and "little," Walker calls attention to Wheatley's physicality. This is significant because most writers who take Wheatley as their subject tend to focus on Wheatley's intellect. Few devote attention to her physical condition. By paying attention to Wheatley's physicality, Walker reminds readers that Wheatley's body was considered someone else's property. When Walker describes Wheatley as "little" she emphasizes her vulnerability and the contrast between Wheatley's diminutive stature and the

presumably large slave auction where she was being sold. She calls her a "girl" to highlight her disadvantages as a result of both her gender and age. Walker focuses on Wheatley's enslavement to remind readers of her remarkable survival and the effects these experiences must have had on her writing.

Walker also contends that critics should examine the effects that the harrowing experiences Wheatley survived had on her writing. In lines three and four of "Ballad," Walker poses a question to Wheatley when she asks, "How have you withstood this shame / bearing all this shock" (M. Walker 96). With these two questions, Walker attempts to assess Wheatley's emotional state after being accosted and brought to America to be sold as a slave. Walker marvels at Wheatley's unlikely perseverance due to her youth and size. She underscores Wheatley's youth and size to call attention to the influence that these factors must have had on her development not only as a person but also as a writer.

In the poem's second stanza, Walker contemplates Wheatley's remarkable survival and the effects it must have had on both her body and psyche when she asks, "How have you succeeded / weathering the trip;/how have you come through the stench / riding on that stinking ship" (M. Walker 96). Walker expresses surprise that Wheatley was able to survive the Middle Passage. Walker conjures images of inclement weather during the trip when she describes Wheatley experience as "weathering" the voyage through the Middle Passage. When Walker mentions the "stench" and "stinking" of the ship, she evokes images of bodily functions, illness, and death. Walker's portrayal of Wheatley's harrowing experiences encourages critics to consider reasons why Wheatley's direct treatment of slavery was limited. By highlighting these images that

must have remained seared in Wheatley's memory, Walker suggests that Wheatley may have remained silent about these experiences in her poetry because they were too painful to write about.

At the beginning of the fourth stanza, Walker continues to emphasize Wheatley's misfortune to elicit sympathy for Wheatley when she writes, "This is little Phillis/shedding two front teeth/this is little Phillis / caught and torn beneath" (M. Walker 96). Once again, Walker underscores Wheatley's youth and vulnerability when she calls attention to her missing teeth, compelling readers to consider Wheatley's vulnerability. When Walker describes Wheatley as "caught and torn" she describes Wheatley's capture and separation from her family. When she states that Wheatley is "beneath" Walker specifies Wheatley's location below the deck of the slave ship. In the next stanza, Walker contrasts beauty and ugliness when she writes, "All the bright blue canopy / of her native land / caught and kidnapped far away / from her native land" (M. Walker 96). At the end of the previous stanza, Walker evokes the image of the hold of the ship when she mentions that Wheatley is "beneath." In the very next line, she describes the sky as one beautiful aspect of Wheatley's homeland, describing it as "bright and blue." This is very different from the darkness of the hold of the slave ship. In addition to the differing degrees of brightness, there is also a spatial difference. The "canopy" of the sky is the limit of Wheatley's reach in her homeland whereas space is very limited on the slave ship. Walker once again underscores Wheatley's forced separation from her homeland when she repeats "her native land" in the stanza. She also repeats the notion that Wheatley was captured and separated from her home when she describes her as "caught and kidnapped far away" (M. Walker 96). By contrasting the beauty and spaciousness of

Africa with the ugliness and confinement of the slave ship and emphasizing Wheatley's abduction from her homeland, Walker contemplates just how shocking and disturbing these experiences must have been for the young Wheatley. Walker evokes these unsettling images to encourage critics to consider the many abuses that Wheatley suffered as an enslaved child.

In the fifth stanza, Walker elicits compassion for Wheatley based on her separation from her homeland. Similarly, in the seventh stanza she further fosters compassion for Wheatley when she continues to emphasize the tremendous losses Wheatley suffered when she was wrenched from her homeland. When Walker writes, "Boston is a cold town / ice and snow and rain/nothing like a tropic world / nothing like the Plain," she continues to highlight the disparities between various circumstances that Wheatley encounters (M. Walker 96). In this stanza, she contrasts Boston, Wheatley's home in the New World, to her native land in Africa. Walker emphasizes the inclement weather that affects Boston compared to the tropical climate from which Wheatley originates. Walker presents these climates as polar opposites, utilizing the extreme difference between the two climates to underscore the vast adjustment Wheatley would have had to make to survive in her new home. The purpose of this emphasis is to leave readers to consider what the effects of such extreme acclimations may have had on Wheatley's life and work. Another Festival participant, Alice Walker, also attempts to evoke sympathy for Wheatley.

Like Margaret Walker, Alice Walker in her pivotal essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" portrays Phillis Wheatley as a sympathetic figure whose importance has been underestimated. Walker presents Wheatley as a counterexample to the black

women whom she calls "Saints." According to Walker, these "Saints" lived in misery because they were unable to thrive artistically. Walker introduces Wheatley as an instance of a black woman who found a vehicle for her artistic abilities when she writes, "One example, perhaps the most pathetic, most misunderstood one, can provide a backdrop for our mothers' work: Phillis Wheatley, a slave in the 1700s" (A. Walker 235). Walker praises Wheatley for not "perish[ing] in the wilderness," and she describes Wheatley as "pathetic" and "misunderstood" (A. Walker 235). These descriptions force readers to consider the loneliness and vulnerability Wheatley must have faced due to her position as both an enslaved woman and the only black woman intellectual known to the Western world in her time. When Walker says that Wheatley is "pathetic," she suggests that Wheatley's life circumstances should affect an emotional response in her critics. When she says that the poet is "misunderstood," Walker asserts that Wheatley's work has not been fully appreciated because her work has not been put into the appropriate context. Walker implies that Wheatley's life circumstances should be taken into account when evaluating her work and determining her significance to the African American literary canon.

Walker insists that contemporary critics of Wheatley acknowledge the privileged position that they enjoy due to the time period in which they write:

> With the benefit of hindsight we ask, "How could she?" But at last, Phillis, we understand. No more snickering when your stiff, struggling, ambivalent lines are forced on us. We know now that you were no idiot or a traitor; only a sickly little black girl, snatched from your home and country and made a slave; a woman who still struggled to sing the song that was your gift, although in a land of barbarians who praised you for your bewildered tongue. (A. Walker 237)

In this excerpt, Walker suggests Wheatley's modern critics would have most likely been subject to the same conflicts of interest that Wheatley faced had they been born before

the Revolutionary War as Wheatley was. Walker also encourages Wheatley's critics to take into consideration Wheatley's vulnerability as a young, sickly, enslaved, black girl who had to overcome numerous traumas to become the first African American to publish a book of poetry; therefore, her work should be treated more sensitively to account for the effects of these traumas and unfortunate circumstances on Wheatley and her work. Walker also asserts that critics should keep Wheatley's audience in mind when she refers to "barbarians who praised [her] for [her] bewildered tongue" (A. Walker 237). Walker reminds critics that Wheatley's primary audience consisted of whites who supported slavery and/or white supremacy directly or indirectly. Walker suggests that Wheatley wrote to accommodate this audience, a fact that should be remembered when assessing Wheatley's poetry.

One aim of the poem "Rite of Passage," written by Doris E. Saunders for the occasion of the Phillis Wheatley Poetry Festival, was to compel critics to sympathize with Wheatley and fully appreciate her resilience when assessing her poetry. Saunders opens the poem with the line that will become the poem's refrain, "She had lost her two front teeth" (Saunders 40). This line is reminiscent of a line in Margaret Walker's poem "A Ballad for Phillis Wheatley." In that poem, Walker points out that Wheatley was "shedding two front teeth" when she arrived in Boston. Like Walker, Saunders creates this image of Wheatley to humanize Wheatley and call attention to Wheatley's young age and defenselessness.

In lines three through eleven of the first stanza, Saunders continues to use the facts of Wheatley's life to elicit sympathy for the often-maligned poet:

> her two front teeth
> not even loose when snatched from

father's arms
separated forever from safety,
warmth, home…
She had lost her two front teeth, alone
No one to show and tell
No tears
When she lost her two front teeth. (Saunders 40)

In lines three through five, Saunders utilizes Wheatley's missing teeth as a way of marking time. She emphasizes that Wheatley's teeth were in place when she began her journey to America but were missing by the time she arrived. This suggests that a significant amount of time passed between her capture and her arrival in Boston. This fact reminds readers of the seemingly endless voyage through the Middle Passage which not only evokes sympathy for Wheatley but also encourages readers to consider the effects that such misfortune may have had on Wheatley's life and work. Saunders emphasizes what Wheatley lost " safety, / warmth, home…" when she was taken from her homeland (Saunders 40). Saunders indicates that these comforts are gone "forever" (Saunders 40). She reiterates this point by adding an ellipsis to signify Wheatley's interminable mourning for these losses. Saunders repeats the refrain again with a variation. In line eight, she explains that Wheatley was alone when she lost her two front teeth. Earlier in the poem, Saunders suggests that Wheatley lost her teeth during her Middle Passage voyage. If that is the case, it is highly unlikely that Wheatley was literally alone when she shed her teeth, but there are many factors about the circumstances that could account for Wheatley's loneliness. She was a young child who was separated from her family. She may not have known any of the other enslaved people with whom she shared the voyage. In addition to the fact that she may not have known any of the people aboard, it is possible that they did not even have a language in

common. Saunders highlights Wheatley's sense of loss and loneliness to call attention to the impact of Wheatley's experiences as an enslaved person.

Saunders concludes the stanza by once again emphasizing Wheatley's youth to underscore her vulnerability and the need for sensitivity when evaluating her work. When she says that Wheatley could not present her lost teeth at "show and tell," Saunders chooses this phrase that is so often associated with childhood to illustrate Wheatley's loss of innocence and naiveté. Saunders also suggests that Wheatley became numb to her circumstances while aboard the ship when she says that Wheatley shed "No tears," and Saunders concludes the first stanza by repeating the refrain.

Imagery of Wheatley as a young, black, and female victim of slavery persists in the second stanza of Saunders poem. When Saunders ends the second stanza by repeating the refrain, "She had lost her two front teeth" and adding, "Prematurely her passage had begun," she uses the final line of the stanza to bring the title of the poem to the fore (Saunders 40). Saunders marks Wheatley's loss of her teeth as a "rite of passage," but unlike traditional rites of passage, Wheatley does not experience this rite within the context of her family or culture; instead, she experiences this rite alone, without ceremony or celebration. Saunders underscores this event as a means of eliciting sympathy for Wheatley and thereby encouraging fairer treatment of her work.

Once again in the final stanza, Saunders calls attention to Wheatley's perseverance by reiterating the strangeness of Wheatley's new environment when she writes, "In the world—with new sounds" (Saunders 40). When Saunders specifies the strangeness of the sounds, she reminds the readers that Wheatley arrived in America not knowing how to speak, read, or write English. This fact brings to mind another loss

Wheatley endured, the loss of her native language. Saunders once again emphasizes Wheatley's losses to promote more sensitive treatment of Wheatley and her work when she writes,

> She had lost her world
> She would make a new one, surviving her special passage rite
> She would BE
> They called her Phillis
> She had lost her two front teeth. (Saunders 40)

When Saunders describes Wheatley as having "lost her world," she contends that Africa and America were essentially on two different planets. Despite the dramatic and traumatic transition that Wheatley endured, she was still able to make meaning of her new world and even articulate that meaning remarkably well through her writing. When Saunders describes Wheatley's ability to adjust to her new environment as "her special passage rite," the word "passage" has a double meaning. She is comparing Wheatley's ability to create a new world as a rite of passage in the cultural or traditional sense because learning to adapt to one's surrounding is an essential lesson that everyone must learn along his or her journey to adulthood. She is also referring to Wheatley's travel through the Middle Passage. For a span of about two hundred years, surviving the Middle Passage was a brutal rite of passage on the journey from African to African American.

When Saunders capitalizes the word "BE," she highlights and marvels at Wheatley's survival. In the penultimate line, Saunders finally names the subject of her poem. She suggests that Phillis was a name that her new masters gave her when she says, "They called her Phillis" (Saunders 40). This reminds the readers that she had another name before she arrived in America. This was something else that she lost when she

came to the New World. Saunders concludes the poem with the same line that began the poem: "She had lost her two front teeth" (Saunders 40). She does this to remind readers that Wheatley made her new world as a child whose missing teeth were a physical symbol of the many losses she suffered on her way to becoming the first African American to publish a book of poetry. Saunders along with Alice Walker and Margaret Walker underscore the litany of losses that Wheatley suffered as a result of her enslavement. This emphasis is intended to make Wheatley a more sympathetic figure whose work should be evaluated in the context of all that she lost when she was accosted from her African home and transplanted to her new home in Boston.

Paula Giddings shares the sentiments of Margaret Walker, Alice Walker, and Doris E. Saunders, when they argue that Wheatley's life circumstances should be accounted for when critiquing her work although Giddings's approach is markedly different. Rather than evoking pathos for Wheatley, Giddings encourages critics to be more rigorous and less dismissive in their criticism of Wheatley and her work. In her essay presented at the Festival titled, "Critical Evaluation of Phillis Wheatley," Giddings argues that Wheatley's work has been vastly undervalued in criticism by men and women. She also asserts that blacks as well as whites have unfairly disregarded Wheatley, but her primary focus is the treatment of Wheatley by other black writers. Giddings is very strong in her rebuke of lackadaisical criticism that has been unappreciative of Wheatley's work. She goes so far as to contend that "And few have been so readily ignored, or the recipient of such vicious criticism at the worst, and patronizing praise at best, from every sector of that [American] society" (Giddings 74). Giddings presents the work of M.A. Richmond, author of *Bid the Vassal Soar:*

Interpretive Essays on the Life and Poetry of Phillis Wheatley and George Moses Horton, as an example of rigorous literary criticism of Wheatley's work. Giddings remarks that Richmond's critique is "the kind of criticism which attempts to take into account all of the forces, including the very human ones, which shape lives and letters" (Giddings 74).

The difficult and complex position that Wheatley occupied in eighteenth century Boston, along with a lack of critical rigor plagues scholarship of Wheatley's work, Giddings contends. She writes:

> Their views lacked a foresight and depth: foresight in terms of understanding the elements of criticism which serve to perpetuate our sensibility through our literature; and depth in terms of taking into account the special forces encountered by Blacks, particularly before the Emancipation Proclamation in America. (Giddings 75)

Giddings responds to the critiques of Arthur Schomburg, James Weldon Johnson and J. Saunders Redding in particular with a lengthy quotation from Richmond's book. Richmond writes:

> For this we must revert once more to the frail, near-naked girl of seven displayed for sale on a Boston dock. At the age the native African culture and values are not firmly imbedded, certainly not with the depth and strength to withstand the powerful assimilative impact of the new culture to which she is thrust. She has no defenses against Puritan certitude and self-righteousness, no resources for *critical* assimilation. To begin with she does not have a chance, and then two specific factors reinforce the process that is better described as inundation than assimilation.
>
> One is her precocity, and the Wheatleys' appreciation and cultivation of it. She is encouraged with patronizing kindness. Privileges and material rewards are compensation for piety and for poetry that respects the prevailing convention in theme and style. It does no good to reproach an adolescent child for yielding to these attractive influences, especially when within herself there is not strong residue of any other influence or tradition….
>
> This first factor is complemented by the second, her isolation from the society of slaves and its sub-culture. Unlike Wheatley [George Moses] Horton was born a slave on a Southern plantation and there was never any ambiguity about his status or identity. Knowing clearly what he was, it was easier for him to determine what he ought to be. (qtd. in Giddings 76-77)

Like aforementioned writers Margaret Walker and Doris E. Saunders, Richmond emphasizes Wheatley's vulnerability. Her reference to Wheatley on the auction block is particularly reminiscent of Walker's "Ballad for Phillis Wheatley" and Saunders's "Rite of Passage." She also takes into account Wheatley's age and sense of rootlessness when analyzing her creative choices.

According to Richmond, because she was overwhelmed with New England culture and values at such an impressionable age and in such a compromising circumstance, it is unreasonable to expect Wheatley to express a strong, explicit connection to African culture in her writing. Richmond also points out that the preferential treatment Wheatley received from her masters due to her precocity was enough to orient Wheatley towards the tastes of her audience. To take Richmond's point a step further, Wheatley was dependent upon the Wheatleys not only for rewards but also for the bare necessities of survival. As a weak, sickly slave unable to endure rigorous labor, Wheatley was literally writing for her life. Had she not pleased the Wheatleys with her work, she most likely would have been subjected to more manual rather then intellectual labor with the Wheatleys or another family. Given the fate Wheatley suffered after she was emancipated and most of the Wheatley family was deceased, it is fair to assume that her pitiful end would have been accelerated had she been unable to satisfy the Wheatleys with her poetry. In addition to Wheatley's need to please her masters with her work, the fact that Wheatley was not immersed in the black American culture that flourished despite the stranglehold of slavery means that there was no space in which Wheatley could express her native culture without fear of retribution. This made it difficult for Wheatley to be in touch with her native culture.

As a participant in the Festival, Vinie Burrows wrote and performed a short dramatic production *Phillis Wheatley Gentle Poet, Child of Africa* in which she portrays Wheatley as deserving of both sympathy and admiration. She begins the play with a prologue describing a scene from a lodging house in what she describes as "the Black section of west Boston" (Burrows 1). Burrows provides detailed descriptions of the last moments of agony of an unidentified black woman and her child. Although Burrows very specifically locates the reader in a particular geographic space, she is vague about to whom she is referring. When Burrows writes, "The child makes no sound; no limbs move. If we could touch this infant, his cold fingers would reveal that life is almost gone….The mother's body is racked with gradually weakening coughs; the child unmoving now," she evokes pathos in the audience (Burrows 1). She concludes the prologue by asking, "Who are they? What mother? What child?" Although Burrows ends the scene questioning the identity of the mother and child, the audience most likely knows that the two individuals in question are Phillis Wheatley and her child. Burrows chooses not to state the identity of the mother and child directly because she wants to contrast the fanfare Wheatley experienced at the height of her fame to the anonymity in which she died. Burrows begins at the end of Wheatley's life to establish her as a sympathetic character.

