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Sweat the Technique: Visible-izing Praxis Through Mimicry in Phillis Wheatley's "On Being Brought from Africa to America"

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SWEAT THE TECHNIQUE: VISIBLE-IZING PRAXIS THROUGH MIMICRY
IN PHILLIS WHEATLEY'S
"ON BEING BROUGHT FROM AFRICA TO AMERICA"

A Dissertation Presented

by

KARLA ZELAYA

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

September 2015

W.E.B. Du Bois Department of Afro-American Studies

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DEDICATION

For My Mother,

Rose Mary Watson

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I would like to thank my parents, Rose Mary Watson and Carlos Zelaya, for their unconditional love and support. Thank you, Mom and Dad, for your kindness, your respect, and your trust in me. Thank you for all of the time and effort you invested into cultivating and guiding me.

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ABSTRACT

SWEAT THE TECHNIQUE: VISIBLE-IZING PRAXIS THROUGH MIMICRY IN PHILLIS WHEATLEY'S "ON BEING BROUGHT FROM AFRICA TO AMERICA"

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"On Being Brought from Africa to America" was written in 1768, seven years after a seven or eight-year-old Phillis Wheatley arrived to British North America. Phillis Wheatley was about fifteen-years-old when she wrote the most reviled poem in Black literature. Charged with thinking white and writing white, "On Being Brought from Africa to America" would condemn Phillis Wheatley as an imitator of the white gaze. Although accused of straightening her tongue, Phillis Wheatley did not imitate the white gaze in "On Being Brought from Africa to America." She mimicked it. To imitate means to do something the same way. To mimic means to resemble. Resemblance lives in the liminal space between sameness and difference. This study sought to investigate what that in-between space of resemblance afforded Wheatley in terms of movement and self-actualization as an enslaved Black poet. As an inaugural text in dissemblance, "On Being Brought from Africa to America" showcased how mimicry, not imitation, could be used to undo the very Anglo-European literary practices and discourses that sought to keep Black writers at bay. This dissertation seeks to investigate how Phillis Wheatley used

mimicry in “On Being Brought from Africa to America” as a subversive vehicle to say without saying. Using resemblance to hide difference, Wheatley, through mimicry, turned a sign of conquest and domination (English as representative of European imperialism) into a sign of resistance.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1992, hip-hop duo Eric B. and Rakim released the now classic song “Don’t Sweat the Technique” in which Rakim not only boasted of his unmatched lyrical prowess but advised his opponents of the futility of preoccupying themselves with figuring out and imitating his “technique”:

They wanna know how many rhymes have I ripped and wrecked
But researchers never found all the pieces yet
Scientists try to solve the context
Philosophers are wondering when, what's next
Pieces are took to last who observe them
They couldn't absorb them, they didn't deserve them
My ideas are only for the audience's ears
For my opponents, it might take years...

The titular use of the word “technique” did not simply allude to Rakim’s skill as a wordsmith, but to the “structure” that situated his poetry. That structure was Eric B.’s Technics 1200 SL direct-drive turntable. Eric B. and Rakim’s ode to technique, to the way they used language and structure to make meaning, allows entrance into seeing Black-authored poems as important sites of praxis. “Technique” is defined as “The formal or practical aspect of any art, occupation or field; manner of execution or performance as regard to this. Also more generally: way of doing something” (“Technique”). The word “technique” became associated with art and not just industry by the turn of the nineteenth century, long after eighteenth-century Black poets such as Phillis Wheatley, Jupiter Hammon, and Lucy Terry assembled texts that clearly evinced a preoccupation with “the way of doing something.”

Concern with praxis or “the performance or application of skill” is nothing new to Black poets (“Praxis”). A quick survey of poems authored by Black poets of the diaspora

reveals the attention paid to the *making* of poems. Lucille Clifton, in “the making of poems,” explained and demystified the labor involved in the making of her poems: “the reason why i do it / though i fail and fail / in the giving of true names / is i am adam and his mother / and these failures are my job” (1-5). As the creator of meaning in “Negus,” Edward Kamau Brathwaite likewise called attention to the making of his poem: “I / must be given words to shape my name / to the syllables of trees / I / must be given words to refashion futures / like a healer’s hand / I/ must be given words so that the bees / in my blood’s buzzing brain of memory / will make flowers, will make flocks of birds, / will make sky, will make heaven...” (61-71).

e.e. cummings observed that “If a poet is anybody, he is somebody to whom things made matter very little – somebody who is obsessed by Making” (“Three Statements” 255). Functioning as a literary cartographer, Phillis Wheatley made poems that would perform as literary maps for future poets. Wheatley’s poems registered the routes Black poets could take to enter the page space as *Black* poets. Though often overlooked or invisible-ized, it is in the poetry of Phillis Wheatley that we first see the sweating of technique. For her opponents, it has indeed taken years to absorb the fact that technique and not simple repetition was involved in the making of her poems. Though “[denied] entrance into the space of ‘legitimate’ Colonial culture, Wheatley...[re-cited] the marks of ‘belonging’ by adopting Western forms, and [used] biblical and classical imagery, [to show] that she had accumulated a sufficient stock of cultural capital to be considered the equal of her white ‘betters’” (Kendrick 73).

Of the millions of enslaved Africans forcibly transplanted into the British colonies by the end of the eighteenth-century, “Phillis Wheatley was one of fewer than twenty

whose words found their way directly into print during their lifetimes” (Carretta 4). As human capital vested with cultural capital, Wheatley literarily modeled how the strategic re-citation of Anglo-European literary markers could be used to both parody and talk back, double-voiced, to “those marks and the laws to which they [referred]...” (Kendrick 73). Wheatley in fact established a poetic prototype for “a poaching raid of sorts, a stealing of signs” that had already existed in colonial culture (Kendrick 73).

Parodying whites and signifying on their culture was nothing new. Negro Election Days and Negro Training Days, “held with white encouragement,” mocked black and white leaders, “ridiculed white pretensions and even played with white stereotypes of black ‘limitations’” (Bruce, Jr. 7). What Wheatley performed on the page space, particularly in “On Being Brought from Africa to America,” was simply the literary extension of an already present cultural practice that “revealed a people not so awed by Anglo-American society as to be able to stand back and comment on, even ridicule, the structure of social relationships in which they had to live” (Bruce, Jr. 7). Through mimicry of Anglo-European literary practices and discourses, Wheatley created a way for Black writers to intervene in and disrupt the very traditions that held them at bay. Wheatley in effect modeled a way to use the word ““with a sideward glance at someone else’s hostile world’” (qtd. in Peterson 92).

In *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. noted that “It [was] not sufficient merely to reveal that black people [could colonize] a white sign” (52). What mattered more is that Black people were able to customize the sign to disempower the signifier. Of all of Wheatley’s poems, “On Being Brought from Africa to America” exemplified the “process by which the language,

with its power, and the writing, with its signification of authority, [was] wrested from the dominant European culture” (Ashcroft et al. 8). Through mimicry, Wheatley was able to beat her bars against her gilded cage and speak back, double-voiced and double-
 languaged, to the masters of the land. Mimicry not only evinced Wheatley’s understanding of the word as a site of social contestation, as a site of “‘intense interaction and struggle between one’s own and another’s word’” but it evinced a poet aesthetically committed to praxis, to being master of her literary situation (Hamilton, Ture 36).

In *Black Power, The Politics of Liberation*, Charles Hamilton and Kwame Turé (formerly Stokely Carmichael) succinctly summarized what all Black poets in particular (and Black people in general) throughout the Atlantic world had always known: “Those who have the right to define are the masters of the situation” (36). But what if you were the one subject to the definitions? What if you were the one being defined? What if the words forced upon your tongue did not fit in your mouth? What if their words were not enough? Of concern to many Black poets, be they in slavery or in freedom, be they in the United States, in Cuba or in Jamaica, has been the question of how to write in and through languages and structures not their own. How do you make the black curvatures on a white page *mean* what *you* want them to mean? How do you invest meaning into and divest meaning from imposed upon language and literary structures introduced through white supremacy? Carolyn Rodgers summarized the literary conundrum facing Black poets in “Breakthrough”: “How do I put myself on paper / The way I want to be or am and be / Not like anyone else in this / Black world but me” (12-15).

Amiri Baraka's "Wise 1" (*from* "Why's/Wise") is especially useful in laying bare what Black people were forced to confront in the Atlantic world: "If you ever find / yourself / some where / lost and surrounded / by enemies / who wont let you / speak in your own language / who destroy your statues / & instruments, who ban / your omm bomm ba boom / then you are in trouble / deep trouble / ...probably take you several hundred years / to get / out!" (Baraka 1-11, 17-19). But it did not take "several hundred years" for Black people or the Black poet to "get out" (Baraka 17, 18-19). Afri-Guyanese poet Grace Nichols masterfully captured the autogenic re-flourishing of the transplanted African's tongue in "Epilogue": "I have crossed an ocean / I have lost my tongue / from the root of the old / one / a new one has sprung" (1-5). From the "root"/route of old tongues, new tongues burst forth and were fashioned and customized to resurrect the "omm bomm ba boom." This resurrection was partly made possible through Christianity.

Derek Walcott's concept of "cunning assimilation," featured in his seminal essay "The Muse of History," serves as a useful tool to illustrate how Black people in the "New World" "sprung" by cunningly absorbing, mastering, discarding, disrupting, re-imagining, and exploding European culture to restore their "omm bomm ba boom." Walcott, using the adoption of Christian religion by slaves as the blueprint for explaining how a stolen people found a way to be in a world that denied their very being, explained:

Because the Old World concept of God is anthropomorphic, the New World slave was forced to remake himself in His image, despite such phrases as 'God is light, and in Him no darkness', and at this point of intersecting faiths the enslaved poet and enslaved priest surrendered their power. But the tribe in bondage learned to fortify itself by cunning assimilation of the religion of the Old World. What seemed to be surrender was redemption. What seemed the loss of tradition was its renewal. What seemed the death of faith was its rebirth (358).

The conversion of Africans and Blacks to Christianity “did not assume any significance until the early years of the eighteenth-century” (Bruce, Jr. 8). As early as 1706, Cotton Mather extolled the benefits of the Christian conversion of slaves by assuring masters that “Christian Piety” would make slaves “more *Serviceable*, and Obedient and obliging” unto masters (“The Negro Christianized...” 20). By the time Phillis Wheatley arrived in Boston in 1761, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts and the Congregational Church had already embarked on the mission of persuading slave owners to not only let their slaves attend worship but, as Samuel Davies put it, to “encourage [their] Negroes to learn to read...” (Bruce, Jr. 9, 14). There was a general opinion “among those who sought to convert slaves to Christianity that right belief required real understanding” and that understanding would be achieved through basic education and literacy (Bruce, Jr. 14). Although the racial hierarchy had started petrifying by the eighteenth-century (exhibited clearly in Robert Beverley’s 1705 *The History of Virginia: In Four Parts* in which he declared “Slaves are the negroes and their posterity, following the condition of the mother” are also slaves) there were still enough fissures in societies with slaves to allow for a small subgroup of literate Blacks to emerge (Beverley 219).¹ Christianity therefore not only provided “the underpinning” for a Black literate class but “for the emergence of an African American literary tradition” (Carretta 43). Christianity also provided Blacks such as Phillis Wheatley a medium by which to

¹ Ira Berlin distinguished “slave societies” from “societies with slaves” in *Many Thousands Gone, The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America*. Berlin noted that “What distinguished societies with slaves was the fact that slaves were marginal to the central productive processes; slavery was just one form of labor among many... In slave societies, by contrast, slavery stood at the center of economic production, and the master-slave relationship provided the model for all social relations...” (8). Opportunities for mobility, edification, or self-actualization on the part of enslaved Blacks were severely circumscribed if not outright forbidden in slave societies.

address white Christians as Christians, and therefore as equals. Christianity not only gave Blacks such as Wheatley literacy but “her primary subject as well as the authority and power to write about it” (Carretta 43). Christianity likewise enabled Blacks to emerge from the shadows cast by slavery and racism as speaking subjects. In 1754 for example, a Connecticut slave by the name of Greenwich took it upon himself to speak “before a revivalist ‘strict congregationalist’ audience” offering a “critique of slavery, mainly on scriptural grounds” demonstrating not only the “possibilities for self-assertion” but also the sense of “authority on the speaker’s part” (Bruce, Jr. 8). Christianized Blacks embodied, for many slaveholders, their worst fears. A Christianized, literate Black had the capacity of reinterpreting “Scripture and its application [according] to their lives and conditions” (Bruce, Jr. 16). In short, Christianity afforded Blacks not only salvation and the written word but also the possibility of engaging in Adamic acts of “naming” by re-naming the world they inhabited. Through Christianity, the tribe in bondage was able to make itself anew and birth for itself a new genesis.