In the production's third scene, "Boston Slave Market," Burrows draws attention to the objectification Wheatley faced when she was sold on the auction block to make Wheatley a more sympathetic character whose life circumstances should be considered before judging her life or work. The scene takes place, as its title suggests, at the Boston

slave market where the Wheatley family purchased the girl who was to become Phillis Wheatley in 1761. The scene opens with the auctioneer yelling:

> Bid em in, bid em in, bid em in, bid em high, bid em low, bid em in. Folks we got the finest lot of nigger children you'd ever want to see. We got boys, we got girls, all healthy, likely niggers. And now's the time to buy. Buy em cheap when they young, sell em high when they prime. (Burrows 4)

Burrows makes a point of emphasizing the fact that children were among the slaves being sold and that they were not only considered property but also an investment because an enslaved child's value would increase as he or she matured. The audience knows that Wheatley is one of the children in the lot being sold in the Boston market, and Burrows calls attention to her vulnerability making it difficult for the audience to ignore the influence this experience must have had on Wheatley and her work. It is Burrows's hope that this acknowledgement will make the audience consider the extent of Wheatley's objectification and the miracle of her survival when critiquing her work.

Wheatley's susceptibility to influence given her precarious position as an enslaved child is another factor Burrows encourages the audience to consider. The Wheatley family enters the scene and the auctioneer says, "What's the matter Mrs. Wheatley. Jest a nigger child. Make a nice pet, if you fatten it up a bit. Coupla years you learn her right, you got yourself a right smart house nigger. Cook and clean, wash and iron, sew and mend a bit" (Burrows 5). The auctioneer's statements to Susannah Wheatley illustrate the ways in which slaves, especially enslaved children, were trained to perform according to their owners' needs and wishes. Through the words of the auctioneer, Burrows suggests that just as the Wheatley family would be expected to instruct Wheatley in terms of manual labor, the family would also be responsible for and in control of Wheatley's intellectual pursuits. Burrows wants critics who accuse

Wheatley of being imitative of white poets and beholden to Western culture to remember that Wheatley most likely did not control what she wrote and probably had even less control of what was published.

The fourth scene, "The Home of John and Susannah Wheatley," scrutinizes the problematic position the poet occupied in the Wheatley home, and Burrows maintains that Wheatley's position should be taken into account when examining the poet. This is the same position Paula Giddings highlights in her essay, "Critical Evaluation of Phillis Wheatley," when she quotes M.A. Richmond: "The cost of being a child prodigy was incalculable for as she grew into adolescence it fashioned a special—and peculiar status for her that set her apart from all other human beings, black or white" (qtd in Giddings 78). Burrows captures the reasons why Wheatley occupied such awkward territory in the scene when Susannah Wheatley says,

> But I feel as if Phillis is my last child….When Rev. Sewall baptized her two years ago, I knew I would not really be content until Old South Church accepted Phillis as a communicant. Even though they have never accepted any African into the church fold. But Mr. Wheatley, I insist that Phillis must sit next to us and not in the gallery with the other servants. (Burrows 7)

Burrows uses this conversation between Mr. and Mrs. Wheatley to reveal just how difficult it was to literally and figuratively put the poet in her place. Wheatley was far more erudite than other servants who had not been afforded the same opportunities as she. The eighteenth-century poet was also far more learned than many whites living in Boston during the American Revolution, yet she was considered their subordinate. These circumstances relegated Wheatley to a life fraught with ambiguity and displacement. According to Susannah Wheatley, it was not typical for the Old South church to accept black congregants, but the church made an exception for Wheatley. Confusion about

what place Wheatley should occupy in the church still abounded after Wheatley's admission into the congregation. Burrows brings this ambiguity, displacement, and confusion to the fore to show the degree to which Wheatley's identity formation was challenged by this sense of constantly being out of place. Burrows wants critics to understand how difficult it would have been for Wheatley to forge an identity rooted in Africa, a distant home, when she could not even find her place in America in her day to day life. Furthermore, Burrows presents another roadblock to Wheatley's development of an African identity when Susannah Wheatley says during the scene, "We are building a New England on the sufferings and labor of God's creatures, heathen and black though they are" (Burrows 7). In Burrows rendering of the somewhat "progressive" Susannah Wheatley, even Mrs. Wheatley held disparaging beliefs about people of African descent, despite her "last child" being one of them.

Burrows excerpts and paraphrases Wheatley's letters to her friend Obour Tanner, a black servant from Newport, Rhode Island, to illustrate how both Wheatley's unconventional relationship with her mistress and Christian values shaped Wheatley's identity and made developing an identity informed by her race an unreasonable expectation. Burrows highlights Wheatley's focus on Christianity and seeming rejection of blackness when she paraphrases from Wheatley's letter from May 19, 1772 saying, "Let us rejoice in and adore the wonders of God's infinite love in bringing us from a land of darkness" (Burrows 13). Even when speaking with another black servant, Burrows's portrayal of Wheatley submits that Wheatley identifies more strongly with Christianity than blackness.

According to Burrows's representation of Wheatley, religion rather than race is a stronger point of connection between Tanner and herself. Burrows paraphrases Wheatley on the death of her mistress Susannah Wheatley from another letter dated, March 21, 1774. Wheatley describes her relationship with Susannah Wheatley:

> I have lately met with a great trial in the death of my mistress; let us imagine the loss of a parent, sister, or brother, the tenderness of all these were united in her. I was a poor little outcast and a stranger when she took me in: not only into her house, but I presently became a sharer in her most tender affections. I was treated by her more like her child than her servant. (Burrows 15)

Using fodder from Wheatley's actual correspondence with Tanner, Burrows depicts Wheatley's bond with Susannah Wheatley as one that goes beyond that of mistress and servant. Wheatley considers her mistress like family and expresses more grief over her death than she ever openly expresses for the loss of her African family. Wheatley also describes her mistress as "t[aking] her in," which is, in fact, a euphemistic way of describing her purchase at a slave auction. This downplaying of the formal mistress—servant relationship between them further illustrates the degree to which Wheatley's position in the household was not clearly delineated making it difficult for Wheatley to understand her place in society.

Through her rendering of Selina Hastings, Countess of Huntingdon in the fifth scene, Burrows suggests that Wheatley was both emboldened and restricted by her relationships with her white benefactors, which dramatically affected Wheatley's work and her ability to develop an identity rooted in her race or enslaved status. In this scene, Selina Hastings, Countess of Huntingdon, the woman to whom Wheatley's book is dedicated, speaks about the poet with her friend Sarah. Burrows depicts Hastings as yet another white benefactor who stakes claim to Wheatley when she calls her "my little

African poetess" (Burrows 9). The ways in which both Susannah Wheatley and Hastings claim Wheatley as their own illuminate the reasons why Wheatley seemed beholden to her white benefactors and unable to forge her identity as a black person. Like Susannah Wheatley, Hastings also expresses disdain for Wheatley's race when she tempers her praise of Wheatley by saying, "And, of course, being African, is not the same as being a true lady" (Burrows 9). Burrows provides yet another reason why Wheatley would have difficulty expressing any allegiance to her African heritage.

However, Burrows subtly contends that once relieved of her obligations to her white benefactors, Wheatley would be able to express an identity informed by her race. In the eighth scene, "John Peters," Burrows depicts Wheatley's side of a conversation between her and John Peters her future husband. Wheatley says to Peters:

> I am very proud of you…a man of color and a free man of color, one of our African race and you a business man, a man of affairs. My acquaintance with you has opened my eyes to another world, one of which hitherfore (sic), I have been woefully ignorant. My life with the Wheatleys kept me from knowing more of my people. My studies, and my travels, even my health which has never been very strong. At Old South Church I did not meet many of my, of our nation. And those I met were servants like me. (Burrows 17)

In Burrows's portrayal, Wheatley expresses not only race consciousness but also pride when she speaks to John Peters. When Wheatley attributes her reticence to express these feelings about her race to her relationship with the Wheatleys, Burrows reiterates that this complicated relationship explains Wheatley's approach to the issue of race when she was under the care of her masters, not self-loathing on the poet's part.

In the closing scene, Burrows emphasizes Wheatley's misfortune by describing her unceremonious end with the intention of garnering sympathy for the poet and underscoring the notion that critics should take her misfortunes into consideration when

assessing her work. In the epilogue, Burrows writes, "We now know the story of that woman, that child. Phillis Wheatley who is buried in an unknown, unmarked grave. A gentle poet, a child of Africa" (Burrows 18). This final description of Wheatley as a "child of Africa" also highlights Wheatley's African heritage and asserts that Wheatley never completely severed her relationship with Africa.

Despite the pronounced disappointment that some feel about the lack of explicit African content in Wheatley's work, many women of the Festival venerated Wheatley for her role as a foremother irrespective of the lack of race consciousness in her work. They maintained that Wheatley's accomplishments given her limited resources made her worthy of the celebration that occurred in Jackson, Mississippi in 1973. In the conclusion of her aforementioned essay "Phillis Wheatley and Black Women Writers," Margaret Walker focuses on Wheatley's role as a trailblazer when she asserts,

> When black women celebrated Phillis Wheatley in 1973 in Jackson, Mississippi—in their poems or in a performance such as that done on the life of Wheatley by Vinnie Burroughs (sic)—they were acknowledging the power of her work and its continuing impact. It was the still small voice of Phillis Wheatley, as constrained as it was, that enabled us to remember how important it is to write out of your own cultural and historical moment and to tell the truth as we see it. (M. Walker 39)

In these sentences, Walker does not comment on or assess the content of what Wheatley wrote. She instead focuses on the notion that just by raising her voice, as a young, black, and female slave, Wheatley teaches other young black women to assert themselves into the conversations that are shaping the times in which they live. According to Walker, Wheatley's insistence that her voice be heard validates the voices of young, black women throughout the history of black women writers, Wheatley's descendants. When Walker describes Wheatley's voice as "still small," she compares Wheatley's voice to the voice

of God to suggest that just as God is hailed in the Bible as the creator of everything, Wheatley is the genesis of African American literature. When describing Wheatley's voice as "still small," Walker also brings to mind the Bible verse, 1 Kings 19:12, in which God describes his voice as "still small" when speaking to Elijah (King James Bible, 1 Kings 19.12).

Although Walker acknowledges that Wheatley was limited in what she could say, she still argues that the very fact of Wheatley's self expression created a model upon which other black women writers could expand. Walker recognizes that Wheatley's voice was shaped, if not fettered, by her own cultural and historical moment, yet she appreciates how truly remarkable it is to have the perspective of an enslaved young woman living in Boston at the time of the Revolution and believes Wheatley's voice should not be taken for granted. Walker concludes the essay with the concise declaration, "All of this, we owe to Phillis Wheatley" (M. Walker 40). Walker credits Wheatley with creating a space in which African American women could assert their voices in the midst of the privileged, white, and male world that is literature.

In her aforementioned essay, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," Alice Walker assesses Wheatley's significance by emphasizing that without forerunners such as Wheatley her own literal and artistic freedom would not be possible. Walker notes the significance of previous women artists such as Wheatley when she says, "Yet so many of the stories that I write, that we all write, are my mother's stories….For stories, too, were subject to being distracted, to dying without conclusion" (A. Walker 240). According to Walker, because Wheatley's poems and own life story died without conclusion, Walker and other women writers feel the impulse to complete their mothers' stories. Mary Helen

Washington corroborates this sentiment when she remarks that black women writers "piece together the story of a viable female culture, one in which there is generational continuity, in which one's mother serves as the female precursor who passes on the authority of authorship to her daughter and provides a model for the black woman's literary presence in this society" (Washington 147). Walker concludes the essay by writing, "Perhaps Phillis Wheatley's mother was also an artist. Perhaps in more than Phillis Wheatley's biological life is her mother's signature made clear" (A. Walker 243). In this conclusion, Walker suggests that Wheatley's mother's work is expressed in Wheatley's writing just as her mother's genetic traits are expressed in the poet's physical body. In the same vein, Wheatley's work which "d[ied]without conclusion" continues to be expressed through the work of contemporary African American writers. Walker further articulates Wheatley's importance as a foremother when she writes, "It is not so much what you sang, as that you kept alive, in so many of our ancestors, *the notion of song"* (A. Walker 237). This statement contends that the very fact of Wheatley's existence is the poet's most significant contribution to African American literature, and the content of her writing is secondary to that contribution.

Regardless of Walker's recognition of Wheatley's significance as the "mother" of African American literature, Walker also expresses some apprehension about Wheatley occupying this position. While her description of Wheatley as "pathetic" was, in part, intended to create more equitable treatment of her work, this description also suggests that Wheatley's work is of poor quality. When one considers the entirety of this word's meaning into consideration, Walker's ambivalence toward Wheatley and her legacy is revealed. Her ambivalence puts her in the position of being both a champion of the

underrated poet as well as one of her challengers. Walker continues to walk this tightrope throughout the essay. She reveals how her own ambivalence mirrors her foremother's when she writes, "The key words, as they relate to Phillis, are 'contrary instincts.' For when we read the poetry of Phillis Wheatley...evidence of 'contrary instincts' is everywhere. Her loyalties were completely divided, as was, without question, her mind" (A. Walker 235). Walker's ambivalence about Wheatley is the result of Wheatley's inconsistencies about slavery, Christianity, and Western culture in general. She desires to vindicate her foremother against the harangues of her male critics, yet she shares their longing to find a defiant and artistically sophisticated voice in her poetry that unequivocally denounces slavery.

Naomi Long Madgett presented her poem "Phillis" at the Festival, and the poem, much like Alice Walker's essay, portrays Wheatley as a figure haunted by the ways in which she was forced to compromise her African heritage to survive in her new home in Boston. According to Madgett's portrayal, Wheatley is not only a point of origin for African American literature but also a point of connection between African American writers and Africa. Madgett asserts that this connection exists despite the concessions that Wheatley made to cope with her life as an enslaved person. Madgett presents Wheatley as a woman who missed her native land and struggled to keep her memories of her home alive. Madgett appropriates Wheatley's voice in this dramatic monologue as she expresses longing for all of the comforts of home. The speaker, Phillis Wheatley, begins the poem declaring:

> I hardly remember my mother's face now,
> But I still feel
> At my bosom a chill wind
> Stirring strange longings for the sturdy back

I used to lean against for warmth and comfort
When I had grown too tall to ride. (Madgett 96)

Wheatley contrasts the "chill wind" that she feels in Boston with the "warmth and comfort" that she felt in Africa when she leaned upon her mother's back. The "chill wind" that Wheatley most likely feels in Boston, evokes "strange longings" for the support of her mother's back. Wheatley describes this desire as "strange" because it is difficult to explain why she would long for her mother's support when she is so far removed from her mother, a woman whom she is not even sure she would recognize if she were in her presence. Still, she feels this longing just the same. This longing for the comforts of home does not paint Wheatley as a person who is thankful for enslavement but as someone whose memories of her native land never died.

Madgett depicts Wheatley as maintaining a connection with her native land and its people despite enslavement when she says,

One night—or day, perhaps—
Revived by consciousness of sound.
I heard
The pounding of the waves against the
shipside
And made believe its rhythm
Was the speech of tribal drums
Summoning in acute need the spirit
Of my ancestors. I dreamed I saw. (Madgett 96)

When Wheatley is overwhelmed by the trauma that was life aboard a slave ship, it is the spirit of her ancestors called forth by the beating of "tribal drums" that brings her back to life. This shows Wheatley's ties to her native culture are not severed when she is forcibly removed from her homeland. Wheatley continues to describe her imagination's rendering of the waves when she says,

Their carven images arrayed

In ceremonial austerity. I thought I heard
Their voices thundering an answer
To my supplication: "Hold fast.
Survive—survive—*survive*!
And then I slept again….(Madgett 96)

Wheatley takes solace in the stoicism of her ancestors as she visualizes pictorial representations of her forbearers in the "carven images" while below deck. She uses these images to summon her own impassive response to the strenuous circumstances to which she is subjected. Wheatley's revelation that she prayed while aboard the ship suggests that she had some belief system and/or religion prior to her arrival in Boston. Based on her description of this mystical encounter, it seems that her religion involved ancestor worship. Wheatley reinforces the notion that she maintains her relationships with her native land despite the disruption that she experiences due to her enslavement.

Wheatley, as Madgett portrays her, does not express gratitude for slavery but for her survival. She also conveys ambivalence regarding her relationship with the Wheatleys:

Once more the sunlight came, but not the
Same
As I remembered it. Now it sat silver—cold
It was good to see the sun at all.
And it *was* something
To find myself the bright dark mascot
Of a blind but well-intentioned host—
A toy, a curiosity, a child
Taking delight in anyone's attention
After so long a death. (Madgett 96)

Although Wheatley is grateful to be an object of affection for the white people who purchase her, she is acutely aware of the precarious nature of her position as "a toy, a curiosity, a child" (Madgett 96). In this position, Wheatley realizes that she is a victim of objectification and paternalism. When Wheatley describes her owners as "blind but well-

intentioned," she expresses an awareness of their shortcomings and the repercussions of their limitations on her life. Wheatley once again voices her ambivalence about her circumstances:

> As I grew older, it was not enough.
> That native lifesong once again surged
> strong—
> Spilled over sands of my acquired rituals,
> Urged me to match the tribal rhythms
> That had so long sustained me, that must
> Sustain me still, I learned to sing
> A dual song:. (Madgett 96)

Madgett contends that Wheatley feels compelled to produce poetry that is characteristic of African culture. When Wheatley remarks, "That native lifesong once again surged / Spilled over sands of my acquired rituals," she suggests that her inclinations towards her native culture overwhelm her ability to express herself through the means available to her within the foreign culture that she has adopted. Her description of her "lifesong" as "native" stands in stark contrast to her subsequent poetry and religion, which she describes as "acquired." This word choice suggests that Wheatley's Christianity and European style poetry are pretense. Madgett's Wheatley is a subversive agent who secretly maintains her African religion and cultural orientation while pandering to her white audience with poetry that fulfills their expectations of an ideal slave.

The poem comes to an end with Wheatley resolving the ambivalence that she expresses earlier in the poem. Wheatley's final words read:

> My Fathers will forgive me if I lie
> For they instructed me to live, not die.
> "Grief cannot compensate for what is lost,"
> They told me. "Win and never mind the cost.
> Show to the world the face the world
> would see;
> Be slave, be pet, conceal your Self—

But *be."*
Lurking behind the docile Christian lamb,
Unconquered lioness asserts: "I am!" (Madgett 96)

Wheatley's capitalization of "Fathers" suggests that she considers her ancestors to be on the level of gods. Wheatley's ambivalence is resolved because she decides that it is her ancestors to whom she must be true, so her feigned allegiance to the Christian God and Western culture is not dishonest because she does not hold herself accountable to her white audience. They also teach her to be "two-faced" by continuing to depict herself as a submissive slave while she maintains her true, African identity underneath the façade. Wheatley compares her fabricated identity to a lamb, an animal we associate with obedience and susceptibility to influence. She compares her true identity to a lion, nicknamed the "king of the jungle," who leads rather than follows. The last two words of the poem, "I am!" contend that Wheatley has agency. The use of the subject form "I" indicates that Wheatley is in charge of her identity despite the ownership of her body by another. By asserting "I," she declares that she is the subject of her own life story and not the passive object of someone else's narrative. Madgett's poem concludes with Wheatley affirming her connections to her ancestors and her African culture despite her outward appearance of passivity and total immersion in Western culture. These connections linking Wheatley to her African culture also serve as ties between African American writers and their African past.

In her poem "Rite of Passage," Doris E. Saunders establishes a connection between Wheatley and her homeland when she describes Wheatley as "This child of Africa" in the second line of the poem (Saunders 40). She does this to counter portrayals of Wheatley as a product of Western education. Saunders wants readers to know that

Wheatley is African first and foremost. In the second stanza, Saunders further ties Wheatley to Africa by evoking Wheatley's ancestors:

> Father, son of kings and priests
> whose softly whispered parting word
> stayed in her ears—kept her through the darkness
> brought her back to light and life—
> Father's daughter kings and priests beyond. (Saunders 40)

Like Madgett, Saunders suggests that Wheatley was sustained by her connections to her ancestors. She believes in them similarly to the way one may believe in a god. This assertion contends that Wheatley never lost touch with her African heritage despite the fact that on the surface her poetry suggests otherwise.

Each black woman writer who gathered at Jackson State University in November of 1973 came with her own agenda, but still they managed to find common ground as they sought to resurrect Wheatley from the critical graveyard where her work had been buried for so long. Each came with her own agenda, but still they managed to find some common ground. They produced works that presented Wheatley as a sympathetic figure whose talents were limited by factors such as her age, gender, race, historical moment, and enslaved status. They contend that when these limitations are accounted for Wheatley's work can be accurately assessed.

Although many of the women from the festival maintained that Wheatley's work had been underestimated, they also argued that it is not the content of Wheatley's work that matters most. The mere existence of Wheatley's voice is remarkable, significant, and worthy of celebration because it serves as the nascence of an African American women's literary tradition. Furthermore, the publication of Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* marks the genesis of this tradition, and Wheatley is the

"mother" of black women's literature. The black women writers at the Festival were her literary daughters whose work was an extension of Wheatley's legacy. Wheatley also serves as a connection point between these writers and their otherwise distant African heritage.

A number of the writers maintain that Wheatley's own connection to Africa remained strong, and she had a longing for her homeland. This longing was the source of Wheatley's ambivalence regarding her religion and Western culture in general. According to many of the participants in the Festival, Wheatley used Christianity and Western culture to enable her survival despite her lowly circumstances. For those who insist that Wheatley had a longing for her homeland, Wheatley serves as a mirror that reflects the desire of the women of the Festival to have a closer relationship to their African heritage. These writers try to establish a direct line of descent from African ancestors to Wheatley and from Wheatley to themselves, her literary offspring. By establishing this lineage, the African American women writers make a case for African American literature as an art form that is distinct from literature written by white Americans. It is this longing for African ancestry, which was an extension of the Black Arts/Black Power movements, that informs the writer's decision to present Wheatley as a product of Africa.

Lucille Clifton's poem "Phillis Wheatley Poetry Festival: for Margaret Walker Alexander" captures the communion and collectivity of the women who gathered at Jackson State University in 1973 for the festival that her title names. Clifton portrays the women as a literary family whose collective fate is dependent upon the cyclical

mothering that takes place between generations of black women writers. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. describes this mothering among black women writers when he writes,

> And whereas most older black male writers deny any black influence at all—or eagerly claim a white paternity—black female authors often claim descent from other black women literary ancestors, such as Zora Neale Hurston and Ann Petry. To an unparalleled extent, the writers of this movement have been intent upon bonding with other women. (Gates 3)

James Smethurst also notes this tendency for mentoring between generations of black women writers when he says that there is "a bonding of black women across generations, a sharing of African American women's experience and culture, and a reinvigoration of a troubled and dissatisfied female subject" (Smethurst 311).

Clifton's three-part poem, which illuminates this intergenerational mentoring among black women writers begins with an interjection: "Hey Nikki" (Clifton 41). In this line, Clifton addresses Nikki Giovanni, one of the participants at the Festival, and Clifton goes on to say to Giovanni in the second line: "Wasn't it good" (Clifton 41). Clifton then proceeds to address each black woman poet who participated in the festival to ask, "Wasn't it good" (Clifton 41). In the fifth line, Clifton addresses Sonia Sanchez saying, "wasn't it good Sonia, sister wasn't it good?" (Clifton 41). When Clifton refers to Sanchez as "sister" she articulates the bond between herself and Sanchez. However, after naming each of the black female participants and asking, "wasn't it good," Clifton remarks in lines thirteen and fourteen the final lines in the first part of the poem, "sisters, sisters, sisters, oh sisters / oh ain't it good?" (Clifton 41). These lines contend that the bond Clifton articulates between herself and Sanchez extends to all of the women who participated in the Festival. Clifton suggests the fellowship among the women continues

well past the end of the Festival when she uses the present tense to ask "oh ain't it good?" (Clifton 41).

In the second part of the poem, which is subtitled "What The Tugaloo Gospel Choir Knows," Clifton focuses on the collective experiences of not only the women who gathered at the Festival but also of African Americans as a whole. The brief four-line section reads, "Jesus Keep Me is / what kept me and How I Got Over is / how we got over" (Clifton 41). Clifton refers to two spirituals "Jesus Keep Me Near the Cross" and "How I Got Over." When she refers to these songs, she explains that these spirituals have been a source of strength not only for her but also for all of the black Americans whose history and culture are expressed through these songs. Clifton also brings to mind the intergenerational cultural transmission that is responsible for the continued preservation of these songs. She suggests that this passing on of the spirituals is not unlike the intergenerational exchanges taking place among the women of the festival and among black women writers over time.

Clifton addresses Margaret Walker directly in the last part of the poem and identifies Walker as a mother figure to the many black women participants in the Festival similar to the way Alice Walker identifies Wheatley as a foremother in her essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens." The last part of the poem reads:

> Mama
> two dozen daughters stand together
> holding hands and singing cause
> you been such a good Mama we
> got to be good girls. (Clifton 41)

Clifton suggests that these black women participants carry on the literary legacy of not only Wheatley but also Walker. Unlike the depictions of Wheatley, which are often

marked by ambivalence, Clifton portrays Walker as a definitively "good Mama" who inspires her literary daughters to follow suit with their own expressions of communal belonging through literature. Many of the women whose works are treated in this chapter mark Wheatley as the origin of this mothering despite the fact that she did not have any contemporary black women writers to nurture and mentor. What Wheatley did do is provide a blueprint for subsequent African American women writers that made an event like the Festival possible.

Chapter Four: "Tost O'er The Raging Main": Phillis Wheatley's Transatlantic Crossings in Late Twentieth-century African American Poetry.

While there is a dearth of first-hand accounts of the Middle Passage in African American literature, there is no shortage of "memories" of the Middle Passage in the African American literary imagination. Wolfgang Binder in his essay, "Uses of Memory: the Middle Passage in African American Literature," proposes possible explanations for the lack of first-hand accounts of this life-altering experience endured by millions of Africans over the course of two centuries:

> The scarce treatment of the middle passage (sic) in autobiographical texts may be due, apart from the traumatic experience itself which one would prefer to forget, to the small number among those slaves in the Americas who would have had first-or-second-hand knowledge of the voyage and the wish or the opportunity to communicate it in the language of the enslaver and colonizer. In addition, the demand for printed (ex-) slave narratives from abolitionist circles came in many instances rather late. In *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave* (1831) for example, the first female (ex-) slave narrative from the New World, the story sets in with Mary's birth in Bermuda and the mentioning of her mother and father. Mary remains silent on both the middle passage (sic) of her parents and on Africa. (Andrews, ed., 1-23) Her narrative is New World oriented. This proves to be the case with very many narratives: they begin with slavery and New World conditions, and omit Africa and the horrible link between the two continents. Both fields of memory, or the amnesia (or pre-existing literary models) blotting them out, seem to go hand in hand. (Binder 540)

Binder's observation that few slaves in the Americas would have been capable of relaying the story of the Middle Passage in the language of the oppressor was certainly the case for most of those enslaved in the Americas, but it was not the case for Phillis Wheatley. Her mastery of the English language was exceptional, making her more than capable of communicating her experience. The question of Wheatley's opportunity to share her experience is a more nuanced one, as she was clearly given the opportunity to write, but the degree to which she controlled her subject matter is not so clear.

Furthermore Binder's suggestion that the popularity of slave narratives reached its peak after the legal end of the slave trade in America, making these authors incapable of providing first-hand accounts of the Middle Passage, does not apply to Wheatley and her work. Wheatley was writing in the eighteenth century when the slave trade was in full swing. She endured the Middle Passage, survived, and acquired the skills necessary to tell her story, yet she did not.

Like Mary Prince, whom Binder uses as a prototypical example of the treatment of Africa and the Middle Passage in the narratives of former slaves, Wheatley remains silent regarding her Middle Passage journey, and seldom speaks of Africa. Binder's assertion that Prince's narrative was "New World oriented" also applies to Wheatley's work. Similarly, Binder implies that many former slaves writing about their experiences attempt to obscure memories of both Africa and the Middle Passage even when those memories are accessible, in part, due to an inclination towards amnesia as well as a tendency to use earlier slave narratives, which typically did not include depictions of the Middle Passage, as models for their own accounts, thereby replicating the silence of their literary predecessors. Binder mostly dwells on the trauma of the Middle Passage as the reason for this amnesia and does not offer any alternative explanations for the glaring absence of Middle Passage accounts in most slave narratives. Binder also fails to take note of African American writers' treatment of the Middle Passage in works of fiction and poetry such as Robert Hayden's poem "Middle Passage" and Charles Johnson's novel of the same name, both published before Binder's essay in 1962 and 1990 respectively. According to Binder, the seeming dearth of Middle Passage accounts are the result of a lack of will to remember and a tendency among the formerly enslaved to

perceive the Middle Passage as site of irreparable rupture that severed the Old World from the New.

However, in his essay "Sea Change: The Middle Passage and the Transatlantic Imagination," Carl Pedersen writes, "Thus the Middle Passage emerges as more of a bridge than a breach, a space-in-between where memory entails reconstructing the horrors of the voyage westward and retracing the journey of Africans to the Americas" (Pedersen 43). For many African American writers, the Middle Passage is a *lieu de mémoire* or a site of memory for African American culture. Pierre Nora in his landmark essay, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," explains the origins of lieux de mémoire:

> Lieux de mémoire originate with the sense that there is no spontaneous memory, that we must deliberately create archives, maintain anniversaries, organize celebrations, pronounce eulogies, and notarize bills because such activities no longer occur naturally. The defense, by certain minorities, of a privileged memory that has retreated to jealously protected enclaves in this sense intensely illuminates the truth of lieux de mémoire—that without commemorative vigilance, history would soon sweep them away. We buttress our identities upon such bastions, but if what they defended were not threatened, there would be no need to build them. Conversely, if the memories that they enclosed were to be set free they would be useless; if history did not besiege memory, deforming and transforming it, penetrating and petrifying it, there would be no need to build them. Indeed, it is this very push and pull that produces lieux de mémoire—moments of history torn away from the movement of history, then returned; no longer quite life, not yet death, like shells on the shore when the sea of living memory has receded. (Nora 12)

Given that no one writing in the late twentieth century has living memory of the Middle Passage, African American poets of that era find it necessary to commemorate the Middle Passage as both the space between Africa, Europe, and America as well as the journey through that space that millions of Africans, including Wheatley, endured on their way to becoming enslaved African Americans. Nora notes that lieux de mémoire are especially

significant to minority groups whose histories are often suppressed by the majority. As a minority group within the United States, the African American poets treated in this chapter not only feel compelled to fiercely preserve the memory of not only Wheatley but also her Middle Passage voyage as a means of establishing an African point of origin for African American literature. Hence, the Middle Passage becomes a site of longing for these African American poets because only by occupying this space, whether literally or metaphorically, can they reestablish their ties to the African continent. Although these poets are invested in Wheatley's identity as an African, many of them also highlight the tension that the space between Europe, Africa, and America represents. They acknowledge that in many ways Wheatley is a product of the convergence of these cultures and her identity is better understood as such rather than as a product of one or the other.

Many African American poets have written about Phillis Wheatley's transatlantic crossings as a means of creating a bridge between Wheatley and her African homeland. Some choose to focus on her first voyage from Africa through the Middle Passage to America while others focus on her voyage from Boston to London and back. As her "progeny," they are simultaneously building their own bridges to Africa. Furthermore, their longing to connect Wheatley to Africa is fueled by their desire to "remember" an Africa that is only accessible through collective memory.

In her own work, Wheatley does not discuss the horrors of the Middle Passage. Wheatley does not explicitly reveal anything about her Middle Passage journey in her poem "On Being Brought From Africa to America." While it is not unusual that Wheatley did not discuss her Middle Passage journey, scholars and artists alike have a

desire for more first-hand accounts of Middle Passage journeys. Just as Wheatley does not discuss her Middle Passage journey, she also writes little about her connections to the African continent. While she often referred to herself as African, there are only a two instances in which she describes her time there in any detail. The first instance occurs in her poem, "To the Right Honourable William Earl of Dartmouth, His Majesty's Principal Secretary of the State of North-America, &c." In this poem, Wheatley describes her homeland as "Afric's fancy'd happy seat." In this instance, "fancied" could mean "existing only in the fancy; imaginary" or "that one has taken a liking or fancy for; favourite" ("Fancied"). Wheatley most likely intends a double meaning. This reading suggests that for her, memories of Africa exist only in her imagination, yet she has an affection for her homeland and holds it as a "favorite."

Wheatley's second major reference to Africa occurs in her poem, "Phillis's Reply to the Answer in our Last by the Gentleman in the Navy." Vincent Carretta argues that in the gentleman's answer to Wheatley's initial poem he includes a "very romanticized pastoral image of the Gold Coast of Africa" (Carretta 150). Wheatley responds to the gentleman's description of Africa with one of her own saying:

> In fair descriptions are thy powers display'd
> In artless grottos, and the sylvan shade;
> Charm'd with thy painting, how my bosom burns!
> And pleasing Gambia on my soul returns,
> With native grace in spring's luxuriant reign,
> Smiles the gay mead, and Eden blooms again,
> The various bower, the tuneful flowing stream,
> The soft retreats, the lovers golden dream,
> Her soil spontaneous, yields exhaustless stores;
> For phoebus revels on her verdant shores
> Whose flowery births, a fragrant train appear,
> And crown the youth throughout the smiling year. (Wheatley 163)

Carretta questions whether Wheatley's description of Africa in this poem is a memory. He asserts that "Her poem is at least as conventionally pastoral and idealized as Rochfort's and gives no evidence whatsoever that she is describing an actual place or time, or that she is speaking from personal experience" (Carretta 151). He suggests that Wheatley may have taken her description of Senegambia from three other accounts. According to Carretta, Michel Adanson's *Histoire Naturelle du Senegal,* was quoted in Anthony Benezet's *Some Historical Account of Guinea*. In turn, Benezet's *Account* was then used as the basis for Thomas Day and John Bicknell's fictional memory of Gambia in *The Dying Negro.* Carretta's assessment further supports the notion that Africa was a product of Wheatley's "fancy" or imagination.

Whether Wheatley's description of her homeland is a personal memory or a part of a collective memory of Africa, Wheatley's claim that the gentleman's description of Africa makes her "bosom burn" suggest that she feels a longing/nostalgia for Africa. Scholars of memory have labeled this type of longing nostalgia. In her book *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym describes the type of longing Wheatley feels when she writes, "Nostalgia (from nostos—return home, and algia—longing) is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy" (Boym xiii-xiv). For Wheatley, Africa is a home "that no longer exists." Her literary progeny inherit the nostalgia that she feels for Africa. Despite the fact that they have very different proximities to the continent, Wheatley's relationship with Africa mirrors that of subsequent African American writers. For both, Africa is a "fancied" homeland.

Moreover, these African American writers evoke Wheatley's Middle Passage journey as a means of reconnecting to this homeland.

While the majority of the poem focuses on Wheatley's Christianity, Jupiter Hammon's poem "An Address to Miss Phillis Wheatly (sic) " depicts Wheatley's Middle Passage journey both explicitly and implicitly. In the first stanza, Hammon writes:

> O Come you pious youth adore
> The wisdom of thy God,
> In bringing thee from distant shore,
> To learn his holy word. (Hammon 28)

Hammon seems to echo the sentiments expressed in Wheatley's "On Being Brought from Africa to America." He commands that Wheatley "adore" God for bringing her to America and allowing her to be Christianized despite the fact that enslavement was the price that she paid for her Christianity. Hammon seems to continue in this vein in the second stanza when he says,

> Thou mighst been left behind,
> Admidst a dark abode;
> God's tender mercy still combin'd
> Thou hast the holy word. (Hammon 28)

On the surface, it may seem Hammon is describing Africa as "a dark abode," but this term could also be a reference to the slave ship. When one takes this reading of the term "dark abode," it is equally plausible that Hammon is saying that Wheatley should be thankful, not simply for becoming Christianized, but for surviving the Middle Passage. Hammon cites God's mercy as the cause of her survival. Hammon refers to the Middle Passage more explicitly in the fourth stanza when he writes, "God's tender mercy brought thee here,/Tost o'er the raging main." In this instance, "main" refers to the ocean. Hammon captures the violence of the Middle Passage with his use of the words, "tost"

and "raging." These two lines corroborate the notion that the dark abode in stanza two is the Middle Passage because the line from stanza four, "God's tender mercy brought thee here," echoes the line in the second stanza, "God's tender mercy still combin'd."