Christianity was not the only thing that Blacks cunningly assimilated. In “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” Zora Neale Hurston addressed the Adamic quality of re-naming, of re-creation, present in Black cultural productions that resulted out of the “cunning assimilation” of the larger master culture:

It has been said so often that the Negro is lacking in originality that it has almost become a gospel...It is obvious that to get back to original sources is much too difficult for any group to claim very much as a certainty. What we really mean by originality is the modification of ideas...So if we look at it squarely, the Negro is a very original being. While he lives and moves in the midst of a white civilization, everything that he touches is reinterpreted for his own use. He has modified the language, mode of food preparation, practice of medicine, and most certainly

the religion of his new country...(86).

Aimable Twagilimana, relying on Oswald de Andrade's notion of cultural cannibalism as it appeared in his 1928 *Manifesto Antropófago*, echoed Gates, Walcott and Hurston in *Race and Gender in the Making of an African American Literary Tradition* by observing that "Africans in the Americas had to consume and digest the European cultures and languages" practicing, in effect, "reverse 'cultural cannibalism'" (xv).² Early Black poets in particular selectively consumed and digested that which suited their own literary purposes and regurgitated, manipulated, or refashioned that which did not. And yet, those first Black poets who "had no model," who imagined and created themselves as poets, who "made it up / here on this bridge between / starshine and clay," who in effect established the foundation for a Black poetic tradition, were charged with poetic impersonation, historically shamed and dismissed for their proximity to literary whiteness, and consequently denied their place as the first *Black* poets (Clifton, "won't you celebrate with me" 3, 7-9). Jupiter Hammon has largely been ignored because racial "resistance was not one of his concerns" (May 24). Lucy Terry, whose 1746 "Bars Fight" did not even appear in print until 1855, is rarely taught. But no other poet of the early period has been drowned by contumely the way Phillis Wheatley has for literarily "repeating" the white gaze. Wheatley has been historically "excoriated for such alleged transgressions as being 'taught by Whites to think white' or writing 'very few poems in which [she] points to her experience as a Black and a slave'" (May 50). Like Caliban, Wheatley's speech-acts "[were] equal in their elemental power to those of [her tutors]"

² Oswald de Andrade's notion of cultural cannibalism was employed to caution Brazilians to consume and absorb outside influences without having to imitate those influences. This stance was one that would allow the cultivation of a sense of nationalistic pride in the face of and as a counterpoint to European cultural hegemony.

and yet her mastery and manipulation of her literary and cultural inheritance [was] seen as “servitude, not as victory” (Walcott, “The Muse of History” 355). Henry Louis Gates, Jr. explained how Wheatley’s act of repetition *could* be seen as victorious.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. subtle-ized the act of “repetition” early Black poets such as Phillis Wheatley were accused of engaging in by explaining that “‘black formal repetition always repeats with a difference, a black difference that manifests itself in specific language use’”(qtd. in Spurlin 733). It is through that specific language use that we would see “The language of the torturer mastered by the victim” (Walcott, “The Muse of History” 355). For Black poets of the eighteenth-century and even for Black poets of the nineteenth-century, the charge of “imitation” would not necessarily have been considered or even understood as insulting:

...in the best ‘classicist’ theory, Imitation is the term normally used to describe...what all the Romantic writers emphasized: ‘a Representation of what Eternally Exists, Really and Unchangeably’. Imitation, at its best, was not understood as adherence to somebody else’s rules; it was, rather, ‘imitation of the universal reality’. An artist’s precepts were not so much previous works of art as the ‘universals’ (in Aristotle’s term) or permanent realities” (Williams 39).³

Zora Neale Hurston importantly addressed the charge of repetition hurled at early Black artists by distinguishing Black cultural productions as sites of mimicry not imitation:

The Negro, the world over, is famous as a mimic. But this in no way damages his standing as an original. Mimicry is an art in itself...He does it as the mockingbird does it, for the love of it, and not because he wishes to be like the one imitated (“Characteristics of Negro Expression” 87).

³ From William Blake’s “A Vision of the Last Judgment”: “The Last Judgment is not Fable or Allegory but Vision. Vision, or Imagination, is a Representation of what Eternally Exists, Really & Unchangeably. Fable or Allegory is Formed by the Daughters of Memory. Imagination is Surrounded by the daughters of Inspiration, who in the aggregate are called Jerusalem” (196).

To “imitate” means “to make or do something the same way as (something else)” (“Imitate”). The definitions associated with the noun “Mimic” on the other hand reveal a noteworthy and subversive point of distinction between imitation and mimicry. A mimic is “a person practicing or skilled in mimicry, *esp.* one who imitates the voice, mannerism, or movements of others in order to entertain, amuse, or ridicule” (“Mimic”). Mimic as a transitive verb means to “resemble closely, *esp.* in structure or functionality” (“Mimic”). Resemblance is not sameness. Black poets such as Phillis Wheatley may have resembled literary masters such as Ovid, John Milton, Alexander Pope, John Dryden, and even Mather Byles but they did not ape those literary masters. Early Black poets’ poetic utterances were inherently different precisely because they were the ones re-inscribing European literary tradition. What was the reason for their mimetic act? Was it to entertain, amuse, or ridicule? Pointedly, who was being entertained, amused, or ridiculed? While the concept of “mimicry” in Hurston’s text predated Gates’, it was in essence the same idea. Both Gates’ and Hurston’s understanding of the act of repetition, of mimicry, was arguably rooted in evolutionary biology. Through evolutionary biology, one would come to understand that when Wheatley mimicked, she mimicked “as the mockingbird [did] it, for the love of it, and not because [she wished] to be like the one imitated” (Hurston 87). Mimicry, understood in the context of evolutionary biology, would be useful in dispelling notions of early Black poetic productions in particular as simply imitative of white poetic productions.

The biological definition of “Mimic” is “To have a mimetic resemblance (to something else), often in a way that deters predators or serves as camouflage” (“Mimic”). In evolutionary biology, a group of organisms –the mimics – evolve in appearance,

behavior, sound, or scent for example, to share common characteristics with another species – the models. The mimics develop similarities to the models, but they are not the same as the models. In terms of interaction, the characteristics developed by the mimics are advantageous to the mimics and potentially harmful to the models. Camouflage is an instantiation of mimicry in that a species adapts to its surroundings by resembling it either to protect itself from predators or transition itself from prey to predator.⁴ Wheatley may have camouflaged herself to resemble the models in appearance, behavior, and sound, but she did so for reasons that would be advantageous to her and harmful to the models. As Grace Nichols warned in her poem “Skin Teeth,” “Not every skin-teeth / is a smile ‘Massa’ / if you see me smiling / when you pass / if you see me bending / when you ask / Know that I smile / Know that I bend / only the better / to rise and strike / again” (1-11). Though incredibly adept at smiling at “Massa” in her poems, Wheatley was even more adept at striking at “Massa.” An anecdote from Wheatley’s days as a slave provides entrée into her literary technique.

Wheatley was often invited to the homes of Boston’s political and economic elite. Though some were “startled to discover that they were expected to share their tea table with Phillis,” others offered her a seat at the table (Carretta 23). Wheatley would always “request that a side-table might be laid for her, [and] dined modestly apart from the rest of the company” (Carretta 23). Wheatley knew that her “audience” would be offended by her presence at the table. Bowing outwardly to tradition and expectations, Wheatley left the table to her hosts. What Wheatley did not do is leave the tea party / dinner. She did not go and eat in the kitchen. She did not wait to eat at home, privately, in her own

⁴ See “Mimicry (biology)” in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

quarters. She did not request of her mistress or master to be sent home. She instead asserted her agency by asking for and receiving her own table, dining separately and equally with everybody else. Wheatley strategically donned just enough of whites' expectations to give the appearance that she knew her place all the while carving out a new space of her own. Wheatley's superficial concession to racism likely concealed her desire to remain apart from her white hosts. That desire would materialize, clearly, in the body of her poems. Whether in a dining room or on the page, Wheatley may have bowed to tradition but "only the better / to rise and strike / again" (Nichols, "Skin Teeth" 9-11).

As a young, enslaved Black woman, Wheatley was well aware of what it would take to navigate whiteness. Wheatley critically understood what producing a literature "under imperial licence" and subject to "imperial licence" would mean and necessitate – after all, she was constantly under and subject to "imperial" license as a slave. Writing "under the direct control of the imperial ruling class who alone [licensed] the acceptable [forms] and [permitted] the publication and distribution of the resulting work" resulted in the creation of poems that performed as meeting grounds between two racial, political, and cultural realities (Ashcroft et al. 6).⁵ How did Phillis Wheatley create these meeting grounds?

[She] stole words from the grudging Lips of the
Lords of the Land, who did not want [her] to know
too many of them or their meaning. And [she] charged
this meager horde of stolen sounds with all the emotions
and longings [she] had...[she] polished [her] new words,
caressed them, gave them new shape and color, a new
order and tempo, until, although they were the words of
the Lords of the Land, they became [her] words, [her]
language (Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*... 40).

⁵ See Michael Awkward's *Negotiating Difference: Race, Gender, and the Politics of Personality*.

Phillis Wheatley, like other Black poets of her time, stole the words from the lords of the land, polished them and made them her own.

When told at all, “stories of [eighteenth and] early 19th-century black literacy are presented as the rare cases of a few individuals, the extent of whose literacy was the basic ability to read and write” (McHenry, *Rereading Literacy Legacy* 477). When told at all, the story of Phillis Wheatley is the story of ““one of the strangest creatures in the country, and perhaps in the whole world”” (qtd. in Bruce, Jr. 47). When told at all, the story of Phillis Wheatley is the story of a scribbling “parrot” that unthinkingly bootlegged European and Anglo-American literary models and conventions. In the first line of “An Address to the Deist,” a poem not included in Wheatley’s 1773 collection *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, Wheatley asked the “unbeliever,” “Must Ethiopians be employ’d for you?” (3,1). Her poems collectively answered “No.” While it is true that Wheatley was subject to the white gaze, she did not pantomime the white gaze nor was she “employ’d” by it.

In *In The Castle of My Skin*, George Lamming wrote: “The eye of another [is] a kind of cage. When it [sees] you the lid [comes] down, and you [are] trapped. It [is] always happening” (73). “On Being Brought from Africa to America” was Wheatley’s daring escape from the cage of the white gaze. A quiet “shouting poem,” “On Being Brought from Africa to America” “[told] the subhuman off...” and “[offed] him with word bullets” (Rodgers, “Black Poetry – Where It’s At...” 193). Through cunning assimilation, Wheatley evolved the signs given her “in order to describe and thus control [her] circumstances...in order not to be submerged” by the very signs bequeathed her (Baldwin, “If Black English...” 132).

For two hundred and twenty four years, Phillis Wheatley has been trapped in another kind of cage created by the eye of yet another. That cage is the critical fiction that is Black literary history. Authors Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury explain the critical fiction that is all literary history:

All literary histories are critical fictions. But, because the needs of the American present have so often dictated the interpretations of the American literary past, to make it 'usable,' American literary history is more fictional than most... This constantly renewing search, this constructing and defacing of literary monuments, this borrowing and assimilating, and intertextualizing, shows us one way in which literary traditions are constructed—from the inside, by writers themselves (xv-xvi).

The creation of a Black literary history has resulted in the raising of some literary monuments and in the defacing of other literary monuments. In disproportionately privileging particular kinds of Black literature—namely writings crafted explicitly as socio-political in nature—many early Black literary productions have been passed over as sites worthy of literary exhumation and excavation. Phillis Wheatley's poems have met this fate. Even when read, Wheatley's poems have been reduced to *what* she wrote and *that* she wrote, often forgetting *how* she wrote. But Phillis Wheatley's poems did not just "grow'd" like Stowe's (in)famous Topsy.⁶ And unlike Stephen E. Henderson's assessment of Wheatley, Wheatley was more than just "a successful experiment to test the strength of nurture versus nature" ("The Question of Form and Judgment..." 174). She was a poet.

⁶ Highlighting how central anti-genealogy was to the erasure of the slave's identity, Harriet Beecher Stowe, in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, created a conversation between Northern Christian Miss Ophelia and her gift, Topsy. Entrusted to civilize "an eight or nine year old" slave girl tastelessly named Topsy, Miss Ophelia, "after cleansing and dressing... the new arrival" asked Topsy "Where were you born?" Topsy responded, "Never was born!" When asked moments later by Miss Ophelia "Don't you know who made you?" Topsy returned with "I spect I grow'd. Don't think nobody never made me" (Stowe 236, 239-240).