In the fifth stanza, Hammon evokes the death and destruction characterized the Middle Passage when he says,

> While thousands tossed by the sea,
> And others settled down,
> God's tender mercy set thee free
> From dangers still unknown. (Hammon 29)

Hammon distinguishes Wheatley from the "thousands tossed by the sea" or those whose bodies tossed about as they rode below the deck of the ship, as well as those whose bodies were tossed overboard because they did not survive the voyage. Hammon also sets Wheatley apart from those who "settled down" or those who sank into the ocean. When Hammon says, "God's tender mercy set thee free / From dangers still unknown" he comments on the precarious nature of the Middle Passage. Hammon was Wheatley's contemporary and the first African American poet to imagine Wheatley's Middle Passage journey, but this theme is revisited again in the last quarter of the twentieth century, over two hundred years after Hammon and Wheatley were writing.

In her prose poem "Linkage (for Phillis Wheatley)" published in 1983 in her volume *Those who Ride the Night Winds*, Nikki Giovanni explores the connections or "links" between Wheatley and contemporary African American poets. The poem does not contain line breaks but instead uses ellipses to break up the text. Giovanni makes a reference to the Middle Passage in the opening words of the poem: "What would a little girl think…boarding a big…at least to her…ship…setting sail on a big…to everybody…ocean" (Giovanni 313). Giovanni begins her poem with a question to

encourage Wheatley's critics to consider Wheatley's point of view. Giovanni also forces readers to contemplate Wheatley's position as a "little girl" forcing readers to contend with Wheatley's vulnerability. From the very beginning, Giovanni emphasizes Wheatley's young age and diminutive size when she arrived in Boston. Giovanni contrasts Wheatley's size with the size of the slave ship and the size of the ocean. Giovanni contemplates what Wheatley's reaction may have been when she first encountered the slave ship and the ocean. For Giovanni, this initial reaction is more so one of awe rather than fear.

Giovanni continues to contemplate the interplay between awe and fear when she says, "Perhaps seeing her first…iceberg…or whale…or shark…Watching the blue water kiss…the blue sky…and blow white clouds…to the horizon" (Giovanni 313). Giovanni mentions an iceberg to contrast the tropical environment from which Wheatley originates with the freezing temperatures she may have faced while aboard the ship. By calling attention to this contrast, Giovanni once again suggests that Wheatley's initial reactions may have been more rooted in curiosity than fear. Giovanni also suggests that Wheatley may have seen a whale for the first time, an animal that is awe-inspiring indeed, but Giovanni's contemplations take a darker turn when she considers that Wheatley may have also seen her first shark. This reference is a reminder that whether Wheatley was aware of it or not danger was nigh. The mention of the shark reminds readers of the death that must have been all around Wheatley while she was aboard the ship. The sharks would be attracted to the ship due to the number of dead bodies that were likely thrown overboard. Giovanni makes this sharp turn in her representation of Wheatley's

experiences to mimic the drastic change in perception that could have taken place when Wheatley realized her position on the slave ship.

After introducing the sinister element by suggesting that Wheatley may have seen a shark while on board the ship, Giovanni returns to the more light-hearted view of the situation writing, "Watching the blue water kiss…the blue sky…and blow white clouds to the horizon…My mother caused awe…in me for blowing…smoke rings" (Giovanni 313). By describing the horizon as a "kiss," Giovanni's word choice suggests that there is affection between the sky and the ocean. It is curious that Giovanni introduces the notion of love in her description of the view from the slave ship. Giovanni also brings herself into the conversation when she mentions her reaction to her mother blowing smoke rings. Just as a young Giovanni fascinated with her mother's ability to blow rings of cigarette smoke most likely admired the act without any knowledge or understanding of the dangers of smoking, Wheatley may have initially viewed her voyage as harmless without true knowledge or understanding of the dangers it held.

Giovanni emphasizes Wheatley's ignorance when she asks, "What would a little girl think…leaving Senegal…for that which had no name…and when one was obtained…no place for her…" (Giovanni 313). Giovanni underscores Wheatley's lack of language to describe what lay ahead of her to account for Wheatley's silence about the Middle Passage. She remarks that once Wheatley learned the language, she still did not find a place in the society that she could occupy comfortably. There was "no place for her" because her intellect could not allow her to be limited to a life of servitude, but her race would not allow her the freedom to simply revel in her intellectual gifts.

In the year following the publication of Giovanni's poem, Gary Smith published *Songs for My Fathers*, a collection of poems composed between 1975 and 1980 through which Smith intends to lend credence to both the history and mythology of the poets treated. In the book's foreword, Smith explains that the poems are,

> …primarily celebratory pieces—near sonnets—that reflect the continuities within the Afro-American literary tradition. In this sense, while writing the poems, I was acutely aware of how the poetry of Phillis Wheatley, for example, speaks to the poetry of Jupiter Hammond (sic)…I have attempted to reconstruct these speech acts, to substantiate their historical realities and myths, and add to my own poetic voice to the dialogues." (Smith iv)

Smith presents history and mythology on an equal plane because he understands that the myths surrounding historical figures contribute to how the public remembers these figures as much as, and in some cases more so than, the facts. In his section "Some Rumors About Phillis Wheatley" Smith presents two poems that address Wheatley's transatlantic crossings. The poems do not have names but numbers. The second poem in his 10-poem series on Wheatley treats her Middle Passage voyage.

In the opening lines Smith evokes the distress that Wheatley most likely experienced on the slave ship: "Daybreak and the unkept promise of sleep / found you spooned in the hold of a ship" (Smith 20). In these lines, Smith indicates that Wheatley had a sleepless night in the hold of the slave ship. Although it is not directly stated, Smith's language personifies, "night" who promised Wheatley that she would be able to sleep, but "daybreak," also personified, found Wheatley still awake at dawn. Smith evokes the extremely close quarters in the hold of the slave ship when he describes Wheatley as "spooned." This word choice also captures the objectification of the human cargo by comparing them to "spoons."

Smith uses personification again to create the impression that the darkness is enveloping when he writes, “The darkness, there, clung to your body / like excrement” (Smith 20). There is no space between Wheatley and the darkness. Smith compares the darkness to excrement to introduce more unpleasant details about Wheatley’s experience on the ship. He conjures olfactory images of the odors of human waste that were inescapable in the hold of the ship. Smith reminds readers that both darkness and excrement were unavoidable during the journey through the Middle Passage.

Smith emphasizes the length of time that recently enslaved people spend in the space known as the Middle Passage and specifies three different locations that would serve as homes for Wheatley when he writes,“Three weeks from Boston, / but fourteen years from the American Republic!” (Smith 20). The poet underscores the protracted journey from Africa to America. Although Boston and the American Republic really refer to one place where Wheatley lived, these two names reflect the adjustments that Wheatley faced during her tenure as a slave. When she arrived in Boston in 1761, Boston was technically a part of the British Empire, but during the course of her tenure there, Boston became a part of the independent nation of the United States of America. Smith also evokes Africa and quotes from Wheatley’s poem “To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth” using a line taken directly from Wheatley’s poem: “Afric’s fancied happy seat” (Smith 20). Smith highlights the various times and spaces that Wheatley occupied throughout her life as a result of her Middle Passage journey. He does so to mark the multiple identities that she engaged over her lifetime. Smith describes Wheatley as “A prospective slave girl” to suggest that enslavers evaluated Wheatley’s suitability for slavery just as employers assess the possible value of potential employees.

When Smith notes that Wheatley was "stolen" he reiterates the notion that a crime was committed against Wheatley whereas some others portray Wheatley's enslavement as an act of kindness.

Smith directly addresses the question of memory and the Middle Passage voyage when he writes,

> Later, you remembered nothing of the voyage,
> nothing of the dead shackled hand to foot;
> or your hapless tribesmen tossed overboard
> like sacraments to the waiting sharks. (Smith 20)

Because Wheatley does not discuss her Middle Passage voyage in any of her surviving poems or letters, many assume that she has no memory of it. Margaretta Matilda Odell's account of Wheatley's life, that nearly every person who has treated Wheatley relies on, states that Wheatley did not remember anything of "the place of her nativity, or of her parents" (Odell 10). This claim is unusual because as Odell herself relates, "The memories of most children reach back to a much earlier period than their seventh year" (Odell 10). Odell tries to account for the supposed breach in Wheatley's memory with a lengthy hypothesis regarding Wheatley's presumed forgetfulness:

> It has been suggested that memory was in fault in this instance; but we have hesitated to account for this singular habit of mind in this manner; for, upon duly considering the point, we cannot suppose that Phillis could have made such rapid progress in various branches of knowledge, if she had not possessed a retentive memory—and still less, that she could have succeeded in the attainment of one of the dead languages. We are rather inclined to refer to the fact in question to some peculiar structure of mind—possibly to its activity—perhaps occasioned by lack of early discipline—one fancy thrusting forth another, and occupying its place. But the difficulty still remains, that she could not recall those fancies. Most persons are aware that, by a mental effort, (and there is no operation of the mind more wonderful!) they can recall scenes and events long since forgotten; but Phillis does not seem to have possessed this power, as it respects her own productions,--for we believe this singularity to have affected her own thoughts only, and not the impression made upon her mind by the thoughts of others, communicated by books or conversation. (Odell 15-16)

Odell's explanation of Wheatley's inability to recall her life before enslavement is complicated and curious to say the least. It seems highly improbable that a person could only retain memories of conversations that she has had with others or facts that she has obtained from books. Wheatley may not have read in her home in Africa given her age, but it unreasonable to think that she did not have any conversations with people during her time in Africa. This theory doesn't account for why Wheatley does not have memories of conversations that she had with people before her enslavement. Depictions of Wheatley's life in Africa and her Middle Passage voyage abound because African American writers long to use the Middle Passage as a "bridge" rather than a "breach." Like Odell, they try to account for this seeming rupture between Wheatley and her memories prior to Boston.

Smith attempts to fill in the gaps in Wheatley's memory by addressing her directly and describing the images that she cannot remember for her. He once again evokes images of the manner in which the slaves were positioned during their voyage when he says that they were "shackled hand to foot" (Smith 20). He reiterates the loss of life in the hold of the ship when he remarks that many of the slaves in the hold were dead. The loss of life continues to be his focus when he describes the dead being thrown overboard to become food for the sharks. Smith tries to revive Wheatley's memory because he needs her memory to bolster the histories of the enslaved Africans who came from Africa from whom he descends. Without the Middle Passage accounts of Wheatley and others, subsequent African Americans cannot connect the space between Africa and America.

Smith alludes to Odell's account again in the final lines of the poem, and he tries to arouse Wheatley's memories of Africa when he concludes,

> Only your mother's memory surfaced again.
> The humble black woman who rose early
> out of lifelong habit and, from a claypot,
> poured fresh water to the rising sun. (Smith 20)

Although Odell claims that Wheatley "does not seen (sic) to have preserved any remembrance" of her life before the Wheatley's purchased her, she names one memory that Wheatley maintained, "the simple circumstance that her mother poured out water before the sun the sun at his rising—in reference, no doubt, to an ancient African custom" (Odell 10). Smith is one of many African American writers who also identified this scene as Wheatley's only enduring memory of her life in Africa. These writers employ this scene as a means of connecting Wheatley to her African heritage, which also connects the writers themselves to Africa. Not all of the African American poets who engage Wheatley's Middle Passage voyage do so directly, as a number of writers approach Wheatley's Middle Passage experience through her second and third transatlantic crossings, her voyages from Boston to London and back. These writers imagine that these subsequent trips across the Atlantic must have conjured images of her first trip.

In Robert Hayden's poem "A Letter From Phillis Wheatley, he uses Wheatley's relationship and correspondence with her confidant Obour Tanner to imagine a letter that Wheatley might have written to Tanner about her journey to England. Tanner, who was a servant in Rhode Island, was a real person with whom Wheatley corresponded. Just how these women knew each other is unclear, but they have left behind several letters to each other. In the poem, Hayden appropriates Wheatley's voice and evokes her Middle

Passage journey via her journey to England. The first line of the poem "Dear Obour" signals to the reader that the poem is in the form of a letter. This fact puts readers in the position of eavesdroppers, as they are privy to what should be the private communication between Wheatley and Tanner. By allowing readers to breach this intimate space, Hayden sets up the expectation that Wheatley may be more forthcoming with her thoughts and feelings than she would be in a public setting.

After addressing Tanner in the first line, Wheatley makes an explicit connection between her journey from Boston to London and her Middle Passage journey when she says,

> Our crossing was without
> event. I could not help, at times,
> reflecting on that first—my Destined—
> voyage long ago (I yet
> have some remembrance of its Horrors)
> and marveling at God's Ways. (Hayden 645)

In these lines, Wheatley admits that the trip from Boston to London reminded her of her Middle Passage voyage from Africa to America. When she says, "I could not help, at times," she suggests that she tried to avoid thinking about the journey that brought her to America, but she was unable to suppress the memories of that passage.

However, Wheatley is conflicted about how she feels about her inaugural crossing of the ocean. She describes it as her "Destined" voyage, while also claiming that she still has "some remembrance of its Horrors" (Hayden 645). When she describes the journey as "Destined" she reflects the sentiments expressed in her often-anthologized poem, "On Being Brought From Africa to America." In "On Being Brought," she contends that it was God's "mercy" that brought her to the New World. Her portrayal of the trip as "Destined" corroborates the notion that her first journey across the Atlantic Ocean was a

fateful act ordained by God. She implies that the "Horrors" of the trip were the result of "God's Ways." When Wheatley says that she is "marveling" at God's plan to bring her to America, she suggests that her enslavement was welcomed, because it was the vehicle through which she became a Christian.

In Hayden's portrayal of Wheatley, she does not have amnesia regarding her Middle Passage journey. She remembers it well but tries to suppress it and rationalize her exposure to such untold "Horrors." Hayden suggests that her feigned ignorance of her journey is as much for herself as it is for the whites around her. By believing that God predestined her enslavement, she avoids developing anger or frustration regarding her position as a slave. Thinking this way also renders rebellion pointless since she was bound to become a slave, and any freedom she procured would be the result of "God's Ways," not any action on her part. For Hayden, Wheatley's ability to survive in the complex world she occupied was predicated on her ability to suppress her instincts to both remember the "Horrors" and question her suffering and the suffering of other enslaved people.

In the sixth poem of Gary Smith's series "Some Rumors About Phillis Wheatley," he compares Wheatley's Middle Passage journey to her second trip across the Atlantic:

> Crossing the Midatlantic again, this time
> the esteemed poetess, the refined African
> who was allowed to sit alone on ship deck;" (Smith 24)

In the first line, Smith evokes Wheatley's first transatlantic journey by noting that her voyage to London is her second crossing. Smith contrasts Wheatley's position as human cargo on her first journey to her position as "the esteemed poetess" on her second (Smith 24). He also underscores that Wheatley had become "refined" over the course of her time

as an enslaved person in Boston, suggesting that Wheatley was uncultured at the time of her initial arrival in Boston.

Smith also contrasts the physical space available to Wheatley in her second journey with her complete lack of personal space in the first journey. In his poem about her first trip across the Atlantic, he describes her as "spooned in the hold of the ship" whereas he describes her as "sit[ting] alone on ship deck;" during her second trip. There are two differences between these two positions. First, Wheatley is among other recently enslaved Africans during her initial journey through the Middle Passage, but she is alone as she travels to Europe. Second, she is tightly packed in the ship's hold with no personal space during her first voyage, but she is on the deck during the second trip where she can enjoy vastly more space than she was afforded during her first trip.

When Smith writes in the sixth poem, "At one remove from Boston, the distant rumblings / of the still-unborn Republic," these lines mirror the lines from the second poem in the series which read, "Three weeks from Boston, / but fourteen years from the American Republic!" (Smith 4, 20). Smith stresses Wheatley's distance from Boston and America. Furthermore, he evokes these settings to reflect Wheatley's identification with Boston and eventually the United States of America as her home. Smith paraphrases from a letter Wheatley wrote to Selina Hastings Countess of Huntingdon when he writes "*A fine passage / of five weeks with young Master Wheatley*" (Smith 24). He uses Wheatley's description of her second journey across the Atlantic as a "fine passage" to once again draw a contrast between her dreadful voyage through the Middle Passage and the "fine passage" that she experienced on her second transatlantic crossing.

Evoking memories of the Middle Passage, Smith imagines the dissonance Wheatley may have felt regarding her position on board the ship relative to the position of other Africans who may have been aboard:

> And at night, I'm told, you overheard
> the human cargo groan in its manacles;
> the shouts of deliverance when the seas calmed,
> and buckets of water were lowered into the hold. (Smith 27)

Smith describes the horrors of the Middle Passage for those who experience it as "human cargo." He depicts Wheatley as a person haunted by her knowledge of these horrors, yet Smith holds Wheatley accountable for what he imagines was her inaction on the part of the enslaved Africans who suffered below deck. For Wheatley as Smith portrays her, the persistent memories of the Middle Passage were too disturbing to confront even in the event that her intervention could have decreased the suffering of her fellow Africans.

Smith concludes the poem by diverting attention from the hold of the ship back to the ship's deck: "But, again, on ship deck – braving the Atlantic froth – /
you wrote of home, your Mistress, and the glory ahead" (Smith 24). Smith once again draws a contrast between Wheatley and the enslaved African below the deck of the ship. They are enduring inhumane conditions while she is "braving the Atlantic froth" (Smith 24). In the final line of the poem, Smith underscores once more that "home" for Wheatley is Boston not Africa. He also emphasizes that Wheatley's allegiance is to the family who owns her and gave her their name. She does not feel enough camaraderie with her fellow Africans to feel any responsibility to aid them in their misfortune. Finally, in the last two words of the poem, Smith draws attention to the contrast between what lay ahead of Wheatley once she arrived at her European destination and what enslaved Africans in the hold of the ship faced once they arrived at their destination.