In “Phyllis [sic] Wheatley, the African Poetess, Who Called George Washington—First In Peace,” Mary Church Terrell advised the following in “considering the life and achievements of Phyllis Wheatley”:

In considering the life and achievements of Phyllis [sic] Wheatley one must remember that the conditions under which she wrote were such as have confronted a woman of no other race who has distinguished herself as a poet. Although the family with whom Phyllis [sic] lived treated her kindly, recognized her ability, taught her to read and write and afforded her considerable opportunity to develop her talent, nevertheless she was a bondwoman and was obliged to perform the duties usually assigned to a slave. In all literature it would be difficult to find a more pathetic picture of talent yoked to drudgery than that which the little slave poet conjures before our eyes (236).

There may be no possibility of avoiding our own judgment in reflecting on the significance of Wheatley’s literary contributions but two things must be remembered: “...all Black poets don’t write the same KIND of poetry, or all Black poems ain’t the same kind” (Rodgers, “Black Poetry – Where It’s At ...” 188). One must also remember that in making any judgment about a literary work, one must make it “as [objectively] as possible in that one does what every scholar does, namely, ‘isolate the object’” (Jauss 172). This study is an attempt to isolate the object – in this case ““the most reviled poem in African American literature””⁷ – in order to see how Phillis Wheatley “[built her] temples for tomorrow, strong as [she knew] how...” (Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” 59).

⁷ Vincent Carretta cited “On Being Brought from Africa to America” as ““the most reviled poem in African American literature”” in *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage* (60).

Overview of Dissertation

The decision to pursue “imitation” as the topic of this dissertation was rooted in the fact that this charge was and has been the central charge hurled at Phillis Wheatley for over two hundred years. The decision to explore this charge in the one poem historically pointed to as “proof” of her thinking white and writing white was critical to emptying out the claim that Phillis Wheatley was a clever imitator and nothing more. Using evolutionary biology’s concept of mimicry as well as Derek Walcott’s concept of “cunning assimilation” as the guiding forces in this study, this study seeks to explore how Phillis Wheatley used mimicry as her dais for a revolutionary performance in dissemblance. The wholesale use and over-reliance of traditional theoretical essays on literature as entrance into and development of this study’s subject matter will be eschewed since those texts tend to center Euro-American literary practices of privileging obscure, dense, academic and therefore private texts that often obfuscate instead of elucidate. While some of those texts will be referenced, each chapter will also rely primarily on Black-authored poems and writings (hip-hop included) that function as valuable, viable, and more accessible sites of theory.

The first chapter of this study will provide context for understanding the significance of writing in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This chapter will contextualize Wheatley’s entrance into the American literary landscape. The second chapter will provide a close reading of the title of Wheatley’s collection of poems as well as the title “On Being Brought from Africa to America.” Performing as slave passes, the titles illustrate how Wheatley managed to employ likeness to escape from the master’s literary plantation. The third chapter will provide a close reading of Phillis Wheatley’s

now canonical “On Being Brought from Africa to America.” This chapter will quietly rely on both Zora Neale Hurston’s notion of “compelling insinuation” and evolutionary biology’s distinction between mimicry and imitation to guide and problematize the traditional view of Wheatley’s poem as nothing more than the utterance of a “lampblack Anglo-Saxon” (Schuyler 52). This chapter seeks to privilege the literary performance of the text – specifically the performance of the word. This chapter will be the longest chapter of this study for several reasons: 1) This chapter will provide a model for how to analyze Black-authored poetry of the eighteenth-century in order to move beyond thematic or socio-political analysis in an effort to restore Black poetry to its place as *poetry*. 2) Importantly, in Wheatley’s poem we clearly see a Black poet occupied with praxis. A poem is a “system”: it is a group of related parts that move or work together. The attention to praxis in “On Being Brought from Africa to America” and the techniques used by Wheatley to make her poem “move” or “work” are techniques Black poets will use for the next two centuries to move in, outside of, beyond, or burn down the master’s literary house. 3) Many of the aesthetic concerns, practices, and discourses around and in Black poetry today, be it in the United States or Latin America or the Caribbean, arise out of the experience of colonialism and its ever-present handmaiden –cultural imperialism. A close reading of “On Being Brought from Africa to America” will illustrate how a politically and culturally colonized subject (paronomasia intended) wrested power, through mimicry, from the ruling class to create the kingdom of *her* Word.⁸ The fourth chapter will analyze how Wheatley used heroic verse in “On Being Brought from Africa to America” to create a Black epic poem. The conclusion will consider how Phillis

⁸ In Edward Kamau Brathwaite’s poem, “Negus,” the speaker reminds the post-colonial subject “it is not / it is not / it is not enough / it is not enough to be free / of the whips, principalities and powers / where is your kingdom of the Word?” (15-20).

Wheatley came to be erased as not only a poet but a Black poet and will introduce, in abbreviated form, a future study of Wheatley's praxis as a poet.

CHAPTER I

“IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD”: A PRELUDE AND POSTLUDE TO PHILLIS WHEATLEY

In the beginning was the word
And the word was
Death
And the word was nigger
And the word was death to all niggers
And the word was death to all life
And the word was death to all
peace be still

“Great Pax Whitie” - Nikki Giovanni

Literature, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, referred to “all culturally valued writing, including what would now be distinguished as ‘nonfiction’ [as well] as history, travel, philosophy, and science” (Arac 2). The “literature” that first appeared in British-occupied America was decidedly religious in kind and appeared at a time when “there was no fully operational national culture” (Arac 3). Colonial American literature was principally a literature of “religious interpretation” constituted by “tales of election, wonder-working intervention and divine meaning” (Bradbury, Ruland 14). The first works of American literature were cultivated, primarily, to help the new settlers “define and live a holy life” (Bradbury, Ruland 19). These first works of American “literature” were not crafted to be imaginative in kind nor were they crafted to be American in kind.¹

Literature, as we know it today, was “not seen as a first need” in the colonial outpost that was America nor was it seen as a first need for the newly emancipated American republic (Bradbury, Ruland 54). For some, not even literacy was seen as a first need. As early as 1671, Governor William Berkeley of Virginia thanked God that there

¹ The first book published by colonial Americans, the Bay Psalm Book of 1640, was written for an English gaze, for the seat of the empire, not for a British North American gaze.

were “no free schools nor printing...for learning [had] brought disobedience, and heresy, and sects into the world” (qtd. in Bruce, Jr. 15). Benjamin Franklin, in “America is the Land of Labour,” argued that people could not afford to buy or consume art nor did art fit “the nation’s workaday needs” (qtd. in Bradbury, Ruland 53). John Adams noted the primacy of disciplines other than literature and the creative arts in a letter to his wife from Paris in 1808: “I must study Politicks and War that my son may have liberty to study Mathematicks and Philosophy” and their children “a right to study Painting, Poetry, Musick...” (qtd. in Bradbury, Ruland 54).

Reflecting on the beginnings of American literature, Malcolm Bradbury and Richard Ruland noted the following in *From Puritanism to Postmodernism: A History of American Literature*:

Just two hundred years ago, when Americans had just completed their Revolution and were proudly feeling their identity as the First New Nation, when the Romantic revolution was developing across the West, and when with the French Revolution the calendar itself seemed to begin again, there was American writing, but there was no American literature. What existed, in those fervent years when Americans began to contemplate a great historical and transcontinental destiny, was a *desire* for one—a novel literature that would express the spirit of independence, democracy and nationhood (xi-xii).

While it is true that the preponderance of American writing that did exist “in those fervent years” was not literary in kind, Bradbury and Ruland clearly discounted the American literature that did exist. Anne Bradstreet’s 1650 *The Tenth Muse, Lately Sprung Among America*, Ebenezer Cooke’s 1708 satirical epic *The Sotweed Factor, or A Voyage to Maryland, a Satyr*, and William Hill Brown’s 1789 *The Power of Sympathy; or The Triumph of Nature* were vanguard works in American literature. Bradbury and Ruland’s oversight of Bradstreet and Cooke’s works was likely due to the authors’

origins. Both Bradstreet and Cooke were English transplants. But Bradbury and Ruland also overlooked Boston-born William Hill Brown's novel and disregarded the literature of Edward Taylor (another English transplant), Lucy Terry (an African transplant), Jupiter Hammon (American), Mather Byles (American), Phillis Wheatley (African transplant), and other writers of the early period, undoubtedly because their works bore too much of the impress of English literature to be considered American in kind. In citing the "absence" of early American literature, Bradbury and Ruland in truth pointed to a literature that had not yet risen from the foot of the English literary altar. There were some practical reasons for the absence of a "novel" American literature: "There was no clear American aesthetic, no patronage, no developed profession of letters, [and] no certain audience" (Bradbury, Ruland 62). By the Revolutionary-era however, American writing writ-large would begin to take on the task of making itself, and by extension the republic, anew and American in kind. Writing in the eighteenth-century would shift from being a tool of religious building to being a tool for nation building:

...the United States formed itself through one written document, the Declaration of Independence, and then negotiated the terms of its existence through another, the Constitution, [securing] the status of writing and publication as a condition of legitimacy in the new nation (qtd. in McHenry 42).

Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, published in 1776, "sold 10,000 copies" within three months and became "the central literary document of the Revolutionary movement" (Bradbury, Ruland 156). While religion, science, and history still occupied an integral space in American writing, writing had taken on a new responsibility – America. The word was now tasked with creating, defining, preserving and defending the new nation.

Two historical developments –the Industrial Revolution and the United States’ newly acquired status as a post-colonial nation – expedited the call for an American literature that would aid in the mission of creating, defining, preserving and defending the new nation.

The Industrial Revolution confirmed and distinguished not only laboring classes but intellectual classes as well. With the concept of specialization in labor came the concept of specialization in the arts. The word “art,” which had commonly meant “skill,” became specialized during the course of the eighteenth century, “first to ‘painting’, and then to the imaginative arts generally” (Williams 43). The word “artist” followed a similar trajectory in that a distinction arose between “artist” and “artisan” and “artist” and “craftsman.” An artist had more than just skill, s/he had a particular creative, imaginative sensibility or genius that elevated his/her labor above that of skilled laborers (Williams 44). The rise of the “artist” would radically change “the ideas of art, of the artist, and of [the artist’s] place in society” (Williams 32).

England saw the growth of an artistic class by the 1730s and 1740s. The rise of “a large new middle-class reading public” which led to the system of patronage that then “passed into subscription-publishing, and thence into general commercial publishing of the modern kind” created the necessary foundation for the emergence of the artist (Williams 32). It was in this marketplace that John Marrant, Jupiter Hammon, and Phillis Wheatley would later formally emerge. The development of a reading, patronage, and publishing class would replicate itself much later in the United States. American print culture would expand rapidly by the end of the eighteenth-century and Adam Smith’s 1776 *The Wealth of Nations* would “[legitimize] specialization as a source of intellectual

productivity” (Pethers 575, 579). By the nineteenth-century, a “literary market” had emerged in the United States whereby the work of an artist, as Adam Smith observed, could now be “purchased, in the same manner as shoes or stockings...” (Williams 33). Although James Fenimore Cooper’s imitators “largely began the commercial life of American literature...competing with the rival flow of sentimental domestic fiction, largely written by women, which was pouring off the presses by the 1830s,” the political life of American literature began much sooner (Bradbury, Ruland 101).

With the republic’s newfound freedom as a separate and distinct nation came the call for a national literature. Writing in the late eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries would take on significant political and cultural import as a tool for nationalism. Of urgent concern in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was the creation of a domestic literature distinct from the literature of the colonizing master. As “The first post-colonial society to develop a ‘national’ literature” anxieties about that literature abounded (Ashcroft et al. 16):

The emergence of a distinctive American literature in the late eighteenth century raised inevitable questions about the relationship between literature and place, between literature and nationality, and particularly about the suitability of inherited literary forms. Ideas about new kinds of literature were part of the optimistic progression to nationhood because it seemed that this was one of the most potent areas in which to express *difference* from Britain (Ashcroft et al. 16).

The preoccupations associated with the creation of an American literature continued well into the nineteenth-century. Debates and pronouncements of what could and should constitute a “new” national literature and who could and should write it increased. Black and white writers, readers, and editors alike partook in the national conversation

regarding a still nascent belles-lettres. While many participated in the discourse, the artistic merit and province of literature was not always agreed upon and public and artistic sentiment on the matter often tensely coexisted.

Although unequal members in / of a shared discursive, cultural and political space, Black and white American writers shared a “common and fundamental problem” in the creation of any and all post-colonial national literatures: “how to achieve cultural independence and identify despite the irrevocable and pervasive influence of their European colonizers...”(Haberly 136). This enterprise was qualitatively different for “a negro nation within the nation”² who first had to contend with “...the acquisition of a new language which in all its unfamiliar and torturous meanings had to be learned through the auditory sense, as the invaluable aids of reading and writing were denied” (Brathwaite, “Some Contemporary Poets of the Negro Race” 51). Not only did this Negro nation have to acquire the language of the masters of the land, they had to build their literature using the very language that “[hung] them up, lynching their black visions” (Fabio 230). Those first Black writers had to become “Frontiersmen [and women] in the lumbering netherlands of Black language. Medicine men [and women]. Schooled in witchcraft, black magic, and the voodoo of words” (Fabio 228). Unable to escape their colonizers, “African-Americans had to appropriate their masters’ language, literary techniques, and culture in order to retrieve, express, and record what Melville Herskovits [called] ‘African survivals’” (Twagilimana xv).

² The term is borrowed from W.E.B. Du Bois’ 1935 “A Negro Nation Within the Nation” in which he lays bare with urgency the need for “the leading classes [to] assume and bear the uplift of their own proletariat” or “be doomed for all time” in an effort to bring about the “economic and cultural salvation of the American Negro” (270, 271).

Establishing a national literature would be a difficult enterprise for white writers as well since, as Ralph Ellison pointed out in his 1967 essay “The Novel as a Function of American Democracy,” American culture “was a continuation of European civilization” (758). America “was not an entity [in itself]” even though American “variations upon [European] theme and...amplification of [European] themes” were unique to American writing (758). America “as an exceptional place...[was] an invention of Europe, as old as Western history itself” (Bradbury, Ruland 5). To create an exceptional literature rooted in a place that was not exceptional would be a difficult task. Margaret Fuller, in “American Literature: Its Position in the Present Time and Prospects for the Future,” spoke to this difficulty (whether she understood the root problem or not) when she cautioned against a national literature premised on literary imitation: “Books which imitate or represent thoughts and life of Europe do not constitute an American literature. What suits Great Britain...does not suit a mixed race” (298, 299). Imitation of English writers was an ever-present angst for white American writers involved in the creation of a post-colonial literature.³ Nonetheless, what Fuller explicitly called for, as did Ralph Waldo Emerson nine years earlier in “The American Scholar,” was an authentically American literature that was not derivative of English literature but that was true to and reflective of the experience of a still developing America: “Each age, it is found, must write its own books” (Emerson 87). Each place, according to Fuller and others, also had to write its own books. Interestingly, the very charge of imitation that white American writers actively labored against would be turned around, weaponized, and used against Black

³ It can be argued that American mimicry of European literature in fact constituted American literature.

American writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries to discredit Black-authored texts.

Seeking to achieve difference from European colonizers “despite the virtual absence of viable cultural alternatives to the continuation of that influence” was not an endeavor exclusive to the inhabitants of Columbia (Haberly 136). Nationalist discourses ushered in during the Enlightenment consecrated the idea of the nation as an “imagined community” distinct from other parceled out landmasses, held together by a shared and common culture.⁴ Johann Gottfried Von Herder’s 1773 *Voices of the People in Their Songs* notably set the currency of this idea into circulation when he congealed Germans into one volk, bound together by a singular language, tradition, and art, among other things. Literature was made as central to the project of establishing an imagined community as monarchy was to the political enterprise of empire building (Ashcroft et al. 3). National identity, noted Toni Morrison, was “formed and informed by a nation’s literature, and...what seemed to be on the ‘mind’ of the literature of the United States was the self-conscious but highly problematic construction of the American as a new white man” (*Playing in the Dark* 39).

Understanding literature as a signpost of national identity, Charles Chesnutt, in his 1899 address before the Bethel Literary and Historical Association, delivered a speech entitled “Literature in Relation to Life” in which he declared: “Would you know a nation, read its books” (114). Fifty-four years earlier in his October 4, 1845 missive “Marginalia” to the *Broadway Journal*, Edgar Allen Poe highlighted one of the problems facing American books:

⁴ Benedict Anderson coined the phrase “imagined communities” in his 1983 book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*.

There is not a more disgusting spectacle under the sun than our subserviency to British criticism. It is disgusting, first because it is truckling, servile, pusillanimous-secondly, because of its gross irrationality. We *know* the British to bear us little but ill will-we know that, in no case, do they utter unbiased opinions of American books-we know that in the few instances in which our writers have been treated with common decency in England, these writers have either openly paid homage to English institutions, or have had lurking at the bottom of their hearts a secret principle at war with Democracy:-we *know* all this, and yet, day after day, submit our necks to the degrading yoke of the crudest opinion that emanates from the fatherland. Now if we must have nationality, let it be a nationality that will throw off this yoke (582-3).

Black writers, for decades to come, would likewise call for the throwing off of the yoke cast by white Americans' "appraisals" of Black literary productions. In "The Value of Race Literature, An Address Delivered at the First Congress of Colored Women of the United States" Victoria Earle Matthews unflinchingly addressed the "degrading yoke...from the [American] fatherland" that Black writers were subjected to when she observed that in a ten volume set of American literature, only two Black writers were featured:⁵

In the ten volumes of American Literature edited by H.L. Stoddard only Phyllis Wheatley and George W. Williams [found] a place. This does not show that we have done nothing in literature; far from it, but it does show that we have done nothing so brilliant, so effective, so startling as to attract the attention of *these* editors [emphasis added]. Now it is a fact that thoughtful, scholarly white people do not look for literature in its highest sense, from us any more than they look for high scholarship, profound and critical learning on any one point, nor for any eminent judicial acumen or profound insight into causes and effects (137).

⁵ R.H. Stoddard (not H.L. Stoddard) edited *The Poets and Poetry of America* in 1872, *Female Poets of America* in 1874, and the ten volume *Bric-a-Brac Series* between 1874 and 1876.

Matthews, like Black writers before and after her, understood quite clearly the critical fiction and political instrument that was the American literary canon. Canon building “[would be] empire building. Canon defense [would be] national defense” and the mission of the American literary canon would be the beatification of whiteness (Morrison “Unspeakable Things Unspoken...” 2304).

The appeal for an American literature, ushered in by the twin forces of the Industrial Revolution and the American Revolution, resulted ultimately in the production of a lot of literature. Contrary to popular imagination, the literary terrain of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was not a barren one inhabited by a group of select, inspired geniuses. Matthew Pethers argued that “overabundance rather than scarcity, and excess rather than infertility” typified the American literary scene in the eighteenth-century: “The number of newspapers published per year in the United States increased by something like 900 percent between 1778 and 1798 (Pasley 403), while the number of literary works issuing from the press grew twelvefold over the same period (Asthon 113)” (574, 575). This democratic literary landscape populated by any and all who could write was bemoaned by some who saw writing as the dominion of an elite few. A contributor to the white-owned, white-run Bostonian periodical *The Monthly Anthology and the Boston Review* lamented in 1807 the consequences of this literary boom: “‘Since books are so excessively multiplied, it is our duty to destroy useless, unnecessary, and pernicious productions, as the ancient Grecians exposed their most puny and imbecile offspring to perish’” (qtd. in Pethers 594). The anonymous contributor cum literary critic revealed that contrary to contemporary misunderstanding of this literary stage in American letters, a paucity of literature would have been welcomed by many. It is to be

noted that such a lament by whom we can only assume to be an average lay person was no different in tone and texture than that of a heralded British Romantic across the pond fifteen years later: “In whatever country literature is widely diffused, there will be many who mistake an intense desire to possess the reputation of poetic genius, for the actual powers, and original tendencies which constitute it” (Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*... 38).

Creators of and contributors to Black-owned newspapers and periodicals were as concerned with the consequences of textual overproduction and the quality of American literature as white critics were. Black-owned newspapers and periodicals, which were critically important to the project of both Black literacy and Black literature, forcibly democratized American literature by creating a space for Black readers, writers, critics, and editors of American letters to engage in the discourse on literature: “It is no coincidence that the rise of the African American press paralleled the development of literary societies and literary culture...a primary goal of these texts was to foster the development of what one early contributor to the black press called ‘a literary character’” (McHenry 84-5). Although Black literary societies were “formed by free Blacks in the urban north...as a place to read and experiment with rhetorical strategies,” not everyone could safely or geographically access those literary societies, but as long as you were literate, you could access Black newspapers and periodicals as a reader of, as a contributor to, as a writer for, or as an editor of said publications (McHenry 23). With the inaugural issue of *Freedom’s Journal* in 1827, “newspapers published by and for the African American community were able to advance and advertise the existence of literary character in the black community” as well as shape “a black readership by disseminating

a sense of the importance of reading and literary activity to the future of the black community” (McHenry 85). And in this project of creating a literary character among Blacks, all hands seemed to be on deck. Black readers, writers, and editors alike readily contributed to the conversation on American letters.

In the July 20, 1839 issue of *The Colored American*, a commentator noted the problem with the quality of writing that had resulted from textual overproduction. In catering to “the public taste...” to “secure the most extensive reading, almost without regard to the good, or the evil, which might ensue,” writers had moved readers away from “solid reading” (“Solid Reading”). The Bible and “books upon theology of the Bible, or books illustrating great principles” were identified by said contributor as “solid reading” (“Solid Reading”). An unnamed contributor to the January 4, 1862 issue of *The Christian Recorder*, the oldest existing Black periodical in the United States, lamented at length about the consequences of a saturated literary marketplace in a submission aptly titled “Difficulties of Authors”:

As regards works of sterling merit, an author at the present day is at a greater disadvantage, because he must write for the many, and not for the few...as to poetry, all the figures and resources of the poet, and all the similes and metaphors are so familiar, that men regard new poetry like new sermons – as a very unnecessary re-production of things long familiar to the mind. But those who cater for the many must remember, as Aristotle said, that they must calculate on an audience of a ‘very ordinary or unsophisticated set of people.’ The consequence is, said Thomas Moore, that since those ‘Who live to please, must please to live,’ authors will learn to write down to the lowest standard...

Echoing Coleridge’s earlier critique about the quality of work passing itself off as poetry,

another contributor, “Irenaeus,” scathingly instructed readers of the November 26, 1864 issue of *The Christian Recorder* to simply stop writing poetry:

If you cannot help it, if it sings in your head and will be head [sic], why then there is no other way but to put it upon paper and send it to the printer. But try to help it if you can. There are only two or three poets alive at any one time. A great poet makes and marks an age; and poor poets, or those who think they are poets and are not, are plenty as blackberries...Rhymes are not poetry. Verse is not poetry. You may make correct verse with faultless rhymes, and there is not a gleam of poetry in it. Poetry requires a peculiar faculty, the imagination; and you may have genius, sense, learning, and the power of expression, so as to write prose to rival Burke or Johnson, and after all, may make yourself ridiculous by trying your hand at poetry. Write prose (“Do not write poetry”).⁶

Even editors joined the chorus. In the September 2, 1886 issue of *The Christian Recorder*, the editors mandated the following: “DO NOT SEND us more rhyme for poetry nor the skeleton of poetry where prose would do as well” (“DO NOT SEND”). Noting the particularly difficult task before editors in deciding what literature to print and what not to print, the editors of *Freedom’s Journal* noted in a December 5, 1828 entry titled “Our Labours”:

To suit the taste of a few is always difficult; more especially when the great body consider themselves as competent judges, and more than qualified, to issue such a publication as ours...it is invariably easier to advise than to perform...In literature as in politicks, we wish for no king, no dictation.

As Matthew Pethers stated in “The Rage for Bookmaking, Textual Overproduction and the Crisis of Knowledge in the Early Republic,” “...it is possible to contend that the

⁶ Irenaeus, and the aforementioned “critics” clearly espoused elitist and anti-democratic sentiments regarding literature, bolstering the idea that works of “sterling merit” could only be produced by the few for the few.

specter of textual overproduction was critical in the emergence of a modern artistic sensibility” for whites as well as for Blacks (603). As the abovementioned observations reveal, sheer textual overabundance made it both difficult and necessary to discern literature from writing and Blacks and whites alike participated in the critical task of distinguishing one from the other.