In his poem "Homage to Phillis Wheatley" published in *The Paris Review* Kevin Young empathizes with Wheatley, discerning the reasons why she would desire to cross the Atlantic a second time. Young's poem includes a headnote to the poem: "Poet & Servant to Mr. Wheatley of Boston, on her Maiden Voyage to Britain" (Young 32). Young addresses Wheatley directly regarding her voyage from Boston to England. The first stanza reads:

> There are days I can understand
> why you would want to board
> broad back of some ship
> and sail: venture, not homeward
> but toward Civilization's. (Young 32)

He is careful not to suggest that Wheatley's second voyage across the Atlantic Ocean is a homecoming for her. He instead explains that the trip's appeal stems from its potential to acquaint Wheatley with the origins of her adopted rather than her native culture. Young identifies Britain as the origin of "Civilization," but in the next line he describes the Western culture that springs from this source as "Cold" (Young 32). He employs synecdoche when he characterizes "Civilization" as "Cold." When Young names "Civilization" he really refers to the individual people who represent Western culture. Young suggests that the British people, in particular, are austere and impassive when he says that they are "Cold." By depicting Western culture as "Cold," Young suggests that Wheatley's native African culture is warm. He implies that the people of that culture are more empathetic and expressive.

Young more explicitly differentiates "Civilization" from Wheatley's native culture in the second stanza:

> Cold seat, --having from wild
> been stolen, and sent into more wild

of Columbia, our exiles
and Christians clamoring upon
the cobblestones of Bostontown—(Young 32)

In this stanza, Young characterizes Wheatley's native African culture as "wild" which he sets in direct contrast to the "Civilization" of Europe. He also calls attention to the fact that Wheatley was accosted from her native land when he says that she had "been stolen." In addition, Young describes both Wheatley's indigenous culture and American culture as "wild." He also notes the opposition between two distinct groups who are mingling in the "wild" of America—exiles who have been banned from England due to issues such as criminality and debt and the various Christian groups who are leaving England to escape religious persecution. Young indicates that both can be found in the streets of Boston. He notes that the streets of Boston consist of cobblestones to highlight the ways in which Boston mirrors the towns and cities of England that those searching for a new life in America are abandoning, yet he describes England as "Civilization's / Cold seat" and the American colonies as "wild." His characterization suggests that although the colonies try to mirror the cities of England, sometimes even by staking claim to the same names, they are, in fact, very different places.

Young makes a direct comparison between Wheatley's first transatlantic crossing and her second when he writes, "Sail cross an Atlantic (this time) mild" (Young 32). By including the parenthetical statement "(this time)," Young evokes Wheatley's Middle Passage journey and suggests that her memories of that first voyage are suppressed. He also signals the dissonance that Wheatley feels about both trips with this aside. While he indicates that her voyage to England was "mild," he insinuates that Wheatley's Middle

Passage journey was not. He elaborates on why the second trip was pleasant and even beneficial:

> the ship's polite and consumptive
> passengers proud. Your sickness
> quit soon as you disembarked in mist
> of England—free, finally, of our Republic's. (Young 32)

One way that Wheatley's first voyage differs from her second is that she is among the "polite" passengers on the second trip whereas she was cargo in the first. Rather than clinging to life in the ship's hold with other recently enslaved Africans, she is enjoying pleasantries on the ship's deck with the presumably white passengers. When Young mentions that the passengers suffer from consumption, an historical term that often refers to tuberculosis, he marks them as suffering from disease. He implicitly invites readers to both draw parallels and make distinctions between the passengers on the ship's deck in Wheatley's second voyage and the human cargo below the deck in her first. Although both suffer from disease, the transatlantic voyage is a cure for the passengers on her second trip whereas the voyage is the cause of the disease for the enslaved Africans in the hold on her first. Anecdotes about Wheatley's own struggles with poor health abound in portrayals of the poet. Young acknowledges those accounts in the third stanza, but it seems that for Young, Wheatley's "sickness" includes not only the poet's bouts with poor physical health but also her condition as a slave.

When Young says that Wheatley's "sickness" was resolved once she reached England, he could be referring to Lord Mansfield's ruling that a person could not be forcibly removed from England even if that person was enslaved upon his or her arrival

in England.[6] Many came to view this ruling as one that granted freedom to enslaved persons upon their arrival in England; therefore, when Young writes that Wheatley's "sickness" left her as soon as she set foot in Great Britain and this discharge made her "free," her illness serves as a metaphor for slavery.

Young questions Wheatley's devotion to Christianity, when he addresses Wheatley directly in the fourth stanza:

> Rough clime, its late converts who thought
> they would not die, or die simply
> in struggle, martyr to some God,—
> you know of gods there
> are many, who is really only. (Young 32)

When Young refers to "our Republic's…late converts" he reintroduces the "Christians" whom he mentions in the second stanza. In the fourth stanza, Young remarks that these Christians who came to their religion late, "thought / they would not die." He refers to a belief in an eternal life in heaven that serves as a reward for fulfilling one's Christian duty on earth. According to Young, those who thought that they would die, thought they would die as martyrs. When Young writes, "you know of gods there / are many, who is really only," one can read these lines two different ways. Young's choice to use the word "you" could be an indication that he is addressing Wheatley directly telling her something that she does not know, but it could also signal that he is acknowledging that Wheatley already knows the message that he communicates. The first example espouses polytheism, which runs counter to Wheatley's adopted Christian religion. The other indicates that the poet knows that the monotheism that the Wheatleys and others have

[6] See Vincent Carretta's discussion of the Mansfield ruling and how it relates to Wheatley in *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage*. (Athens: University of Georgia Press) 2011, p.21.

taught her is false. This ambiguity reflects the questions that many African American writers have raised regarding possible discrepancies between Wheatley's true, internal beliefs and the beliefs that she embraced publicly. Young's ambiguity forces readers to questions whether Wheatley secretly believed in the polytheism that was most likely a feature of her native belief system or whether she truly adopted the monotheistic tradition that she learned in Boston. Furthermore, Young highlights this ambiguity about Wheatley's religious beliefs to further illustrate the ambiguity that Wheatley feels about her second transatlantic voyage as it is portrayed in previous stanza.

Young reiterates the complexities of Wheatley's identity formation when he writes in the sixth stanza,

> Docked among the fog and slight sun
> of London, you know who you are not
> but that is little new. Native
> of nowhere….(Young 33)

He states that Wheatley knows who she is not, but he does not say that she knows who she is. After completing her second transatlantic crossing and arriving in London, Wheatley knows that she is not a typical slave, but she is not sure of where exactly she fits in society. Since identity is often rooted in origins, Young highlights the complications regarding Wheatley's ability to form a definitive identity when he notes that there are questions about what qualifies as Wheatley's "native" land. In Hayden's "A Letter from Phillis Wheatley," Wheatley writes to her Obour Tanner: "I scarce could tell them anything / of Africa, though much of Boston" (Hayden 645). These lines reflect, in part, the sentiment that Young captures when he says that Wheatley is "Native / of nowhere…" (Young 33). Although she was definitely born in Africa, she spent her

formative years in Boston with the Wheatley family. She knows Boston better than Africa, yet neither is definitively her home.

Young attempts to penetrate the seemingly impervious inner sanctum of Wheatley's psyche when he says,

> …your slight profile
> that long pull of lower lip, its pout
> proving you rescued by
> some sadness too large to name. (Young 33)

In these lines, Young describes Wheatley as she appears in the portrait used for the frontispiece of her book. He evokes the first line of Wheatley's "On Being Brought From Africa to America": "Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land" (Wheatley 18). Young's choice of the word "rescued" echoes Wheatley's assertion that it was "mercy" that facilitated her journey from Africa to America; however, Young explicitly brings the irony of that word choice to the fore. Young names the abstract noun "sadness" as the initiator of her removal from Africa and subsequent placement in America. The irony lies in the fact that one usually thinks of being rescued by a benevolent person or force rather than "sadness," which is not typically considered a desirable emotion. Because she was forcibly removed from her family and place of birth, Young suggests that sadness results from her being "rescued." This sadness rescues her from heathenism, but also separates her from her family and friends so sadness ensues. Young proposes his own explanation for Wheatley's silence regarding her Middle Passage voyage and the loss of her loved ones. He contends that her resulting sadness from these memories renders her speechless. She cannot bring herself to speak about these matters because they are too painful to discuss.

Young echoes another of Wheatley's poems in the ninth stanza when he refers to Wheatley as "My Most Excellence" (Young 33). His word choice emulates the title of Wheatley's poem to the nation's first president, "To His Excellency General Washington." Young invites readers to compare Washington's status as a founding father of the United States to Wheatley's status as a foremother to subsequent African American poets. He returns to the silences in Wheatley's poetry regarding her own lived experience: "your need is what's missing, unwritten / wish to cross back but not back" (Young 33). Young contends that Wheatley's own need for a definitive identity that encompasses her experiences in Africa and America and resolves the ambiguity surrounding her place in society. He notes that Wheatley's need is "unwritten," as these sentiments are not explicitly articulated in her surviving poems and letters. Young uses enjambment in these last two lines of this stanza so that "unwritten" refers to Wheatley's "need" and her "wish" (Young 33). He uses this technique to replicate the tension between her decision to omit much of her inner life from her work and her wish "to cross back but not back" (Young 33). Young highlights the ambiguity prompted by Wheatley's second transatlantic voyage in which she "crossed back" across the Atlantic, but did not go back to Africa, the origin of her initial transatlantic trip.

In the tenth stanza, Young further articulates the complexities the notion of "place" has for Wheatley:

> Into that land (for you) of the dead—
> you want to see from above
> deck the sea, to pluck from wind
> a sense no Land can
> give: drifting,.....(Young 33)

When Young speaks of "that land (for you) of the dead" he refers to Africa, Wheatley's birthplace. According to Young, Africa is a graveyard for Wheatley because even if some of the people from whom she was separated are still alive, they are "dead" to her because her connections to them have been severed. When he notes that Wheatley wants "to see from above deck the sea" he conjures memories of her first transatlantic crossing by specifying that Wheatley wants to be positioned on the ship's deck rather than down in the hold. Young also expresses Wheatley's longing for home which he describes as a "sense no Land can / give." Young suggests that Wheatley's longing cannot be satiated. This description captures the idea of nostalgia as Svetlana Boym describes it. She defines "Nostalgia" as a longing for a home that does not exist and perhaps never existed. When he says that Wheatley is "drifting" he indicates a lack of volition and direction on Wheatley's part. This aimless travelling results from Wheatley's uncertainty regarding which direction will lead her to a place that feels like home.

Young continues to express Wheatley's sense of ambivalence when he writes in the final stanza,

> looking not
>
> For Leviathan's breath, nor waves
> made of tea, nor for mermen half-
> out of water (as you)—down
> in the deep is not the narwhal enough real? (Young 33)

He names several mythical creatures in this stanza: Leviathan, mermen, and the narwhal. When Young compares Wheatley to "mermen" half out of water, he does so because just as mermen are part human and part fish, Wheatley has a dual identity, as she is both African and American. When he asks "down / in the deep is not the narwhal enough real," he compares Wheatley's quest for home to the quest that some have to encounter a

narwhal. He suggests that because the deepest recesses of the ocean are largely unexplored and its life forms unknown, belief in the possibility of the narwhal's existence is legitimate. Young draws a parallel to the actuality of the narwhal's existence and the authenticity of Wheatley's homeland as she imagines it.

Young concludes the poem with the lines: "Beneath our wind-whipt banner you smile / At Sea which owns no country" (Young 33). Wheatley's second transatlantic journey forces her to occupy this space in between Africa and America which underscores her ambiguity regarding her sense of home; however, when she is "At Sea which owns no county" she occupies an intermediate space, that does not require her to claim a single country as her home. These final two lines capture the reasons that Wheatley's second transatlantic crossing evokes feelings of both anxiety and assurance for the poet.

From Jupiter Hammon to Kevin Young, African American poets contemplate the significance of Wheatley's transatlantic crossings to the construction of the eighteenth-century poet's identity. They also evaluate the implications of these crossings for all African American and indicate these crossings, especially the Middle Passage journey, as sites of memory or *lieux de mémoire.* Furthermore, African American poets from this era identify the space between Europe, Africa, and America as a metaphor for the impasse African Americans often reach when trying to define "home," as they are neither African nor American but both. The dilemma is further complicated by the fact that often times Americanness is synonymous with whiteness. Moreover, the quandary is no easier to resolve on the other side of the Atlantic, as most black Americans can say little about their African ancestry with any specificity, because their family tree often has roots on

the North American continent that go back hundreds of years. These African American poets' attempts to tease out Wheatley's identity by analyzing her transatlantic crossings highlight African Americans' protracted struggle to find a home to call their own two hundred years after Wheatley's death.

Chapter Five: "212 Years Later, Did You Succeed?": Thomas Jefferson and Phillis Wheatley Come Full Circle in Twenty-first-century African American Poetry

Given Thomas Jefferson's influence on African American representations of Phillis Wheatley, it is only fitting to return to Thomas Jefferson in this, the last chapter of this project. In twenty-first century African American poetry, black writers are still responding to Jefferson's criticism of Wheatley. In *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. declares, "If Phillis Wheatley was the mother of African-American literature, there is a sense in which Thomas Jefferson can be thought of as its midwife" (Gates 50). Jefferson's treatment of Wheatley has inspired many counter narratives by African American critics and artists. If the amount of ink that has been spilled by African American writers responding to Jefferson's harsh criticism of Wheatley in his *Notes of the State of Virginia* is any indication of his influence on the African American literary tradition, then Gates's statement could not be more true. Whether explicitly or implicitly, many African Americans' representations of Phillis Wheatley engage Jefferson's belittling of the poet in *Notes on the State of Virgina* in 1785, the year after her death.

In her poem "From the Spirit of Phillis Wheatley to the Spirit of Thomas Jefferson (A Note 212 Years Later)," Karen Williams appropriates Wheatley's voice in imagining what a spectral version of Wheatley emboldened by both freedom and her undeniable legacy in the African American literary tradition would say to Thomas Jefferson's ghost two hundred twelve years after Jefferson initially dismisses her. Before the text of the poem Williams presents a note: "Jefferson once said Wheatley's poetry was beneath dignity of criticism because Blacks innately could not write poetry. This is

her response" (Williams 19). In the poem's first stanza, Williams addresses Jefferson directly:

> Kind sir, do listen
> to the zephyr that blows,
> and ruffles the fallible threads
> beneath your powdered wig. Do you hear it,
> it is my voice,….(19)

When Williams writes in her first line, "Kind sir, do listen," she employs irony, as Jefferson gave Wheatley no cause to describe him as "kind." Wheatley, the speaker, calls attention to Jefferson's malevolence when she chooses to begin with "kind," and she initiates an ironic tone that pervades the poem. Wheatley creates a metaphor in which she compares herself to a wind that "blows, / and ruffles the fallible threads / beneath your powdered wig" (Williams 19). Although "fallible" is an adjective that is usually used to describe a person, Jefferson's natural hair takes on this quality because his hair is thinning. Williams evokes a less frequently used definition of "fallible" meaning "That causes disappointment; mocking expectation" ("Fallible"). Jefferson's thinning hair disappoints him, and it falls below his expectations. Williams utilizes this image of a balding Jefferson to emphasize his susceptibility to aging and every other process that humans experience over the course of a lifetime. Jefferson is typically lionized as a founding father of the United States of America. In Williams's poem, Wheatley depicts Jefferson as corporeal rather than godly making his opinion of her poetry carry less weight. When Wheatley says that she is the wind who "ruffles" Jefferson's thinning hair, she suggests that does so to bother and possibly even anger him.

When Wheatley names her voice as the entity ruffling Jefferson's hair, she intimates that the enduring influence of her work irritates the president. For Jefferson,

the fact of Wheatley's lasting relevance to American literature, generally, and to African American literature, more specifically, exasperates him because he thought that his infamous verdict regarding her talent and importance would be the final word on the matter. Much to his chagrin, Wheatley remains meaningful to many writers more than two centuries after Jefferson's dismissal of her work. In the second half of the first stanza, Wheatley describes her voice as,

> a lodestone ardent and sweet,
> sage and resolute, the mysterious interface
> of dust and gold, of the immemorial,
> the now and hopes of our world. (Williams 19)

When Wheatley describes herself as a "lodestone" she explains why she attracts both praise and vitriol. As a "lodestone" many writers are drawn to Wheatley which explains why she is the subject of so much literature and criticism. Wheatley then submits two pairs of adjectives that describe her voice. When she describes her voice as both "ardent" and "sweet," she compares her voice to both fire and sugar; Wheatley's voice has the power to both ignite and enchant. This description accounts for why Wheatley often inspires admiration and admonishment. Wheatley also presents another pair of adjectives to describe her voice when she characterizes it as "sage and resolute." The poet not only depicts her voice as wise but also unwavering. This depiction accounts for why Wheatley's voice holds so much meaning for so many and why it has persisted over such a long period of time despite Jefferson's dismissal.

Wheatley draws a contrast between two possible ways to describe her voice and assess it's value when she says that her voice is the "mysterious interface / of dust and gold" (Williams 19). Like in her first pair, Wheatley uses opposing ideas to characterize her voice. Wheatley describes her voice as the junction where both "dust," a worthless

substance comprised of waste, and "gold," a very valuable element comprised of precious metal, meet (Williams 19). Wheatley's voice is like dust because some consider it worthless since it is the voice of a young, enslaved teenager, but it takes on some of the qualities of gold because others consider it extremely valuable because it is the only example of the perspective of a young black woman at the time of the American Revolution. In the final two lines of the stanza, Wheatley explains that her voice represents antiquity, the present, and the future all at once. Her voice originated from a time that is long gone, but remains relevant to those living in the present, and will continue to resonate with the writers and thinkers of the future.