For an overwhelming number of white readers of Black writers however, the difficulty in discerning whether Black writing was literature or just writing was quickly resolved by the race of the author: “...since the slave was incapable of mastering the ‘difficult’ English tongue, how could one take seriously the idea of a Black American [writer]? Most did not...” (Henderson 174). Black writers, in the eyes of their majority white audience, could not be real writers. After all, real writers were marked by genius, not just skill. The artist, as opposed to the common artisan or craftsman, was “a special kind of person” who engaged in activities that required specialized skills, sensibility, imagination, and thought (Williams 5). None of these attributes were culturally or scientifically associated with the Black body in the eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries.⁷ Between the racist scientific theories of the Enlightenment that firmly established persons of African descent as innately inferior⁸ and penalties enacted against persons teaching

⁷ For George Moses Horton, who aspired to be seen as a real writer, as an artist, necessity and demand turned him into an artisan. Aware of his genius, male students at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill would special order and purchase acrostics from George Moses Horton to court potential love interests. Horton’s selling of poems was in part due to material necessity as he sought to raise money to buy his own freedom. His selling of poems like common ware however arguably cheapened the value of his skilled labor. Horton quietly disclosed his self-consciousness about the devaluation of his labor in his poetry. Moses Horton, like Wheatley, battled on the page space to offset the brand of crude laborer foisted upon him by circumstance and race. Like Wheatley, Moses Horton constantly called attention to himself as a refined laborer and his work as refined labor to ameliorate the effects of being treated as an artisan.

⁸ See, among others, George Cuvier, Carolus Linnaeus, Immanuel Kant’s *Observations on the Beautiful and the Sublime*, and Thomas Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia*.

slaves to write, writing was established to be beyond the province or right of the so-called sons of Ham.⁹ Black people could be crude laborers but they could not be refined laborers. The call for and creation of an American national literature would therefore not include Blacks. This new American literature would define, defend, and codify as “American” exactly what the Constitution and every legal and extralegal document, law, and practice before and after slavery defined, defended, and consequently codified as American - whiteness.

Literarily, the call for a national American literature was really a call for a *white* American national literature –one produced, published, read, consumed, and canonized by those politically and racially understood to be white and therefore “American.” The project of creating a national and distinct literature was not one that would welcome, consider, or much less legitimize the Black presence. Intellectual productivity and specialization were not the domain of crude laborers whose only tools were their hands, not their minds.¹⁰ Henri Gregoire’s 1808 *On the Cultural Achievements of Negroes* proved the saliency of this idea by citing David Hume who “...[distinguished] four or five races but [maintained] that only the white race [possessed] culture and that no black [had] ever distinguished himself by his actions or by his knowledge” (20). The new American literature would be one created and defined by those who possessed culture and intellectual capacity, those invested with cultural capital, not by those considered actual capital.

⁹ See, for example, South Carolina’s 1740 “Act for Better Ordering Negroes and Other Slaves” in *Stono: Documenting and Interpreting a Southern Slave Revolt* by Mark Michael Smith.

¹⁰ See “Science in Antebellum America” in Mason Lowance Jr.’s *A House Divided: The Antebellum Slavery Debates in America 1776-1865*.

Interestingly, in Margaret Fuller's call for an authentic American literature reflective of a "mixed race" was the implicit understanding of Americans as a mixed race, but what was the mix? More than sixty years earlier, in 1782, Michel-Guillaume-Jean de Crevecoeur pointed to the admixture that made up this new brand of people called Americans. In *Letters From an American Farmer* de Crevecoeur clarified who this new American was: "...whence came all these people? [T]hey are a mixture of English, Scotch, Irish, French, Dutch, Germans, and Swedes. From this promiscuous breed, that race now called Americans have arisen...The Americans were once scattered all over Europe; here they are incorporated into one of the finest systems of population which has ever appeared" (41, 44). Europeans were the Americans. However, there were "others" in the colonies de Crevecoeur wrote about. In "Letter III, What is An American?" de Crevecoeur shared that he "ate an hearty supper" with "Indians" (71). He did not call them Americans nor did he include them in the mix that made up the emerging American nation. Curiously, de Crevecoeur boasted that in this new land there were no princes for whom to "toil," "starve," and "bleed" (41). That was certainly true for him and those he deemed American. In fact, de Crevecoeur proclaimed of the colonies and its inhabitants: "...we are the most perfect society now existing in the world. Here man is free as he ought to be..." (41). According to the population statistics from the 1790 United States Census, there were almost 700,000 *documented* slaves (counted as three-fifths of a person) among a population of almost four million people (Lowance, Jr. 6). Not all were as free as they ought to have been.

However, in "Letter IX" of *Letters From an American Farmer* de Crevecoeur wrote movingly of the "unfortunate" race. de Crevecoeur wrote of African slaves in

Charles-Town, South Carolina and their unfortunate plight far from their *native* home: “The chosen race eat, live, and drink happy, while the unfortunate one grubs up the ground, raises indigo, or husks the rice; exposed to a sun full as scorching as their native one...” (160). Twice in this epistle de Crevecoeur referred to Africa as slaves’ native home. For some this was no doubt true. But there were others who had already been born in the nascent republic or, like Phillis Wheatley, had arrived at such a young age that all they knew was America. For de Crevecoeur, however, neither Indians nor Africans/Blacks were understood to be Americans. He referred to neither as such. Those of European stock could blend and mix to become Americans. The “others” could not. This idea of dissolving into American-ness would famously reappear in Israel Zangwill’s 1908 *The Melting Pot* where again we would be presented with the notion that only select peoples of European ancestry could become American simply “by being received in the broad lap of our great Alma Mater” (de Crevecoeur 43). Sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, commenting on Zangwill’s play, explained the history of American-hood in the documentary *Race: The Power of an Illusion*:

So when the Irish, when Germans, when Italians were coming, they didn’t speak the language, they didn’t know the culture. The idea was they would assimilate into American-hood. They would become American, which in the American tradition has meant *white* American. But that melting pot never included people of color. Blacks, Chinese, Puerto Ricans, etcetera, could not melt into the pot. They could be used as wood to produce the fire for the pot but they could not be used as material to be melted into the pot.

Being *in*, as W.E.B. Du Bois would say about his experience at Harvard University, did not mean being *of*. The Black body, by design, would be rendered as invisible in the literary sphere of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as it had been in the socio-

political sphere. And yet, the call for and creation of a “new” national literature, just like the call for and creation of a “new” American republic, would include this hyper-visible / invisible population – be they welcomed or not.

Toni Morrison, in her 1988 University of Michigan Tanner Lecture on Human Values, delivered an address entitled “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature” in which she responded to the purported “absence” of the Black presence and Black writing in and from the canon of early American literature by stating: “Invisible things are not necessarily ‘not there’... certain absences are so stressed, so ornate, so planned, they call attention to themselves; arrest us with intentionality and purpose, like neighborhoods that are defined by the population held away from them” (2306). Morrison’s observation regarding the historically constructed invisibility of the Black presence in American literature writ large was true, and was particularly true of Black writing in colonial and Revolutionary-era America.¹¹ Black writers’ literary erasure from the canonical American literary scene was purposeful. It was, in effect, the cultural extension and manifestation of the legal erasure that began on this unwelcoming soil in 1619 as part of an empire building process:

Canon building is empire building. Canon defense is national defense. Canon debate, whatever the terrain, nature, and range (of criticism, of history, of the history of knowledge, of the definition of language, the universality of aesthetic principles, the sociology of art, the humanistic imagination), is the clash of cultures. And *all* of the interests are vested (Morrison, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken...” 2304).

¹¹ In Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark* the Black presence Morrison engaged was not that of Black writers and Black authored literary productions per se but Blackness as a metaphor or trope in white-authored texts. Morrison was intrigued by how Blackness was fashioned in the white literary imagination and how it consequently manifested itself in early American canonical literature.

The ink of Black writers would be rendered invisible from the canon of American literature for another important reason.

Frantz Fanon, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, noted, “When you examine at close quarters the colonial context, it is evident that what parcels out the world is to begin with the fact of belonging to or not belonging to a given race, a given species” (32). Between Enlightenment science, travel literature that was “widely read in England prior to North American settlement and was well known in the colonies after that,” and biblical thinking that “described black Africans as the descendants of Noah’s son, Ham, cursed...to a state of permanent and eternal servitude,” a “striking negative portrayal of Africans and their ways of life” was firmly in place by the time Lucy Terry, Venture Smith, Briton Hammon, Jupiter Hammon, John Marrant, Oladuah Equiano, Phillis Wheatley, and others published their works. Those portrayals of Africans helped maintain and perpetuate the system of slavery in particular and the racist hierarchal order in general. Black-authored writing however shattered the negative portrayals of African descended people that had petrified into “truth” by the seventeenth-century and called into question the validity, authority, and force of the racial caste system. The invisible-izing of Black-authored writing served as a kind of national defense, a way of maintaining the racial status quo. A survey of eighteenth-century white-authored writings on Phillis Wheatley would reveal the danger posed by Black writing to essentialist arguments about Africans’ lack of “‘Reason which [was] peculiar unto man...’” that undergirded the white supremacist racial order (qtd. in Lowance, Jr. 251).¹²

¹² It is important to note here that while Wheatley’s collection of poems was published in London in 1773, it did not appear on the American scene until 1786. Boston publishers would not publish *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* even though Wheatley had already established a local audience in New

Included in the 1783 London publication *Choice of the Best Poetical Pieces of the Most Eminent English Poets*, was Phillis Wheatley's poem "Recollection, to Miss A—M—." It was followed by Horatio Walpole's poem "On Voltaire."¹³ Featuring Wheatley's poem in this collection of verse, couched between the works of two European writers, cemented her standing as a noteworthy poet of the English language, and more importantly rendered her work equal to those of the "masters" she was charged with parroting. Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* was likewise included in Thomas King's 1792 seven-volume set *A Catalogue of Books, Containing Many Valuable Articles in Ancient and Modern Literature*. In 1781, a poem entitled "On Reading the Poems of Phillis Wheatley" written by "Philanthea" appeared in Mary Deverell's *Miscellanies in Prose and Verse, Mostly Written in the Epistolary Style...*¹⁴ The speaker, singing the praises of Britain for calling "the seeds of [Wheatley's] genius forth," also "[praised] the artist" for her genius:

Though no high birth nor titles grace her line,
 Yet humble Phillis boasts a race divine;
 Like marble that in quarries lie conceal'd,
 Till all its veins, by *polish*, stand reveal'd;
 From whence such groups of images arise,
 We praise the artist, and the sculpture prize.
 Go on, sweet maid, of Providence once more
 Divinely-sing, and charm another shore;
 No fetters thus thy genius shall controul,
 No iron laws restrain thy towering soul (9-18).

England as well as an international audience in London after the publication of her broadside to Reverend George Whitefield in 1770.

¹³ Joseph Retzer published this six-volume collection. Wheatley was featured in the fourth volume of the collection.

¹⁴ The full title of Deverell's multi-volume work was *Miscellanies in Prose and Verse, Mostly Written in the Epistolary Style: Chiefly Upon Moral Subjects, and Particularly Calculated for the Improvement of Younger Minds*. The poem on Wheatley appeared in the second volume of that work.

While it is true that Mary Deverell published this tribute to Wheatley under a nom de plume, suggesting the kind of hostility she could face for extoling a young, enslaved Black woman, she still published the poem. Not only was Wheatley referred to as an artist in “On Reading the Poems of Phillis Wheatley” – a high distinction in the eighteenth-century—her genius was referred to *twice*. This re-presentation of Wheatley as an equal in the kingdom of culture surely endangered claims about African inferiority. One would be pressed to find the kind of acclaim Wheatley received in London, where slavery was receiving its last rites, duplicated in her country of enslavement.

Brief mentions of Phillis Wheatley did appear in local newspapers and magazines across six British American colonies, a significant feat considering the fact that she was a young enslaved Black woman, but those mentions were limited to New England publications.¹⁵ Mentions of Wheatley in American publications never approached the extended defenses of intellect and capacity seen in London publications nor did they approximate the tributes also seen in London publications (Isani 260). The repeated references to Wheatley in colonial newspapers were nonetheless significant because colonial newspapers and magazines did not have much page space to dedicate to anything but serious, political happenings since most colonial publications were “almost universally only four pages long” (Isani 260). Editors of those publications had to be incredibly judicious about what made it into print. Save for George Washington, who in his thanking of Wheatley for the poem she had written about him referred to Wheatley’s “elegant lines” and noted that her “style and manner [exhibited] striking proof of [her] poetical talents,” the recognition bestowed upon Wheatley by her Revolutionary-era

¹⁵ New England was the seat of the American literary scene, which explains why Wheatley appeared in New England publications.

contemporaries did not near the generous acknowledgments she received from Londoners. Why would this be the case? The following valuations of Wheatley and her work clarify why she, along with other Black writers, were not heralded in their own country.