In the second stanza, Williams employs personification and metaphor to signal Wheatley's steadfast belief that slavery was an unnatural condition and human beings' natural inclinations inevitably bend toward freedom. Wheatley instructs Jefferson to look:

> to the hills and mountains,
> their shadows of eyes looking, dark and keen
> waiting not for sleep, but for freedom's leaves
> to sprout, sheath and encourage. (Williams 19)

Wheatley personifies the hills and mountains when giving them "dark and keen" eyes that are "looking" (Williams 19). When Wheatley says that the hills and mountains' eyes are waiting for "freedom's leaves to sprout, sheath and encourage," she compares freedom to the leaves of a tree. The hills and mountains await the return of the leaves that the cold temperatures and winds battered until they fell from the trees. Wheatley employs three verbs to articulate what actions "freedom's leaves" will take. When Wheatley says that the leaves will "sprout" she means that the leaves will emerge from the branches anew. Her claim that the leaves will "sheath" reflects their ability to shelter those who stand under the tree. Finally, the reappearance of the leaves after winter

"encourage[s]" those who witness it to believe that spring will return. In Williams's metaphor, the emergence of spring is compared to the dawn of freedom. Wheatley tells Jefferson to look to this arrival of freedom because he needs to understand that freedom cannot be suppressed and that emancipation is inevitable. His racist characterizations of African Americans, generally, and Wheatley, in particular, cannot thwart their progress just as spring will always recommence no matter how harsh the winter.

When Wheatley concludes the second stanza writing, "Eyes shining with internal and external blood, / and that of the weeper crusting the driver's lash," she evokes the violence of slavery. This violence stands in stark contrast from the images of new life conjured by her descriptions of the leaves. In the third stanza, Wheatley elaborates on the images of blood that conclude the second stanza:

> This blood of coin, full of shadow and light,
> the stirs and whispers of the Muse, lives,
> breathes and hisses, procreates and hopes,
> breathes and hisses again, angry yet fueled
> you and peers have tried to quench its hunger and fire,
> 212 years later, did you succeed? (Williams 19)

When Wheatley describes the blood "crusting the driver's lash" as "This blood of coin" she indicates that the blood of the enslaved had a monetary value. When they shed blood, there was always a risk that they would become severely injured or even die. Because they were considered chattel, when they bled they were essentially bleeding money, as injuries or death would make them less valuable to their owners. She uses synecdoche as the blood, which is a part of a human body, stands in for the whole person. Wheatley brings up this reality of slavery to highlight they ways in which enslaved people were valuable as property, but not valued as human beings. She underscores this hypocrisy as she addresses Jefferson who held the highest ideals of freedom as expressed in the

Declaration of Independence, while also espousing the lowest opinions of Wheatley and other people of African descent in *Notes on the State of Virginia*.

In the third stanza, Wheatley emphasizes the humanity of enslaved people. Wheatley notes that within the blood of the enslaved one finds, "shadow and light," representing both doubts that emancipation will be realized and faith that it will. When Wheatley insists that "the stirs and whispers of the Muse" live in the blood of the enslaved, she asserts that poetry comes as naturally to people of African descent as it does to those of European lineage. She also contends that an enslaved person, "lives, / breathes and hisses, procreates and hopes, / breathes and hisses again, angry yet fueled" (Williams 19). In these lines, Wheatley underscores that black people experience the same life cycle as everyone else, and she notes they use their anger about their disadvantaged position as motivation to keep striving for equality. In the final two lines of the third stanza, Wheatley addresses Jefferson directly saying, "you and peers have tried to quench its hunger and fire. / 212 years late, did you succeed?" (Williams 19). Wheatley accuses Jefferson and many of his ilk of trying to suppress the natural aspirations and passions of African Americans. In the final line of the stanza, Wheatley poses a rhetorical question. She asks the question to underscore the fact that her voice still reverberates throughout African American literature. The poem itself, written 212 years after Jefferson tried to silence Wheatley, is a rejection of his assessment of Wheatley and the capabilities of African Americans to produce poetry.

In the fourth stanza, Wheatley's voice continues to capture the humanity of the enslaved when she writes,

> "The blood of coin too awaits entry into golden gates,
> presses it's face to the iron,

into the stories it lives and weaves and remembers. (Williams 19)

When Wheatley mentions the "golden gates" she evokes imagery of heaven. She remarks that the enslaved person aspires to heaven just as fervently as others do. When she says that he or she "presses it's face to the iron" she stresses the slave's desperation to escape his earthly condition. She also emphasizes the ways in which slave owners such as Jefferson may objectify an enslaved person by referring to him or her as "it," a pronoun that indicates an object, rather than a pronoun that indicates a person. When Wheatley also notes that the enslaved person, "awaits entry…into the stories it lives and weaves and remembers," she brings to the fore the ways in which creative output, identified here as "stories," are inherent to African Americans' way of life. She also points out that these stories operate as a coping mechanism for the enslaved person, just as heaven operates as a source of solace for the Christian believer.

In the fourth stanza Wheatley provides a litany of the people whom she and her work represent:

> So kind sir, do listen to me the Afric,
> the silenced, the woman,
> America in tawny shades,
> The screams and songs in the field. (Williams 20)

Once again Wheatley ironically refers to Jefferson as "kind." She identifies herself as an "Afric" or African. Wheatley also states that she is a voice for the voiceless. She brings gender to the fore when she says that she represents "the woman." The poet also claims that she represents all people of color in America. Finally, she suggest that her poetry is the equivalent of the "screams and songs" of the field hands. When she asks Jefferson to listen to her, she does so not only for herself but also on the behalf of all of the marginalized groups whom she embodies.

In the fifth stanza, Wheatley characterizes herself utilizing a number of contradictory word pairings:

> Yes, kind sir, do listen
> for I am the peasant and the peacock,
> the anchor and the moon
> the force behind the eraser,
> but better yet I am the quill,
> the dollar the buys and frees. (Williams 20)

When Wheatley identifies herself as both "peasant" and "peacock" she notes that her enslaved status marks her as a lowly person of little means, but that the celebrity that she garners because of her extraordinary intellect also serves as a source of pride and confidence. By labeling herself as both the "anchor and the moon" she asserts that she is both what secures the ship to the depths of the ocean floor and the heavenly body that represents dreams and aspirations while also pulling the tide. When she compares herself to both the "force behind the eraser" and the "quill," she suggests that she has the power to erase or nullify texts that mark African Americans as racially inferior such as Jefferson's *Notes*, but as the quill she crafts her own narrative that rewrites the story of African Americans' capabilities. Wheatley concludes the stanza declaring that she is the currency by which a purchase is made; she is also the purchase itself, and she represents the freedom that is attained through the purchase. Through her own intellect, Wheatley earned her freedom. Although she did not literally purchase herself, she did so metaphorically and she was freed by way of this purchase.

Wheatley continues to describe herself by pairing words with opposite meanings, and she reiterates the inevitability of African Americans asserting their right to live and create freely:

> And I am the slave and the slave-owner

the creator and the creation
the knob on doors to me you've closed,
slowly turning,
slowing turning. (Williams 20)

Wheatley is the "creator" because she is the point of origin for African American literature, and she is the "creation" because she is the product of the education that she received from the Wheatleys; therefore, she is their creation. Wheatley accuses Jefferson of excluding her when she says that he has closed doors to her, but she also contends that these doors will not remain closed much longer. On the other side of this metaphoric door lies all that Jefferson tried to deny Wheatley. He denied Wheatley her humanity, her rightful place in the annals of American literature and history, and her genius. She says the "knob on doors" that Jefferson has prevented her from entering is "slowly turning, / slowing turning."

In the final stanza, Wheatley further articulates her identity as the genesis of African American literature when she says,

I am the sinner and the saved
Footing, a Blackwomanpoet
the walking, courageous bard,
another image of Christ. (Williams 20)

When Wheatley describes herself as the "sinner" she marks herself as one guilty of sin, yet she also says that she is the "saved" because she is a Christian who marks herself among the believers who will gain eternal life and thus be saved from death. In the second line of the stanza, when Wheatley uses the term "Footing" she evokes a definition of the word that means "an example or precedent set by someone or something; a vesting,

trace, or indication." ("Footing"). [7] This definition captures Wheatley's status as a forerunner in the African American literary tradition. When she calls herself "Blackwomanpoet" she notes that her race and gender cannot be separated from her identity as a poet. In the final two lines of the stanza and the poem, Wheatley compares herself to Christ because like him, she was sacrificed for the benefit of those who would come after her. She suffered in life and death so that future African American writers would have a precedent. They could benefit from her success while also learning from her failures. She also compares Jesus's walking on water to her own "courageous" decision to demonstrate her faith in herself and work by pursuing a writing career.

In her poem "wheatley and hemmings (sic) have drinks in the halls of the ancestors," Evie Shockley imagines what a relationship between Wheatley and Sally Hemings, the black woman with whom Jefferson carried on his most infamous relationship, might look like in the afterlife. In many ways, history has defined these two black women in terms of their relationships with Jefferson, so it is fitting that Shockley examines both in the same poem. The poem is written in stanzas of three lines each with one final line standing on its own. The first stanza opens with the voices of Wheatley and Hemings:

> *cheers!* they clink and each one
> knocks one back, rockless scotch
> whiskey. phillis is unfazaed, despite. (Shockley 25)

These first three lines find Wheatley and Hemings in a barroom. This setting is somewhat ironic given popular images of Wheatley and Hemings as women of

[7] The choice of the word "footing" also reminds careful readers of Wheatley's October 1773 letter to Wooster in which she requests his help in gaining subscriptions for her book because she is "now upon [her] own footing" (Carretta 141).

refinement. In their lives, neither would have been found in a barroom for several reasons. First, two women in the eighteenth century would not be permitted into such a location, especially alone without the supervision of male companions. Second, especially Wheatley has been portrayed as extremely pious, making the image of them drinking whiskey in a barroom all the more unexpected. By placing Wheatley in a barroom in death, Shockley suggests that the pious attitude she adopted while alive was assumed to please others and was not a reflection of her own convictions. These two women, who are literally free now that they have died, are exercising their own judgments rather than fulfilling others' expectations of them.

In the second stanza, Shockley once again suggests that Wheatley's public demeanor while alive did not reflect her own thoughts and opinions when she writes,

> her slight frame: holds her liquor
> like she holds her tongue. sally's
> less circumspect, hums along. (Shockley 25)

When Shockley writes that Wheatley "holds her liquor / like she holds her tongue," she implies that Wheatley spent much of her time on earth censoring her speech. When Shockley describes Hemings as "less circumspect, she subtly comments on the dubious nature of Hemings's identity given her role as both a woman of culture and a mistress to her master.

In the third stanza, Shockley contends that Hemings and Wheatley predate many other important figures in American history, yet their significance is often downplayed and exclusively discussed in connection with their masters:

> those two've been
> doing drinks since mark twain
> was in diapers. (Shockley 25)

Shockley underscores the fact that Wheatley and Hemings made their marks on American history long before Mark Twain, who is probably better known than either Wheatley or Hemings, was even born. By comparing Hemings and Wheatley to Twain, she highlights the mark these two women made on American history and culture while also noting the lack of acknowledgement they have received for their role in shaping American history and culture. In the fourth stanza, Shockley subtly reminds readers of Jefferson and his relationship with Hemings when she writes,

> overlooking sally's descendents (sic),
> whose affairs keep them beaming
> and cackling…. (Shockley 25)

Shockley tacitly verifies Hemings's relationship with Jefferson when she refers to Hemings's descendants. Without mentioning his name, Shockley evokes Jefferson from the very beginning of the poem by naming Hemings and Wheatley, as Jefferson is whom they have in common.

Furthermore, Shockley claims that both Wheatley and Hemings have interests beyond their masters' prescriptions, citing literature as one of these interests when she mentions Twain again in her description of their behavior

> phillis scratches
>
> lines on a napkin. they both like
> young twain's book about a boy
> and a man on a raft, encourage
>
> sally's kin to read it. *everything*
> *moves along, long as they stay on*
> *the river*, sally says, as though
>
> the living hear her….(Shockley 25)

Even in death, Wheatley is still writing poetry, and both she and Hemings are reading Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* in the afterlife, recommending it to Hemings's descendants.

Shockley introduces the perceptions that others in the halls of the ancestors have of Wheatley and Hemings when she writes,

> newcomers ask
> about the stately older woman
> with a parisian lilt coasting on her
>
> uneducated English tête-à tête
> with that thin young chick who
> looks and snaps like a whip. (Shockley 25)

Shockley refers to Hemings as the "stately older woman" and Wheatley as "that thin young chick" drawing contrasts between the two. In the halls of the ancestors, Hemings and Wheatley appear as they did at the time of their deaths. Hemings had the opportunity to grow old in relative comfort compared to Wheatley's premature, agonizing death. Shockley not only calls attention to the difference in age between the two but also the difference in their general physical appearance. Although Wheatley is younger, Hemings is describes as the more attractive or "stately" woman whereas Shockley suggests that Wheatley has a severity to her appearance that "looks…like a whip." Shockley notes that Hemings has a French accent suggesting that she knew the language, yet she notes that Hemings is the uneducated one of the two, and it is Wheatley who "snaps like a whip." This description is reminiscent of the phrase "smart as a whip" and suggests Wheatley's educational background. Despite the differences between the two women, Shockley intimates that the two are very close when she chooses the phrase "tête-à tête," which literally means "head to head," to describe the women in relation to each other, connoting a sense of intimacy between them.

In stanzas nine through eleven, Shockley introduces the poem's central conflict, which is not between the two primary subjects of the poem, but between these women and the other ancestors in the hall:

> now and then
> someone will overhear their names,
>
> know just enough to be curious
> and not enough to leave the two
> alone. approaching the table,
>
> the someone gushes: i have to know—
> was it love? for you and thomas? Or
> you? susanna? (Shockley 26)

In these stanzas, Shockley calls attention to a number of factors. First, she acknowledges the celebrity of Hemings and Wheatley when she says, "someone will overhear their names." Because people recognize their names when they overhear them, this suggests that these women's *names* are famous. However, the fact that it is their names that people recognize, and not their faces suggests that many people do not know what they look like, but they have heard their names many times. The other ancestors' inability to recognize Hemings and Wheatley by sight suggests the anonymity of enslavement, while the ancestors' recognition of their names signals the lack of privacy that enslaved people must endure. Without knowing their names, Hemings and Wheatley appear to be unimportant. Their race no doubt contributes to this sense that they could not be anyone of importance.

Furthermore, even after hearing their names, the other ancestors question the women regarding their relationships to their white masters. They do not ask the women questions about their identities as individuals separate from their masters. Shockley's contention that the other ancestors know enough about the women to be curious about

them, but not enough to know that they should not approach them, further supports the notion that the other ancestors do not know anything about the women personally, but are simply curious about their infamous relationships with their masters. The other ancestors assume that intimate knowledge of Hemings and Wheatley's relationships with their masters should be available for public consumption, and they engage them with an inappropriate degree of familiarity.

Again, because Hemings and Wheatley were enslaved, the other ancestors do not seem to recognize that they have a right to privacy. The other ancestors believe that they have the same rights to these women's stories as their masters had to their bodies. Although Hemings and Wheatley's enslaved status makes them both anonymous and public figures at the same time, when Shockley identifies these curious ancestors as simply "someone" she illustrates the ways in which freedom affords this "someone" an anonymity that is conducive to maintaining privacy. Despite his or her inappropriate behavior, this other ancestor is spared the embarrassment of others associating him or her with this unflattering behavior whereas Hemings and Wheatley do not have the privilege of being able to rest in peace in the halls of the ancestors. Their life stories are the source of constant questioning and judgment.

Shockley describes Hemings and Wheatley's reaction to this incessant interrogation, noting their differences while also highlighting their commonalities:

> dark and light eyes
>
> look into each other, then turn
> on the interrogator, untamed.
> *what kind of question is that?* one
>
> of them asks. *tell me. what kind?* (Shockley 26)

When Shockley says "dark and light eyes/look into each other," she once again emphasizes the differences between the two women. The African born Wheatley has dark eyes, but the interracial Hemings has eyes that are light in color. Just after Shockley notes the difference in appearance between Hemings and Wheatley she reiterates their commonality when she suggests that they are one in the same by not specifying which of them responds to the stranger's question. This ambiguity suggests that they alternate giving their pithy response, but it also suggests the possibility that even if the same person responds to the interrogator each time, the response would be the same no matter who spoke.

The ambiguity also indicates that Hemings's relationship with Jefferson and Wheatley's relationship with her mistress Susanna resembled each other. Although it has only been proven through DNA testing in the last twenty years or so, many have presumed the sexual and possibly romantic relationship between Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson since the eighteenth century.[8] However, the notion of a romantic relationship between Phillis Wheatley and Susannah Wheatley is a rather novel claim. This allegation is novel not only because it has never been previously claimed but also because while sexual relationships between white slave masters and enslaved black women were open secrets on many plantations, same-sex relationships between white mistresses and enslaved black women are not often the subject of antebellum lore. By essentially equating these relationships, Shockley disrupts the typical narrative regarding

[8] In *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley: America's First Black Poet and Her Encounters with the Founding Fathers,* Gates asserts that the relationship was common knowledge especially among African Americans when he says, "But Jefferson's relationship to Hemings and her children has been the stuff of the African American oral tradition for two hundred years;" (Gates 55).

Wheatley and her mistress. Shockley revises the popular perspectives of both women when she describes them as "untamed" (Shockley 26). Because of their close, unconventional relationships with their masters, some may assume that this intimacy implied a lack of agency on their part, but Shockley implies that their relationships were not simply a byproduct of their enslavement. Shockley intimates that these women had at least some degree of choice regarding their participation in these relationships.

Wheatley and Hemings have been the subject of much fiction and poetry over a span of hundreds of years, and their popularity as fodder for these romances is due, in part, to their silence regarding much of their internal life, including their relationships with their owners. By refusing to answer the strangers' question, the two maintain their silence, preserve their power, and deny these strangers access to their inner lives. Without this access, the strangers' sense of entitlement to the intimacies of the enslaved is torn asunder.