Thomas Clarkson, in his 1785 London anti-slavery tract *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, Particularly the African...* defended Phillis Wheatley by saying, “if the authoress was designed for slavery, (as the argument must confess) the greater part of the inhabitants of Britain must lose their claim to freedom” (175).¹⁶ Wheatley, in other words, was no more fit for slavery than the British (read: whites) were. Addressing the customary rejoinder issued by pro-slavery apologists that Wheatley and Ignatius Sancho were exceptional “prodigies” and not representative of all Blacks, Clarkson said “if these are prodigies, they are only such prodigies as every day would produce, if they had the same opportunities of acquiring knowledge as other people, and the same expectations in life to excite their genius” (176). The condition of Africans and African descended people, Clarkson argued, was the result of nurture, not nature. Thomas Burgess, in his 1789 London anti-slavery treatise *Considerations on the Abolition of Slavery and the Slave Trade, Upon Grounds of Natural, Religious, and Political Duty* likewise argued the following in regard to the capacity of Black people: “It appears that we repress the natural powers of their minds, and then accuse them of not exhibiting any marks of intellectual capacity: we reduce them to, or keep them in a situation the most unfavourable to any exhibition of capacity, and then deny that they

¹⁶ The full title of Clarkson’s work is *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, Particularly the African, Translated from a Latin Dissertation, Which Was Honoured With the First Prize in the University of Cambridge*. Clarkson featured three of Wheatley’s poems – “From an Hymn to the Evening,” “From an Hymn to the Morning,” and “From Thoughts on Imagination” as proof of her genius.

possess it” (130-131). Lauding Phillis Wheatley and Ignatius Sancho’s “extraordinary efforts of imagination, of moral judgment, of political prudence, and abstract reasoning,” Burgess said of Wheatley and Sancho that their works were “testimonies that the African mind [was] susceptible of very superior improvement” (133). It is clear why those in power in America would want the ink of all Black writers in the ante-bellum and post-bellum era rendered “absent” from the canon of American literature and from the larger socio-political terrain. The threat to white supremacy posed by the existence of Black writing would have been too much for white America to bear/bare but suffer it they did. From petitions for freedom to slave narratives, Black writers rose up from the bowels of the acrid tomb that was America to bear witness to their own lives.

Testifying to their lives would not be easy. Black writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries lived in a republic defined by two systems, that of a “universal” egalitarianism and that of a Herrenvolk republicanism. These two ideo-political systems, in the estimation of the majority of white Americans, did not exist in ideological or political opposition. America was decidedly invested in and shaped by its allegiance to slavery, racism, and equality among equals. By 1639 “statutes were enacted by the Virginia Council specifically prohibiting Blacks from arming themselves. By as early as 1660, Africans in Virginia were relegated by statute to the lowest human status” (Browne-Marshall 3). The Louisiana Purchase of 1803; the founding of the American Colonization Society in 1816; the 1820 Missouri Compromise; the revival of (1804 and 1807) “Black Laws” in states like Ohio which, in 1829, barred free blacks from entering the state; the rise and popularization of minstrelsy in the 1830’s; the Wilmot-Proviso Act of 1846; the Compromise of 1850 with the attached Fugitive Slave Act; the Dred Scott

decision of 1857; Southern secession in 1861; the Civil War, the failure of Reconstruction, and the Nadir decidedly evinced the existence of and America's commitment to a politically and racially bifurcated nation firmly entrenched and invested in white supremacy. Black writing threatened one of the central ideologies necessary to maintaining such a system of oppression for if writing was a marker of civilization, an indicator of intellectual capacity and equality, and Black people could write, then they were – by Anglo-America's own criteria – civilized and equal.

Given the prevailing “social, political, and economic situation,” Black people appropriated and customized the literary tools of the lords of the land “and began an autogenic reformulation of their literary and cultural representation,” recreating themselves “as human beings endowed with reason, imagination, memory, and history” (Twagilimana xv). In taking up writing, Black writers, like their white American counterparts, started with what was culturally and immediately available—European literary forms and conventions— but unlike their white American counterparts, Black writers “[passed] through the throes of an enforced re-birth into the epoch of an alien and dominating civilization” (Brathwaite, “Some Contemporary Poets...” 51). Although Dickson Bruce Jr. contends, in *Black American Writing from the Nadir...*, that “black and white Americans were members of the same cultural community, for whom the same literary models were common property...” (13-14), it must be made clear that black and white Americans were not members of the same cultural community as much as they were people occupying the same physical and cultural space. Because of cultural imperialism however, European literary models forcibly became “common property.” That “common property” was customized through cunning assimilation. Through

cunning assimilation, Black writers ushered in “new cultural forms [that emerged] from the collision of pre-existing traditions” (Taylor, “Black Aesthetics” 6).

In “200 Hundred Years of American Negro Poetry,” Langston Hughes reviewed the writing produced by Black poets in the context of “an alien and dominating civilization”:

...the basic and most pertinent matter of Negro poetry [was] not love, roses, moonlight, or death or sorrow in the abstract, but race, color, and the emotional problems related thereunto in a land that [treated] its black citizens, including poets, like pariahs...It would seem...only fitting and proper, if art [was] to be an intensification or enlargement of life, or to give adequate comment on what living [was] like in the poet’s own time, that Negro art be largely a protest art (95).

In “A Century of Negro Portraiture,” Sterling Brown likewise noted that “[creative] literature...was the exception with [early Black writers]” since “an embattled people used literature as a weapon, as propaganda; not as exploration, but as exposé of injustice” (75). It is true that much of the Black-authored literary productions that emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries were allied in the battle for political freedom. The gravity and shadow of slavery and all the subsequent legal and extra-legal maneuverings that came to replace slavery loomed threateningly over the very existence of all Blacks. Quite simply, many Black writers could not afford to not use their literary platform in service of a larger political platform. The political imperatives of the time coupled with the dominant American civic-oriented view that literature’s province was to teach, uplift, and impart truth situated black literary production as the artistic / cultural component of the larger struggle for freedom and citizenship.

In understanding the utilitarian function of literature, Black poets of the early period were not unlike their white counterparts who understood writing as “a tool for political analysis” and who believed in “a form of classical republicanism that took civic prosperity as its central concern” (Pethers 576). White authors of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries understood imaginative works as subordinate to the larger imperative – civic responsibility. For Black writers however, their sense of civic responsibility came into sharp conflict with the dominant herrenvolk society’s civic responsibility to keep hierarchies of power firmly in place. But like their white counterparts, Black writers were also artists and thought, as artists do, about the *art* they were crafting even if that thought was sometimes secondary to larger political concerns. Black writers “in the New World knew well the demand of the speech-act they had to perform: to enter the masters’ language and act from within it...” (Twagilimana 78). Black writers were actively engaged in critically thinking about the aesthetics of the literature they produced. One need not look any further than the first page of Olaudah Equiano’s narrative *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, The African* to see an obvious concern with aesthetics. In fact, the very first half of the very first paragraph of Equiano’s 1789 narrative found him contemplating not only his writerly act, which he referred to as an “imperfect sketch,” but the readerly act as well as the problems inherent in the autobiographical form:

I believe it is difficult for those who publish their own memoirs to escape the imputation of vanity. Nor is this the only disadvantage under which they labour: it is also their misfortune, that whatever is uncommon is rarely, if ever, believed, and from what is obvious we are apt to turn with disgust, and to charge the writer of it with impertinence. People generally think those memoirs only worthy to be read or remembered which

abound in great or striking events; those in short, which, in a high degree, excite either admiration or pity: all others they consign to contempt and oblivion...I offer here the history of neither a saint, a hero, nor a tyrant (11).

Equiano contemplated, in a comprehensive way, the full writing experience – from its creation, to its reception, to his particular representation in letters. Importantly, Equiano called attention to the fact that he was a writer thinking about writing by not only sharing his thoughts with readers on writing but sharing those thoughts in the very first paragraph of his narrative. No matter what political purpose his work served, Equiano was a writer and privileged that identity by featuring it first in his narrative. In regard to writing and his role as a writer, Equiano strategically revealed later in the narrative that before he was literate, books did not “speak” to him: “[He] had a great curiosity to talk to the books...and then put [his] ears to it...in hopes it would answer him...” and was “very much concerned when [he] found it remaining silent” (43-44). The books Equiano had access to did not resonate with him, did not “speak” to him. How did Equiano, the writer, respond to and resolve the silence of those books once he became literate? He wrote a book that did speak to him and for him – his own.

A Narrative of the Lord’s Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, A Black, (Now Going to Preach Gospel in Nova-Scotia) also began as Equiano’s narrative began –with the author, John Marrant, reflecting on his narrative: “I John Marrant...wish these gracious dealings of the Lord with me to be published, in hopes they may be useful to others, to encourage the fearful, to confirm the wavering, and to refresh the hearts of true believers” (7). While Marrant did not explicitly refer to his role as a writer (Reverend William Aldridge was his amanuensis), he did express a clear understanding of what writing had the power to do: it had the power to have a practical application, it had the

power to hearten, to assure, and to restore. Like Equiano, Marrant dedicated his very first paragraph to the function and power of the written word.

Although Black writing emerged within a white supremacist state, it was not simply responsive or reactive in kind although, as Toni Morrison notes, “A work does not get better because it is responsive to another culture; nor does it become automatically flawed because of that responsiveness” (“Unspeakable Things...” 2312). Since eighteenth and nineteenth-century Black life was shaped and defined by slavery and racism however, slavery and race/ism became the super-ordinate themes of early Black literature. That the majority of Black literature of the eighteenth and particularly nineteenth-centuries were either “protest” literature or “purpose” literature reflects that reality. Explaining the “protest” and “purpose” quality in / of black writing in the nineteenth-century in particular, Anna Julia Cooper wrote in 1892:

The fact is, a sense of freedom in mind as well as in body is necessary to the appreciative and inspiring pursuit of the beautiful. A bird cannot warble out his fullest and most joyous notes while the wires of his cage are pricking and cramping him at every heart beat. His tones become only the shrill and poignant protest of rage and despair. And so the black man’s vexations and chafing environment, even since his physical emancipation has given him speech, has goaded him into the eloquence and fire of oratory rather than the genial warmth and cheery glow of either poetry or romance (“The Negro as Presented...” 223-4).

For Cooper, the black-authored text was fashioned by and subject to “vexations and [a] chafing environment” (223-4). James Monroe Whitfield’s “The Misanthropist” and Paul Laurence Dunbar’s “Sympathy” likewise rendered Cooper’s theory on the black-authored text as a literary production shaped by confining extra-literary realities. In

James Monroe Whitfield's "The Misanthropist" the speaker sang the shrill notes of rage and despair brought on by the cage of slavery, race, and racism:

In vain thou bid'st me strike the lyre,
And sing a song of mirth and glee,
Or, kindling with poetic fire,
Attempt some higher minstrelsy;
In vain, in vain!

...
Then how can I attune the lyre
To strains of love, or joyous glee?
Break forth in patriotic fire,
Or soar on higher minstrelsy

...
Let others strike the sounding string,

...
mine must still the portion be,
However dark and drear the doom,
To live estranged from sympathy
(1-5, 133-6, 144, 147-149).

Paul Laurence Dunbar, a year after Cooper composed the aforementioned critical evaluation of black writing, wrote: "I know why the caged bird sings, ah me, / When his wing is bruised and his bosom / sore, - / When he beats his bars and he would be free; / It is not a carol of joy or glee, / But a prayer that he sends from his heart's / deep core" (15-21). Cooper, Whitfield and Dunbar's works elucidated the situated-ness of black-authored texts and the precarious position occupied by Black writers who grappled with their notion of place in life and on the page space. For all three, and many others before and after them, "[being] situated [as Black writers] [placed] limits on what [they] could say [and] on [their] credibility in making certain statements" (Simpson 28).¹⁷ While it is true, as J. Saunders Redding observed in his now classic *To Make A Poet Black*, that many of the black writers between 1770 and 1890 "were far too much engaged with the

¹⁷ See *Situatedness or, Why We Keep Saying Where We're Coming From* by David Simpson for a fuller discussion on the concept of situatedness.

business of existence to devote hungry time to the more esthetic ends of art...often [sacrificing] beauty of thought and of truth—the specific goals of art—to the exigencies of their particular purposes,” the literature produced did reflect a clear concern with the aesthetic ends of art (47-8). The concern with aesthetics, and ultimately praxis, would first and most clearly become visible in the poems of Phillis Wheatley. It would be Phillis Wheatley’s poems that would launch the Black American literary tradition.

In his introduction to *The Origins of African American Literature, 1680-1865*, Dickson D. Bruce, Jr. credited Phillis Wheatley with being the most influential writer of the eighteenth-century to usher in “a distinctive African American literary persona...establishing patterns that would remain important for another hundred years” (x). Vincent Carretta, one of Wheatley’s biographers, referred to Phillis Wheatley as the mother of African-American literature. Though one of the most famous and most anthologized early Black writers, Phillis Wheatley’s poems “[have] served merely as a pawn in various socio-anthropological arguments. Few have taken the time or made the effort to read her poetry seriously” (Shields 267). Although *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* “went into five printings before 1800,” becoming “the international antislavery movement’s most salient argument for the African’s innate mental equality,” – virtually no one, not Voltaire (Francois-Marie Arouet)¹⁸ or Benjamin Franklin who reviewed the book, discussed the book as poetry (Gates, “Preface to Blackness...” 236).¹⁹

¹⁸ Voltaire mentioned Wheatley in a 1774 letter to Baron Constant de Rebecq noting “Fontanelle was wrong to say that there would never be poets among Negroes” since “there [was] presently a Negro woman who [wrote] very good English verse” (qtd. in Bly 12).

¹⁹ Benjamin Franklin called on Wheatley in July 1773 while in London. In a letter dated July 7, 1773 to his cousin Jonathan Williams, Sr., Franklin reported feeling unwelcomed by John Wheatley, likely because he had shown up unannounced to the Wheatley’s place of residence. Franklin did not meet with Wheatley during this visit though he indicated to his cousin that he had offered his services to her through John

Though she received recurring mentions in colonial newspapers, and though the “value of her poetry [was] recognized...there [was] also extraordinary emphasis on her status as a black poet, a slave turned intellectual, and a pious prodigy” (Isani 261). London’s *Westminster Magazine*’s 1773 review of Wheatley’s book of verse typified the response to Wheatley. The poet, explained the reviewer, was a “young and...promising poetical plant...Indeed, we were so far from expecting her to write better, that we were astonished to find her write so well” (qtd. in Isani 271).

Since the London debut of Phyllis Wheatley’s 1773 collection of poems, Wheatley has faced the same critiques by Black and white readers and writers alike for close to 250 years. The poetry of Afric’s muse has been “measured” and subsequently discounted “entirely by its [assumed] morality” ignoring almost indiscriminately the technique in her work (Symons, *Silhouettes*). In 1773, London’s *Monthly Review* said the following of Wheatley’s book of verse:

The poems written by this young negro bear no endemial marks of solar fire or spirit. They are merely imitative; and, indeed, most of those people have a turn for imitation, though they have little or none for invention (qtd. in Shields 267).

Less than ten years later, Thomas Jefferson in *Notes on the State of Virginia* said of “those people”: “in memory they are equal to the whites; in reason much inferior, as I think one could scarcely be found capable of tracing and comprehending the investigations of Euclid; and that in imagination they are dull, tasteless, and anomalous...” (7). Of Phillis Wheatley in particular, Jefferson asserted: “Religion indeed

Wheatley. Wheatley would dedicate her second unpublished volume of poems, “proposed on October 30, 1779,” to Benjamin Franklin (Shields, *Phillis Wheatley and the Romantics* 90).

has produced a Phyllis Whately [sic]; but it could not produce a poet. The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism” (8).²⁰

Interestingly, the same aforementioned 1773 *Monthly Review* critic who lamented Wheatley’s imitateness admitted, “She has written many good lines, and now and then one of superior character has dropped from her pen” (qtd. in Isani 271). In 1939, J. Saunders Redding, continuing the long tradition of disparaging both the poet and her poetry, caustically concluded:

It is this negative, bloodless, unracial quality in Phillis Wheatley that makes her seem superficial...none of her poetry is real...Miss Wheatley’s passions are tame, her skill the sedulous copy of established techniques, and her thoughts the hand-me-downs of her age. She is chilly (*To Make a Poet Black* 11).

Begrudgingly, Redding eventually permitted the following: “And yet she had poetic talents, was in fact a poet” (*To Make a Poet Black* 12). Amiri Baraka included Wheatley in the pantheon of American Negro writers producing a literature of “almost antagonizing mediocrity” because the literature she produced was “within the perfectly predictable finger painting of white bourgeois sentiment and understanding” (“The Myth of a ‘Negro Literature’” 165, 171). Did we really expect a Carolyn Rodgers or a Jayne Cortez to emerge in 1773? And yet, the poet who did emerge was far more innovative and radical than suggested or understood.

²⁰ Jefferson would likewise express his incredulity about the ability of another Black genius - Benjamin Banneker - to the writer Joel Barlow eighteen years after Banneker had penned a letter to Jefferson challenging Jefferson on his position on Blacks in *Notes on the State of Virginia*. As a riposte to Jefferson’s critique of Wheatley, Banneker made sure to include his accompanying almanac in his own writing to fend off any charges that he had not produced his own work. The strategy did not work. In 1809, Jefferson intimated to Barlow that he knew that Banneker had “spherical trigonometry enough to make almanacs, but not without the suspicious aid from Ellicott, who was his [white] neighbor and friend...” (Collier, “Paradox in Paradise: The Black Image in Revolutionary America” 8, 9).

Phillis Wheatley actively illustrated in her poems – particularly in “On Being Brought from Africa to America”— that “it ain’t what you cop, it’s about what you keep” (“Final Hour”).²¹ Her poems were not blind and unquestioning acts of absorption and regurgitation of “white bourgeois sentiment and understanding” but dexterous sleights of hand that made it appear as if she had uncritically “copped” or taken the literary “hand-me-downs” of her age. She knew that “the captors owned the masters to what [she was] writing” but with each act of copping – with each “sip” from the literary chalice of whiteness that she took, she “[baptized] her lips” – making everything anew.²² Her poetic mask may have grinned, but it also bared lies.

Countering the notion of universality in literature, William Stanley Brathwaite noted:

All kinds of poetry do not attract people who may care for poetry itself as an art...A profound lover of poetry will fail, or often find it very difficult, to enjoy the atmosphere of the art in the special kind of poetry for which his sympathy is not absolute and his understanding enlightening though not comprehensive. This point of difference, then, makes it very hard for a poet to win readers outside the group who immediately grasp his intention (“Robert Frost, New American Poet” 19, 20).

Our historical sympathy for Wheatley as a poet has not been absolute. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. succinctly summed up our 250-year-long scholarly approach to Wheatley: “In 1772 a slave girl had to prove she was a poet. She’s had to do so ever since” (“Phillis Wheatley on Trial” 82). Phillis Wheatley went on trial in 1772 before an august group of eighteen white men, the “New England illuminati,” to prove that she indeed was not only

²¹ The quote comes from Lauryn Hill’s song “Final Hour” from her debut solo album *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*.

²² “Thieves in the Night” appears in hip-hop duo Black Star’s 1998 self-titled album: “Not free, we only licensed, Not live, we just exciting / Cause the captors own the masters to what we writing.”

the author of her collection of verse, but a poet (Gates, "Phillis Wheatley on Trial" 82).

She has been on trial ever since.

CHAPTER II

“IT AIN’T WHAT YOU COP, IT’S ABOUT WHAT YOU KEEP”: MIMICRY AS A TREACHEROUS ACT, OR, THE IMPORTANCE OF TITLES

I’m making sure I’m with the 144
I’ve been here before
This ain’t a battle, this is war
Word to Boonie, I make salat like a Sunni
Get diplomatic immunity in every ghetto community
Had opportunity – went from hood shock to hood chic
But it ain’t what you cop, it’s about what you keep
And even if there are leaks, you can’t capsize this ship
Cuz I baptize my lips every time I take sips
“Final Hour”- Lauryn Hill

By the time Phillis Wheatley emerged as a poet in the savage garden that was colonial America the white man “for most theorists of the eighteenth century... was the human norm, the Negro was the deviation” (Davis 456). Correlating blackness and inferiority as a self-evident association, Immanuel Kant asserted that ““so fundamental [was] the difference between the black and white races of man, that it [appeared] to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in color”” (qtd. in Lowance, Jr. 251). Draped in the regalia of scientific garb, racist Enlightenment thinkers specifically pointed to the absence of linguistic mastery as proof of the African’s lack of intellect and culture. The existence of Black-authored texts exploded beliefs about Black people’s fixed intellectual inferiority. Black writers clearly betrayed the idea that they could not ascend the Great Chain of Being vis-à-vis the act of writing. Not only was writing for the enslaved an illegal act in numerous colonies, and later states, it was an act of treachery committed by all Black writers, free or enslaved, in that it violated the legitimacy of the racial order set forth by the masters of the land.

Defined as “Deceit, cheating, perfidy; violation of faith or betrayal of trust” or “treason against a sovereign, lord, or master,” the treachery committed by Phillis Wheatley in *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* came in the form of mimicry (“Treachery”). Mimicry allowed Wheatley to speak double-voiced and double-linguaged. Through mimicry, Wheatley re-presented “[another’s] language while still retaining the capacity to sound simultaneously both outside it and within it, to talk about it and at the same time to talk in and with it” (Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel” 358). The act of speaking double-voiced enabled Wheatley to deftly hide her perfidy behind the mask of repetition. The title of her collection of verse, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* and the title of her poem, “On Being Brought from Africa to America,” illustrated just how dangerous Wheatley’s acts of repetition could be. By guilefully echoing the literary traditions of her day, Wheatley undid the very traditions she re-cited. Through mimicry, Wheatley poetically answered, centuries in advance, June Jordan’s principal question in “The Difficult Miracle of Black Poetry In America or Something Like a Sonnet for Phillis Wheatley” –How do you “Come to this country a slave and how should you sing?” (177).

In “The Muse of History,” Derek Walcott explained how the Black writer, once in the “New World,” *could* sing and that was through cunning assimilation. Walcott provided the example of how enslaved Africans in the Atlantic world modified their master’s religion to their own ends without foregoing their own religious cosmology.¹ What looked like acquiescence, like surrender to the outside world, was really the African’s rebirth. Walcott used this example as a model for literary contemporaries

¹ See the introduction to this manuscript for Walcott’s quote on cunning assimilation.

struggling to overcome, through literature, the historical “shipwreck” that began with slavery (“The Muse of History” 357). The outright rejection of the language and literary forms of the master, Walcott argued, did nothing else but prove “that by openly fighting tradition we [perpetuated] it” (“The Muse of History” 354). Walcott held instead the idea that “maturity [was] the assimilation of the features of every ancestor...” (“The Muse of History” 354). Just as those first enslaved Africans cunningly assimilated the religion of masters, so too, Walcott proposed, could Black writers cunningly assimilate the literature of their masters. Phillis Wheatley had done just that. Phillis Wheatley cunningly assimilated the literature of her masters, taking and making use of Anglo-European literary tradition without authority or right. In doing so, Wheatley “created herself a poet, notwithstanding and in despite of everything around her” (Jordan 177).

How did this enslaved Black girl create herself a poet? “What did she read? What did she memorize?” (Jordan, “The Difficult Miracle...” 177). What was given to this African child to learn, to consume, and to repeat?

Of course, it was white, all of it: white. It was English, most of it, from England. It was written, all of it, by white men taking their pleasure, their walks, their pipes, their pens and their paper, rather seriously, while somebody else cleaned the house, washed the clothes, cooked the food, watched the children...It was written, this white man’s literature of England, while somebody else did the other things that [had] to be done. And that was the literature absorbed by the slave, Phillis Wheatley. That was the writing, the mannerisms, the games, the illusions, the discoveries, the filth and the flowers that filled up the mind of the African child (“The Difficult Miracle...” 177).

And what did this African child do with “the filth and the flowers that filled up [her] mind”? *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* evinces what Wheatley did with all of the literature she absorbed; she dexterously customized the literary heirlooms that

had been bequeathed to her. These acts of customization necessitated the wounding if not outright destruction of the original heirlooms: “The principle of destruction is the principle of life. It is your business, if you are bringing a new force into the world, to begin by killing or at least wounding, a tradition, even if the tradition once had all the virtues” (Brathwaite, qtd. in “Amy Lowell Again Assails Tradition” 31). Though her poems outwardly bowed to the very literary traditions and discourses given her, Wheatley’s “portrait[s] of composure / [were really] crosshatched like tribal marks” (Komunyakaa, “Lament & Praise Song” 7-9). Wheatley was able to dissemble and wound tradition vis-à-vis her familiar portraits of composure. As Hans Robert Jauss discerned in “Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory,”

A literary work, even when it appears to be new, does not present itself as something absolutely new in an informational vacuum, but predisposes its audience to a very specific kind of reception by announcements, overt and covert signals, familiar characteristics, or implicit allusions. It awakens memories of what was already read...(167).