Shockley concludes the poem with a note of humor and even suggests and air of superiority from Hemings and Wheatley when she writes,

> after someone backs away, sally
> always says, *you ain't got to be*
>
> *smart to be among the ancestors. No,*
> phillis shoots back, *just dead*. in
> silence they think on rivers and
>
> rafts, then order another round. (Shockley 26)

When Shockley writes, "sally / always says" she implies that Hemings and Wheatley are confronted with this scenario often. Shockley reiterates Hemings's lack of education in comparison to Wheatley when Hemings says in grammatically incorrect English, "you ain't got to be / smart to be among the ancestors" (Shockley 26). Despite Hemings's

language, her intelligence is never in question, as she is quick to point to the stupidity of those who approach her with inappropriate questions. When Wheatley answers tersely, "no / … just dead," her witty comeback confirms that her intelligence is superior to the strangers' as well. In the final two lines of the poem, Hemings and Wheatley return to image of the raft from *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Twain's novel, generally, and the raft, in particular, are significant to Hemings and Wheatley. Generally, they are attracted to the novel because the main character, Huckleberry Finn, tells his own story. Hemings and Wheatley long to control their own narratives. Hemings and Wheatley did not have the opportunity to tell their own stories from the beginning, so they have had no control over the ways in which they were portrayed. They maintain a bit of control when they refuse to answer the strangers' questions. Their focus on the raft signifies their desire for freedom, autonomy, and the ability to control their own destinies.

In her poem "Mastering" Honorée Fanonne Jeffers plays on Elizabeth Bishop's villanelle "One Art" to craft a response to Thomas Jefferson's aforementioned excerpt from *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Jefferson's words, "Religion indeed has produced a Phyllis Whateley (sic); but it could not produce a poet," appear as an epigraph to the poem (qtd. in Jeffers 81). Jeffers also explicitly notes that the poem is inspired, in part, by Elizabeth Bishop's villanelle "One Art." The first line of Bishop's poem is "The art of losing isn't hard to master;" (Bishop). Jeffers uses the words "lose," "art," and "master" in her first line as well when she writes, "The master's art was plenty hard to lose" (Jeffers 81). Jeffers changes Bishop's use of "master" as a verb to the noun form of the word. In Jeffers's poem, "master" is not something that one does; it is one's identity. Phillis Wheatley is the speaker in this poem. When she refers to the "master" in the first

line, she does not mean only her master specifically, but white men in general. Furthermore, when Wheatley says, "The master's art was plenty hard to lose," she means that the influence of white men on her art, poetry, was difficult to "lose" or deviate from. The last two lines of the first tercet read: "I left that ship a burly-headed *wench*, / lonely child of the Good Book's refusal" (Jeffers 81). Wheatley refers to the condition that she was in when she left the slave ship. When Wheatley describes herself as a "burly-headed *wench*" she is not depicting her perception of herself. She is presenting a description of herself that reflects her captors' perceptions. Jeffers use of italics differentiates Wheatley's voice from the voices of others.

In the second tercet, Wheatley suggests that, contrary to popular belief, she suffered during her enslavement when she says,

> and catchers and plunder, a girl misused
> for someone's fat coffers. A golden stench.
> Back then, the art I could not stand to lose. (Jeffers 81)

Wheatley describes herself as "plunder" reflecting her objectification by the "catchers." She also compares herself to "someone's fat coffers" which further articulates her status as an object rather than a person. Although many portray Wheatley as a privileged despite being enslaved, Wheatley, as Jeffers portrays her, considers herself "a girl misused." This attitude renders Wheatley's "On Being Brought From Africa to America" an inaccurate, misrepresentation of Wheatley's experience. In the final line of this tercet, Wheatley explains her motivation for writing "On Being Brought From Africa to America" and other poems that seemingly endorse slavery with the revised refrain: "Back then, the art I could not stand to lose" (Jeffers 81). Wheatley could not afford to lose the privilege of practicing her art, as her survival was tied to her opportunity to write instead

of performing difficult, manual labor. This dependence dictated the content of her poetry because she needed to write poetry that would meet with her master's approval.

In the poem's third tercet, Wheatley argues that she earned her right to write and describes the means by which she earned that prerogative when she says,

> Then letters, books, my freedom's near perfume
> while eighteen men sat on the judge's bench.
> And so? I won my word but some refuse. (Jeffers 81)

Wheatley compares freedom to "near perfume" that she believed she would reach by demonstrating mastery of Western languages and literature. She notes that her intellectual acumen was assessed "while eighteen men sat of the judge's bench." Despite the fact that " [she] won [her] word" or was proven to be the author of the poems published under her name, many still doubted her; the words of one of her biggest doubters, Thomas Jefferson, appear in the poem's epigraph. Wheatley implicitly evokes Jefferson's critique when she refers to those who "refuse." Jeffers employs enjambment at the end of the third tercet, and she also repeats a revised version of her second refrain.

Wheatley's final thought from the third tercet continues into the fourth tercet where she confronts her doubters writing,

> And so? I won my word but some refuse
>
> My humanity — and, oh yes, my Muse.
> If this poesy gives them a painful clench,
> still what else? *Take care, Phillis, or you'll lose.* (Jeffers 81)

In the first line of the fourth tercet, Wheatley notes that despite her impressive intellectual feats, some still not only deny her artistic capabilities but also her humanity. For those who deny Wheatley's humanity and acumen despite evidence to the contrary, no attestation regardless of its author's esteem could change their minds. When Wheatley

asks, “If this poesy gives them a painful clench, / still what else?” she notes that these doubters express their displeasure with a “painful clench” when they are confronted with her poetry because it forces them to confront the reality of her genius. Wheatley also questions “still what else” will be enough for these detractors to acknowledge the fallacy of their erroneous beliefs about the capabilities of Wheatley, in particular, and people of African descent generally. To even consider the possibility of the illegitimacy of their beliefs challenges them to reevaluate not only their theories about people of African descent but also their opinions of themselves. If Wheatley is both human and capable of producing literature, then whites can no longer cling to the notion that they are inherently superior forcing them to reevaluate a major underpinning of their identities and the identity of the race as a whole.

The last words of the fourth tercet are not Wheatley’s voice, but the advice of someone else: “*Take care, Phillis, or you’ll lose*” (Jeffers 81). When this unidentified voice instructs Wheatley to “take care,” he or she discourages Wheatley from being too bold in her writing. This person informs Wheatley that if she speaks against slavery or refuses to espouse Christian faith, she will “lose” her privileged status. By all accounts, Wheatley was sickly from the day that she arrived in Boston in 1761 until her premature death in that same city in 1784. As her tragic death confirms, Wheatley’s life was dependent upon her ability to earn a living as a writer because her health did not allow her to tolerate physical labor. According to Margaretta Matilda Odell, author of an 1834 memoir on Wheatley, when Wheatley was unable to procure enough subscriptions for her second, presumably lost, book of poetry, she was forced to take up domestic work for which she was not well suited. When these facts are taken into account, Wheatley’s

stood to lose more than privilege if she failed to "take care"; she could potentially lose her life.

In the fifth tercet, Wheatley expresses confidence in her abilities and faith that her intellect will make questions about her aptitude and the aptitude of people of African descent dissipate:

> Surely, I'd like to think I'm no one's fool,
> that soon my words will make good passage sense—
> a water's tale the reader can't refuse. (Jeffers 81)

When Wheatley says that she would "like to think [she's] no one's fool" she intimates that she is not the sycophant that many believe her to be. She implies that it is she who utilizes her gifts to gain an advantage over her masters and not the other way around. However, she also implies that she has doubts about the truth of her assertion when she says "Surely, I'd like to think" rather than simply stating "I'm no one's fool" (Jeffers 81). Wheatley is assured that the intention behind her words will be understood over the course of time. When she says that her "words will make good passage sense —," she evokes the trauma of the Middle Passage and indicates its influence on her work. Wheatley hopes that eventually readers will appreciate that her work is understandable when it is put in the context. She anticipates that in the future reasonable critics will recognize that her seeming praise of slavery is really an appreciation for surviving the Middle Passage and for escaping a more violent version of slavery. The final line in the fifth tercet Wheatley confirms that her use of "passage" refers to the Middle Passage when she compares her words to "a water's tale" (Jeffers 81). Wheatley argues that her words are compelling when she says that her story is one "the reader can't refuse." She is

confident that she will be able to prove her humanity and intellectual capacity and that of other people of African descent.

Wheatley desperately seeks to reverse the perceptions that African American writers hold about her and requests their empathy when she concludes,

> Till then, how quick my dear brethren's contempt,
> how they forget this woman's dear expense.
> For me the master's art too hard to lose —
> but please know (It writes!) I try to refuse. (Jeffers 81)

When Wheatley refers to her "brethren's contempt" she counts her fellow African American writers among her harshest critics. Wheatley identifies the writers who follow her as "brethren" rather than children suggesting that she views them as equals. Because these African American writers who came after Wheatley are equals, they should have the capacity to understand her position. Identifying these writers as children would make their contempt for her seem more understandable due to their lack of comparable life experiences. However, by calling them, "brethren" she suggests that they should be able to comprehend the nuances of her position. Wheatley attributes the lack of compassion from these African American writers to a failure of memory when she says, "how they forget this woman's dear expense" (Jeffers 81). Wheatley highlights the sacrifices that she made for the sake of these writers who hold her in contempt. She compromised her African identity so that the African American literary tradition could be established.

In the final lines of the villanelle, Jeffers repeats the two refrains, emphasizing Wheatley's struggle to maintain what Naomi Long Madgett calls Wheatley's "dual song." In the poems conclusion, Wheatley underscores that her struggle was particularly difficult since she was a forerunner with no role models to help her negotiate this "double consciousness." When she says, "For me the master's art too hard to lose," she notes that

the stakes were too high for her to lose her master's art or go against the grain in her writing. Jeffers evokes the final two lines of Bishop's "One Art" in the last two lines of "Mastering." Bishop's concluding lines read, "the art of losing's not too hard to master / though it may look like (Write it!) like disaster" (Bishop). Jeffers sets up a contrast between Bishop's position as a white American, twentieth-century writer of significant financial means and Wheatley's position as an African-born, eighteenth-century writer who was enslaved.[9] For Bishop the "art of losing's not too hard to master," but for Wheatley "the master's art [is] too hard to lose." Wheatley has such little privilege she could not afford to lose her master's art or his favor. In Bishop's final line, the subject of the parenthetical phrase " (*Write* it!)," is the understood "you." Wheatley, is the subject of Jeffers's parenthetical phrase "(It writes!). In this short sentence, Wheatley is being objectified when an unnamed speaker refers to her as "it." This unnamed source expresses shock at the notion that an enslaved person of African descent, which is to them an "it" has the ability to write. In Bishop's poem "you" as a subject are a person in control, whereas in Jeffers's version of the parenthetical statement, Wheatley, the subject of the sentence, has very little to no control over her writing. Wheatley's last plea to her readers and African American writers in particular is to know that she makes an effort to supplant her master's art for her own; she has too much to lose by doing so.

[9] According to a biographical profile of Bishop on www.poetryfoundation.org, Bishop was "independently wealthy and thus enjoyed a life of some privilege."

Conclusion: "Follow Imagination Like a Lover…Into the Secret Rooms": African American Writers Discover and Recover Wheatley

Imagination! who can sing thy force?
Or who describe the swiftness of thy course?
-Phillis Wheatley "On Imagination"

she'd say to you: Please
follow Imagination like a lover
into the eardrum & inner

sanctum, into the secret rooms
behind seven chambers of naked
doubt….
-Yusef Komunyakaa "Lament and Praise Song" from "Séance"

The African American literary tradition has had a very active imagination when it comes to remembering Phillis Wheatley. One may even say that this preoccupation with Wheatley borders on fixation. Moreover, longing is central to African American writers' engagement with Wheatley. Although their fascination with Wheatley is a point of connection, and memories of her are drawn from a pool of recollections that are collective, African American writers' longing in relation to Wheatley is both constant and inconsistent, manifold rather than monotonous. There are as many longings for Wheatley as there are African American authors writing about her. Arguably, this diversity of expression is contingent upon each author's historical moment as well as his or her biases, with gender identity casting the heaviest influence on African American writers' portrayals of Wheatley.

During the turn of the twentieth century, African American writers invoked Wheatley as the black prototype for aptitude and piety. Their portrayals of the eighteenth-century poet were very much enmeshed with the politics of respectability. A closer look at this concept reveals the ways in which the politics of respectability were

often based on ideals that were complicit in perpetuating beliefs in black inferiority. The underlying argument upon which the politics of respectability is based suggests that African Americans could gain civil rights by proving to racist whites that they deserved equal rights due to their intelligence and their adoption of Christian, middle-class values. Writers publishing in African American periodicals at the time, such as Pauline Hopkins, were staunch advocates of African Americans receiving full civil rights, and they were reluctant to passively await the transformation of racists into reasonable and righteous people. They promoted the politics of respectability through their depictions of Wheatley in an attempt to empower their readers to aspire to Wheatley's example as an intellectual and virtuous African American who was afforded privileges and eventually freedom through her adoption of Western culture and Christianity. These contributors to African American periodicals at the turn of the twentieth century longed for the opportunity to exercise all of the rights to which they were entitled as American citizens. Their aspiration to emulate Wheatley was also a form of longing. Because these writers knew that their utilization of Wheatley as a model of respectability was at least, in part, based on internalized racism, they remained ambivalent about their approach. Finally, although it takes very different forms, ambivalence in relation to Wheatley is a common thread throughout the African American literary tradition.

Ambivalence characterized the ways in which African American writers represented Wheatley during the era of the New Negro due to a changing racial climate and shifting definitions of race consciousness. Although black Americans writing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century endorsed race pride, what constituted race pride changed greatly during the time between the turn of the twentieth century and the

height of the Harlem Renaissance. In the earlier period, having pride in one's race was an impetus to behave according to white, middle-class norms, so as not to shame one's people due to unsavory comportment. During the time of the New Negro, exhibiting race pride was about relieving African Americans of the burden of proving their equality in an effort to combat the internalized racism that plagued those adhering to the politics of respectability of a previous era. Inherent in this new pride was a belief that black Americans were not a monolith, and artists had not only the right but also a duty to express themselves in a manner befitting their creative impulses rather than refuting their supposed inferiority.

On the other hand, the New Negro's race consciousness and race pride also encouraged black writers to write about black people, places, and experiences as they believed only black writers could. Some New Negro writers contended that depicting the lives, history and culture of African Americans was a task uniquely assigned to black writers. Some also sought to create links between their contemporary literature and an African tradition distinct from the white American or European literary traditions. These New Negro values greatly affected the ways in which black American writers treated Phillis Wheatley. Because she did not explicitly treat racial themes in her poetry, Wheatley was rejected as a legitimate founder of African American literature. In addition, she was also rejected because she had for so long been the favorite of those endorsing the politics of respectability, and New Negroes aimed to supersede this concept from a bygone era with their own brand of politics. These factors led many of the black male writers of the New Negro period to put forth an ambivalent assessment of Wheatley's work and its significance. They often recognized Wheatley as historically

important but rendered her critically negligible. Ambivalence also came into play with respect to the tenets of their philosophy of race consciousness, as they advocated that African American writers should promote an essential black culture while they also argued that African American writers were individuals who should not be made to bear the burden of representing their race. Although they rejected the notion that black American writers need to use their work to uplift the race, they heavily criticized Wheatley for her lack of race consciousness and race pride, once again displaying ambivalence in relationship to Wheatley. However, in response to the overwhelmingly negative responses to Wheatley put forth by African American male writers, the women writing during this period offered unwavering support for Wheatley and still held her up as a revered foremother.

Black women writers' appreciation for Wheatley extended far beyond the Harlem Renaissance, culminating with the Phillis Wheatley Poetry Festival held in Jackson, Mississippi in 1973. Margaret Walker organized this gathering of black women writers to celebrate the life and work of Phillis Wheatley. Because the eighteenth-century poet had been silenced after years of either neglect or defamation, these African American women writers revived Wheatley's memory and reinstated Wheatley to her rightful place as the founder of the African American literary tradition. These women also established a literary lineage that began with Wheatley and continued to their contemporary moment. They also used Wheatley's African origins as a means of connecting their literary lineage to the African continent thereby tracing the origins of the African American literary tradition back to Africa. Although there was some ambivalence about Wheatley's choice to adopt Western culture and Christianity, the festival participants insisted Wheatley

functioned as the missing link between African American literature and African culture and rejected the notion that she dispossessed black American writers of their ancestral inheritance for which they longed so.

In another attempt to reinforce African Americans' ties to Africa, black American poets from the late twentieth century depict Wheatley's transatlantic crossings of which she made three. Her Middle Passage voyage from Africa to Boston was her first transatlantic crossing, and her journey from Boston to London and back constitute her second and third crossings. These African American poets contemplate the significance of the space in the Atlantic Ocean where Europe, Africa, and the New World converge. It is this space that connects African Americans to their African ancestry. The space is also significant as a metaphor for the ambivalence and longing that these writers attribute to Wheatley. Just as the space in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean belongs to neither Africa nor America but both, Wheatley's identity consisted of her early exposure to her native culture as well as her upbringing in Boston. They portray Wheatley as a figure plagued by uncertainty in relation to her identity. These poets employ the transatlantic zone as a metaphor for the ambiguity that characterized her fractured sense of self, their ambivalence about Wheatley's seemingly dubious relationship with the place of her birth, and their insecurity about what Wheatley's precarious relationship to her homeland signified for their own circuitous relationship to Africa, a site of longing for them.

In the twenty-first century, African American poets turn their attention away from Wheatley's multi-faceted identity and return their attention to her relationship with her first critic, Thomas Jefferson. These poets examine the relationships among three eighteenth-century figures—Thomas Jefferson, Sally Hemings, and Phillis Wheatley.

More specifically, they question the ways in which these relationships do or do not reflect our democracy's realization of Jefferson's Declaration and the implications of that success or failure for our country's past, present, and future. When Karen Williams inquires, "212 years later, did you succeed," she encapsulates the quandary that African American poets of the twenty-first century face in relation to Wheatley, Hemings, and Jefferson. These writers long for confirmation that they do not still face the same harsh, undue criticism as Wheatley simply because of their race and question whether success has been realized, rendering the obligation to prove their worth (or Wheatley's for that matter) unnecessary.

Although Wheatley has fallen out of favor at various points over the course of the last few centuries of African American literature, time and time again African American writers have recovered her reputation and pondered her role as a predecessor, keeping her memory alive in the African American literary imagination. For better or for worse, African American writers' engagement with Wheatley is very much in line with Saidiya Hartman's characterization of the longing she experienced for her great-great grandmother in her book *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route,* when she says, "It's hard to explain what propels a quixotic mission, or why you miss people you don't know, or why skepticism doesn't lessen longing. The simplest answer is that I wanted to bring the past closer…I wanted to cross the boundary that separated kin from stranger." (Harman 17). Hartman at once feels kinship with and estrangement from her ancestor. Hartman's bifurcated relationship to her ancestor whom she never met is comparable to African American writers' relationships with Wheatley and longing is a byproduct of these fragmented relationships.

Finally, unease plagues African American writers' relationships with Wheatley because of the lack of closure resulting from this fragmentation. When Alice Walker in her essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," describes the stories of predecessors such as Wheatley as "dying without conclusion," she suggests that finishing these stories is her responsibility. (A. Walker 240). Similarly, in her essay "Site of Memory," Toni Morrison laments the incomplete accounts of slave narratives when she contends that many of such stories provide "no mention of their (slaves) interior life" (Morrison 70). Like Alice Walker, Morrison articulates her obligation to fill that dearth when she writes,

> Moving that veil aside requires, therefore, certain things. First of all, I must trust my own recollections. I must also depend on the recollections of others. Thus memory weighs heavily in what I write, in how I begin, and in what I find to be significant….But memories and recollections won't give me total access to the unwritten interior life of these people. Only the act of imagination can help me. (Morrison 70-71)

Ultimately, the African American writers who engage with Phillis Wheatley over the course of four centuries perform acts of reclamation, employing the only tool that can ease their longing for consistency and conclusion, their imaginations.

Works Cited

1. Baker Jr., Houston A. The Journey Back: Issues in Black Literature and Criticism. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980. Print.

2. ---. "The Revolutionary Tradition in Afro-American Literature" *Daggers and Javelins: Essays, 1974-1979*. 137-148. New York: William Morrow and Company, 1979. *Black Thought and Culture*. Web. 27 Mar. 2016.

3. ---. "Chapter: The Myth of a Negro Literature" *Home: Social Essays.* New York: Morrow, 1966. 105-115. Web. *Black Thought and Culture.* 27 Mar 2016.

4. Bernard, Emily. "The New Negro Movement and the Politics of Art." *The Cambridge History of African American Literature.* Ed. Maryemma Graham and Jerry W. Ward, Jr. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. *Cambridge Histories Online*. Web. 21. Mar. 2016.

5. Bethune, Mary McLeod. "A Philosophy of Education for Negro Girls." *Mary McLeod Bethune: Building A Better World: Essays and Selected Documents*. McCluskey, Audrey Thomas and Elaine M. Smith eds. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1999. 84-86. *Black Thought and Culture*. Web. 22 Jan. 2014.

6. Binder, Wolfgang. "Uses of Memory: the Middle Passage in African American Literature." Slavery in the Americas. Ed. Wolfgang Binder: Wurzburg: Konigshausen and Neumann, 1993. 539-564. Print.

7. Bishop, Elizabeth. "One Art." *The Complete Poems, 1926-1979*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983. N. pag. *Poetry Foundation*. Web. 13 April 2016.

8. Boym, Svetlana. *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books, 2001. Print.

9. Braithwaite, William Stanley. "The Negro in Literature." *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892-1938*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Gene A. Jarrett. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007. 182-190. Print.

10. Brawley, Benjamin Griffith. *A Social History of the American Negro*. New York: Macmillan & Co, 1921. 48-75. *Black Thought and Culture*. Web. 14 Jan. 2014.

11. ---. "Phillis Wheatley" *Voice of the Negro*. 1 Jan. 1906. 3.1. 55-59. *African American Periodicals*. Web. 16 Feb. 2016.

12. ---. *Early Negro American Writers*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1935. 56-74. *Black Thought and Culture*. Web. 25 Jan. 2014.

13. ---. *The Negro in Literature and Art in the United States*. New York: NY Duffield & Co., 1918. 10-32. *Black Thought and Culture*. Web. 14 Nov. 2013.

14. ---. *Women of Achievement: Written for the Fireside Schools, Under the Auspices of the Woman's American Baptist Home Mission Society*. Woman's American Baptist Home Mission Society, 1919. Web. *Documenting the American South.* 17 Jan. 2014.

15. Brown, Lois. *Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins: Black Daughter of the Revolution*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008. Print.

16. Bruce Jr., Dickson D. Black American Writing from the Nadir: The Evolution of a Literary Tradition, 1877-1915. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989.

17. Bruce, John Edward. "The Negro in Poetry." *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892-1938*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Gene A. Jarrett. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007. 410-413. Print.

18. Bullock, Penelope. *The Afro-American Periodical Press*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981. Print.

19. Burroughs, Margaret G. "Do Bird of a Feather Flock Together?" *Jackson State Review*. 6.1 (1974). 61-73. Print.

20. Burrows, Vinie. *Phillis Wheatley Gentle Poet, Child of Africa.* 1973. MS Special Collections/Archives. H.T. Sampson Library, Jackson State University, Jackson, Mississippi.

21. Carter, Robert W. "The Opening Century" *Colored American Magazine* 1 Feb. 1901. 2.4. 307-309. *African American Periodicals*. Web. 15 Feb 2016.

22. Carretta, Vincent. *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011. Print.

23. "Chirp." *OED Online.* Oxford University Press. Web. 27 Jan. 2014.

24. Clifford, Carrie Williams. "To Phyllis Wheatley (First African Poetess)" *Shadowed Dreams: Women's Poetry of the Harlem Renaissance*. 2nd ed. Ed. Maureen Honey. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006. 23. Print

25. Clifton, Lucille. "Phillis Wheatley Poetry Festival: for Margaret Walker Alexander." *Jackson State Review* 6.1 (1974). 41. Print.

26. Du Bois, Shirley Graham. *The Story of Phillis Wheatley*. New York: Julian Messner, Inc., 1949. Print.

27. Du Bois, W.E.B. "Criteria for Negro Art." *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892-1938*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Gene A. Jarrett. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 257-260. 2007. Print

28. ---. *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Howe, 1920. *Black Thought and Culture*. Web. 14 Jan. 2014.

29. ---. *The Gift of Black Folk: The Negroes in the Making of America*. Boston: The Stratford Co., 1924. *Black Thought and Culture*. Web. 15 January 2014.

30. ---. "The Negro in American Literature." *Epworth Herald*. 28 Jan. 1928. 70-71. *Black Thought And Culture*. Web. 22 Jan. 2014.

31. ---. "The Negro in Literature and Art." *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892-1938*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Gene A. Jarrett. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007. 299-302. Print.

32. "Fallible." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. Web. 31 March 2016.

33. "Fancied." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. Web. 25 Oct. 2013.

34. "Footing." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. Web. 31 March 2016.

35. Fultz, Michael. " 'The Morning Cometh': African American Periodicals, Education and the Black Middle Class, 1900-1930." *Journal of Negro History*. 80.3 (1995): 97-112. Web. 12 March 2016.

36. Gaines, Irene M. "Colored Authors and Their Contributions to the World's Literature." *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892-1938*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Gene A. Jarrett. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007. 315-321. Print.

37. Gates Jr., Henry Louis. *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the 'Racial' Self*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987. Print.

38. ---."In Her Own Write." Foreword. *The Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*. By Phillis Wheatley Ed. John Shields. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988. viii-xxii. Print.

39. ---. Introduction. *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Meridian Book, 1990. 1-17. Print.

40. ---. *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley*: *America's First Black Poet and Her Encounters With the Founding Fathers.* New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2003. Print.

41. ---. "The Trope of a New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black" *Representations.* 24. Special Issue: America Reconstructed, 1840-1940. (1988). 129-155. Web. *JSTOR* 27 Mar. 2016.

42. Giddings, Paula. "Critical Evaluation of Phillis Wheatley." *Jackson State Review*. 6.1 (1974). 74-81. Print.

43. Giovanni, Nikki. "Linkage." *The Collected Poetry of Nikki Giovanni*: 1968-1998." New York: HaperCollins Publishers, 2007. 313-315. Print.

44. Guinn, Dorothy C. *Out of the Dark*. *Plays and Pageants from the Life of the Negro*. Ed. Willis Richardson. Washington, D.C.: The Associated Publishers Inc., 1930. *Black Drama*. Web. 15 Jan. 2014.

45. Halbwachs, Maurice. *On Collective Memory*. Trans. Lewis A. Coser. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992. Print.

46. Hall, Stephen. *Faithful Account of the Race*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009. *Project Muse*. Web. 22 Jun. 2016.

47. Hammon, Jupiter. "An Address to Miss Phillis Wheatley, Ethiopian Poetess, in Boston, Who Came from Africa at Eight Years of Age, and Soon Became Acquainted with the Gospel of Jesus Christ." *Unchained Voices: An Anthology of Black Authors in the English-speaking World of the Eighteenth Century*. Ed. Vincent Carretta. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1996. 28-31. Print.

48. Hartman, Saidiya. Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007. Print.

49. Hayden, Robert. "A Letter from Phillis Wheatley London, 1773." *Massachusetts Review*. 18.4. (1977): 645-647. *JSTOR*. Web. 8 May 2013.

50. Hopkins, Pauline E. "Famous Women of the Negro Race" *Colored American Magazine*. 1 Mar. 1902. 4.4. *African American Periodicals*. Web. 15 Feb. 2016.

51. Huggins, Nathan. *The Harlem Renaissance.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1971. Print.

52. Hunter, Charlayne. "Poets Extol a Sister's Unfettered Soul." *New York Times.* 9 Nov. 1973. 28. Print.

53. Jarrett, Gene. *Representing the Race: A New Political History of African American Literature.* New York: NYU Press, 2011. *Project MUSE*. Web. 22 Jun. 2016.

54. Jeffers, Honorée Fanonne. "Mastering" *Black Renaissance/Renaissance Noire;* 6.2/3. (2009). 82. Print.

55. Jefferson, Thomas. "Notes on the State of Virginia" *Race and the Enlightenment.* Ed. Eze, Emmanuel Chukwudi. Malden: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1997. 95-103. Print.

56. Johnson, James Weldon. Preface. *The Book of American Negro Poetry: Chosen and Edited with an Essay on the Negro's Creative Genius.* Ed. Johnson. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich*,* 1922. vii-xlviii. *Black Thought and Culture.* Web. 12 Jan. 2014.

57. ---. "Race Prejudice and the Negro Artist." *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892-1938*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Gene A. Jarrett. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007. 343-350. Print.

58. ---. "The Dilemma of the Negro Author." *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892-1938*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Gene A. Jarrett. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007. 378-382. Print.

59. King James Bible. *King James Bible Online*. Web. 18 Jan. 2014.

60. King James Bible. King James Bible Online. Web. 24 March 2015.

61. Komunyakaa, Yusef. "Lament and Praise Song: Séance" *Callaloo*. 24.4 (2001). 1061-1079. *JSTOR*. Web. 22. Dec. 2008.

62. "Lark." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. Web. 22 March 2014.

63. Locke, Alain. "Art or Propaganda." *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892-1938*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Gene A. Jarrett. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007. 260.

64. ---. Foreword. *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992. xxv-xxvii. Ed. Alain Locke. Print.

65. ---. "Propaganda—or Poetry?" *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892-1938*. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Gene A. Jarrett, eds. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007. 261-268. Print.

66. ---. "The Negro Poets of the United States." *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892-1938*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Gene A. Jarrett Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007. 422-426. Print.

67. ---. "The New Negro" *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892-1938*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Gene A. Jarrett Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007. 112-119. Print.

68. "Long." *OED Online.* Oxford University Press. Web. 8 April 2016.

69. Madgett, Naomi Cornelia Long. "Phillis." *Ebony.* 29.5. (1974). 96 *MasterFILE Premier*. Web. 8 May 2013.

70. McDougald, Elise Johnson. "The Task of Negro Womanhood." *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*. Ed. Alain Locke. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992. 369-382. Print.

71. Miller, Kelly. "Achievements of the Negro Race." *Voice of the Negro*. 1 Sept. 1905. 2.9. 612-618. *African American Periodicals.* Web. 15 Feb. 2016.

72. Morrison, Toni. "Site of Memory" *What Moves at the Margin: Selected Nonfiction*. Ed. Carolyn C. Denard. Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2008. 70-71. Print.

73. Nora, Pierre. "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire." *Representations*. 26, Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory. (1989). 7-24. Web. *JSTOR*. 14 April 2016.

74. "Novelty." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. Web. 5 April 2014.

75. Odell, Margaretta Matilda. *Memoir and Poems of Phillis Wheatley, a Native African and a Slave. Dedicated to the Friends of the Africans*. Boston:

Published by Geo W. Light, 1834. Web. *Documenting the American South*. 10 April 2016.

76. Oxley, Thomas L.G. "Survey of Negro Literature, 1760-1926." Messenger. 1 Feb. 1927. 37-39. *African American Periodicals.* Web. 15 Feb. 2016.

77. Parks. Carole A. "Phillis Wheatley Comes Home" Black World. 23 (1974) 92-97. Print

78. Pedersen, Carl. "Sea Change: The Middle Passage and the Transatlantic Imagination." *The Black Columbiad*: *Defining Moments in African American Literature and Culture*. Sollors, Werner, and Maria Diedrich, eds. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994. 42-52. Print.

79. Rampersad, Arnold. Introduction. *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*. Ed. Alain Locke. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992. ix-xxiii. Print.

80. Redding, J. Saunders. *To Make a Poet Black*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1939. *Black Thought and Culture*. Web. 25 Jan. 2014.

81. Rowell, Charles H., and Jerry W. Ward. "Ancestral Memories: A Report on the Phillis Wheatley Poetry Festival" TS Special Collections/Archives. H.T. Sampson Library, Jackson State University, Jackson, Mississippi.

82. Saunders, Doris E. "Rite of Passage." *Jackson State Review* 6.1 (1974). 40. Print.

83. Shockley, Evie. "wheatley and hemmings have drinks in the halls of ancestors." *A Half-red Sea*. Durham: Carolina Wren Press, 2006. 25-26. Print.

84. Smethurst, James: The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. 2005**.** Print.

85. ---. "The Black Arts Movement: A Companion to African American Literature." Ed. Gene Andrew Jarrett. Chicester: Wiley-Blackwell. 2010. 302-314. Print.

86. Smith, Gary. "Crossing the Midatlantic Again, This Time." *Songs for My Fathers*. Detroit: Lotus Press Inc., 1984. 24. Print.

87. ---. "Daybreak and the Unkept Promise of Sleep." *Songs for My Fathers*. Detroit: Lotus Press Inc., 1984. 20. Print.

88. "Strange." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. Web. 8 April 2016.

89. Terrell, Mary Eliza Church. "Address Delivered at the International Congress of Women in Berlin Germany, June 13 1904." Unpublished Papers of Mary Church Terrell. Alexandria: Alexander Street Press, 2004. 110-113. Web. *Black Thought and Culture*. Web. 14 Nov. 2013.

90. Terrell, Mary Eliza Church. "The Progress of Colored Women: An Address Delivered Before the National American Women's Suffrage Association, at the Columbia Theatre, Washington, D.C., February 1898. On the Occasion of It's Fiftieth Anniversary." *Black Thought and Culture*. Web. 14 Nov. 2013.

91. Thurman, Wallace "Negro Poets and Their Poetry." *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892-1938*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Gene A. Jarrett Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007. 415-422. Print.

92. Tillman, Katherine. "Afro-American Women and Their Work." *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892-1938*. Gates Jr., Henry Louis, and Gene A. Jarrett, eds. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007. 277-287. Print.

93. Walker, Alice. "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens." *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974. 231-243. Print.

94. Walker, George Gilbert. "Phillis Wheatley—A Study." *Colored American Magazine*. 1 June 1904. *African American Periodicals*. Web. 14. Feb. 2016.

95. Walker, Margaret. "The Humanistic Tradition of Afro-American Literature." *How I Wrote Jubilee and Other Essays on Life and Literature.* Old Westbury: Feminist Press, 1990, 121-132. *Black Thought and Culture*. Web. 22 Jan 2014.

96. ---. "Ballad For Phillis Wheatley" *Ebony* 29.5. (1974). 96, 98. *MasterFILE Premier*. Web. 8 May 2013.

97. ---. "Critical Approaches to the Study of African American Literature." *On Being Female Black and Free: Essays by Margaret Walker, 1932-1992.* Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1997, 123-131. Web. 25 Jan. 2014.

98. ---. "Phillis Wheatley and Black Women Writers" *On Being Female Black and Free: Essays by Margaret Walker, 1932-1992*. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1997, 35-40. *Black Thought and Culture.* Web. 25 Jan. 2014

99. ---. *A Poetic Equation: Conversations Between Nikki Giovanni and Margaret Walker.* Washington: Howard University Press, 1974. 41-81. *Black Thought and Culture*. Web. 25 Jan. 2014.

100. Washington, Booker T. *A New Negro for a New Century: An Accurate and Up to Date Record of the Upward Struggles of the Negro Race*. Chicago: American Publishing House, 1900. *Black Thought and Culture*. Web. 14 Nov. 2013.

101. Washington, Mary Helen. " 'The Darkened Eye Restored': Notes Toward a Literary History of Black Women." *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology.* Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Meridian. 1990 30-43. Print.

102. Wheatley, Phillis. *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. Ed. John Shields. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988. Print

103. White, Walter. "The Negro Renaissance." *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892-1938*. Gates Jr., Henry Louis, and Gene A. Jarrett, eds. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007. 231-233. Print.

104. Williams, Karen. "From the Spirit of Phillis Wheatley to the Spirit of Thomas Jefferson (A Note 212 Years Later)." *Beyond the Frontier: African American Poetry for the 21st Century*. Ed. E. Ethelbert Miller. Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 2002. 19-20. Print.

105. Woodson, Carter Godwin. *The Education of the Negro Prior to 1861: A History of the Colored People of the United States from the Beginning of Slavery to the Civil War*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1915. *Black Thought and Culture*. Web. 14 Jan. 2014.

106. ---.*The Negro in Our History*, 8th ed. Washington DC: The Associated Publishers, 1922. *Black Thought and Culture*. Web. 14 Jan. 2014.

107. Yeocum, William. "Phillis Wheatley—First African Poetess" *A.M.E. Church Review.* 6.3. (1890). 329-333. Web. *The African-American Experience in Ohio.* 5 June 2016.

108. Young, Kevin. "Homage to Phillis Wheatley." *The Paris Review*. Vol. 40.148 (1998) 32-33. *Literature Online*. Web. 28 June 2012.