By presenting titles that read as known and knowable, Wheatley was able to escape from the masters’ literary plantation undetected and protected by “overt and covert signals” that veiled her defection as a permitted crossing. Given “a dictionary and a place to write,” Wheatley began her act of literary maroonage – her literary escape from her “place” as a slave— by writing to an audience she had no right to address.

Walter J. Ong, in “The Writer’s Audience Is Always a Fiction,” asked “How does the writer give body to the audience for whom he [or she] writes...[if] [readers] do not form a collectivity, acting here and now on one another and on the speaker as members of an audience do [?]” (10, 11). Ong concluded that a writer, if s/he “[succeeded] in

writing...[fictionalized] in his [or her] imagination an audience he [or she] [had] learned to know not from daily life but from earlier writers who were fictionalizing in their imagination audiences they had learned to know in still earlier writers..." (11). For an enslaved writer, this conclusion would have been a privileged conclusion indeed.

The strategy of fictionalizing an audience was a luxury that Phillis Wheatley did not have. First appearing in London in 1773, Wheatley's collection of verse did not appear in the United States until 1786. Nevertheless, Wheatley knew exactly who her audience would be in Europe and in the soon to be United States, and they would not be members of the "benighted country" to which she belonged (Wheatley, "Letter to Rev. Samuel, Hopkins, Feb. 9, 1774"). When Wheatley first arrived to Boston, Massachusetts in 1761 there were "a little over fifteen thousand people"; barely eight hundred of them were of African descent (Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage* 1). Of that number "about twenty of the latter were not enslaved" (Carretta 1). By the end of the international slave trade in the United States in 1808, the Black population in Massachusetts was two percent (Carretta 3-4). England, where Wheatley's book of verse would first be published, "had around 6,500,000 people in 1771"; Blacks constituted 0.2 percent of the English population" (Carretta 4). Wheatley's audience would be the people she saw in her daily life; the people who kidnapped her, transplanted her, sold her, bought her, spared her, redefined her, "refin'd" her, and determined her daily life. Her audience would be white people, largely male, wealthy, and learned white people.

Wheatley was so aware of who her audience would be at home and abroad that in a letter to her patron Selina Hastings, Countess of Huntingdon, to whom her collection of verse was dedicated, she confided the following: "under the patronage of your

Ladyship...my feeble efforts will be shielded from the severe trials of uppity Criticism and, being encouraged by your Ladyship'd Indulgence, I the more feebly resign to the world these Juvenile productions..." (Wheatley, "Letter to Madam, June 27 1773").

Wheatley was acutely aware of the fact that she needed the shield provided by Countess Huntingdon's whiteness and status to allow her "efforts" to be published and to protect her efforts from "severe" criticism upon publishing.² After all, not only did Wheatley have to "write in the language of the criminal who committed the crime," she had to be authenticated by and position herself as both familiar and innocuous to that criminal (Kincaid, *A Small Place* 31). The Preface and Attestation to her collection of verse further attested to this reality, performing as armors, and unwittingly as veils, to protect Wheatley from the ire of whiteness.

Between the dedication to Countess Huntingdon, the Preface written by her master John Wheatley, and the Attestation signed by a cadre of white, male, Boston luminaries, the legitimizing power of whiteness was on full display in Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. In effect, those paratexts functioned as literary versions of slave passes. Slave passes, written by respective masters, gave slaves permission to leave their sites of enslavement. Slave passes also provided slaves with a modicum of protection from white violence when traveling beyond their designated spaces. As Toni Morrison's young, enslaved protagonist Florens understood of the letter she was given by her white mistress to travel to find the Blacksmith who would cure her mistress of smallpox – "With the letter I belong and am lawful" (*A Mercy* 115). A total of nineteen white people, eighteen of them white men (including the Governor of

² The countess had already proven her "openness to an African-born writer, James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, whose narrative had been published with a dedication to her in 1770" (Bruce, Jr. 42). John Marrant and Olaudah Equiano would also gain access to the Countess of Huntingdon's literary patronage.

Massachusetts Thomas Hutchinson and John Hancock), signed, literally and symbolically, Wheatley's slave pass and made her and her work "belong" and "lawful."³ This white paratextual machinery unknowingly sanctioned Wheatley's treacherous acts of mimicry and deactivated any fears white readers may have had about Wheatley's writerly performance.

While it may not seem apparent at first, the title of Wheatley's collection of poems also performed as a kind of slave pass, allowing Wheatley to realize her first act of treachery through mimicry. To be a literate slave in colonial America was, in many places, illegal. To be young, gifted, and Black was outright dangerous and anathema to the socio-political order. The title of Wheatley's collection of poems performed in such a way as to outwardly appease and appeal to "the world" that would be reading her work. The title *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* mirrored the primary discourses of the day. Seventeenth and eighteenth-century American and English poetry was preoccupied with all things religious and moral, from John Donne's meditations in *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* to Anne Bradstreet's "Meditations Divine and Morall" to Philip Freneau's *History of the Prophet Jonah*. Even Jupiter Hammon's 1760 broadside "An Evening Thought: Salvation by Christ, with Penitential Cries" and John Marrant's 1785 *A Narrative of the Lord's Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, A Black...* reflected the day's literary subject matter. In this sense, the title of Wheatley's collection of verse was very much in line with the dominant Euro-American province of poetry, specifically in the eighteenth-century. The title of Wheatley's collection not only mapped for the reader where Wheatley would be venturing to but helped assure the

³ The dedication to the Countess of Huntingdon functioned as an indirect signature or stamp of approval from the Countess of Huntingdon in that it made known a standing relationship between the author and her patron.

reader that even though she was traveling beyond her designated space, she was traveling into their territory, into known territory. The title, by reiterating the foci of the white literary gaze, allowed Wheatley to be passed into the white literary landscape.

The title *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* helped Wheatley safely pass into the white literary landscape in another way. *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* “was [an] appropriate [title] for a work intended to display a new poet’s talents in various forms of verse, including hymns, elegies, translations, philosophical poems, tales, and epyllia (short epics). The range of forms allowed [Wheatley] to display both her familiarity with tradition and her unique contribution to it” (Carretta 104). Moreover, the title of Wheatley’s collection of poems struck a familiar chord with readers in its similarity to other women poets’ works. In 1703, Lady Mary Chudleigh published *Poems on Several Occasions*. Sarah Fye Egerton published *Poems on Several Occasions* in 1706. Anne Finch’s 1713 collection of poems was similarly titled *Miscellany Poems, on Several Occasions*. Four years after the London debut of Wheatley’s book, Mary Savage published *Poems on Various Subjects and Occasions*. But Wheatley was unlike other women poets. Her Blackness and status as an enslaved woman made it necessary to minimize her talents as a poet. The title of Wheatley’s collection of poems would interestingly allow her to do just that.

The title of Wheatley’s collection of verse shielded the import of Wheatley’s writerly act by creating the impression of a writer unable to present a constant and fixed vision. Because of the use of the word “Various” in *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, and because of the author’s identity as a young, enslaved Black woman, the title could have easily been read as indicative of an unfocused and

amateurish writer. After all, one of the definitions of “Various” is “Turning different ways; going in different directions” (“Various”). The Preface to Wheatley’s collection of poems bolstered this impression of Wheatley as an inexperienced writer by presenting her work as juvenilia, as the imperfect product of a curious but young and enslaved mind “written originally for the amusement of the Author” (iii). This conventional disclaimer, the claim of an author’s work either as juvenilia or as defective, found in works like John Brown Ladd’s *Poems of Arouet*, performed differently and for different reasons in the text of an enslaved Black woman in that it served to strategically reify African incapacity. This quiet invocation of African incapacity both in the Preface to Wheatley’s poems and through the word “Various” was necessary to counteract the alarming and unfamiliar reality of an enslaved African writing in the most esteemed genre of all genres. John Wheatley even apologized to the reader on behalf of Wheatley for her alleged incapacity, for her poems’ “Defects,” in the Preface of her collection of poems whilst expressing hope that the reader could find enough merit in the poems to not cast them aside as “worthless and trifling Effusions” (v). Considering that Wheatley’s book of poems could have simply been titled *Religious and Moral Poems* or *Poems on Religion and Morality*, the presence of “Various” in *Poems on Various Subjects...* comes to be of critical interest.

Though outwardly bowing to tradition, the first portion of the title of Wheatley’s books of poems (*Poems on Various Subjects*) arguably performed to give the impression that Wheatley’s work was nothing more than a slapdash production. It would have been important to underplay the incredible breadth of knowledge and deft literary skills Wheatley had acquired as a young enslaved Black colonial woman. The education

Wheatley received from Susanna and Mary Wheatley would have been very impressive for a white *man* of high social standing in the eighteenth-century much less an enslaved Black girl (Carretta 39-40). Considering that ““only about half of the white American female population in the eighteenth century may have been sufficiently literate to sign a name to a will,”” the significance of Wheatley’s literacy and expansive knowledge would have become abundantly clear to an eighteenth-century audience (qtd. in Carretta 38). Wheatley’s writings would reveal to readers not only “a familiarity with Classical literature, at least in translation, as well as geography, history, politics, and English literature” but a working knowledge of Latin as well (Carretta 40). This cultural capital (literacy and knowledge), reserved for the most educated and privileged, was not, in the estimation of many, the birthright of human beings who were transformed into actual capital. This cultural capital catapulted Wheatley into a position of privilege not even afforded most white men (Carretta 38, 40).⁴ There could be no calling attention to any of this in the title. The aforementioned definition of “Various” masked the more disruptive definition of “Various”: “Versatile in knowledge or acquirements; exhibiting variety in works or writings” (“Various”). While the very existence of Wheatley’s book of poems proved her capable of writing, a distressing truth for whites in and of itself, the word “Various” in *Poems on Various Subjects...* functioned to disable any added threat her act of writing could have posed to white readers by suggesting that capacity was not proficiency. This idea was reinforced by the title page of Wheatley’s collection of poems which made sure to remind the reader that ultimately the literary productions they were about to read were simply those of a “Negro Servant.” How learned or threatening could

⁴ Wheatley’s “privilege” was of course complicated by her position as a slave. She may have been learned and cultured, but she was still a slave.

a Negro servant really be? The non-threatening and familiar façade effected in the title and title page of Wheatley's text allowed Wheatley safe passage into a white literary space. And yet, the title of her collection of poems mattered not because it reported Wheatley's literary whereabouts to a white gaze, but because it declared and confirmed her entrance into their space as a poet. By re-citing the literary discourses of the day in the title of her collection of poems and by re-citing Wheatley's station in life, the title (and title page) covertly disguised as familiar and inferior the work of an enslaved Black woman whose literary and intellectual acumen equaled if not surpassed that of her white readership.⁵

Mimicking the white literary gaze in the title allowed Wheatley something else. The title *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* enabled Wheatley to enter the page space as a Christian poet, not as an enslaved poet. No mention of race or slavery appeared in the title *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. Although her reader may have expected race and slavery to materialize in the poems themselves, by repeating a familiar title to her readers, Wheatley was able to surreptitiously cast-off whites' expectations of how she should enter the page space.⁶ It would be in Wheatley's most oft-anthologized and derided poem, however, that we would see just how proficient Wheatley was at using mimicry as a literary strategy to betray and defy her "place" as an enslaved Black woman and to betray and defy the hegemony of whiteness.

⁵ Wheatley's moral and intellectual authority would be unequivocally revealed in the pages of *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, particularly in "To the University of Cambridge" and "On Being Brought from Africa to America."

⁶ Wheatley directly engaged African bondage in "To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth, His Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for North America, &c." Wheatley also indirectly engaged the topic of slavery through the voice of General Wooster in "On the Death of General Wooster," a poem not included in *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*.

First written in 1768 and published in 1773, “On Being Brought from Africa to America” originally appeared as “Thoughts on being brought from Africa to America” in Wheatley’s 1772 “Proposals.”⁷ Invoking the tradition of the occasional poem, both the proposed and eventual title signaled a form of poetry increasingly classed as “women’s work” by the end of the eighteenth-century. *Gelegenheitsdichtung* (occasional poetry) honored occasions such as “battles, victories, and coronations” as well as “baptisms, birthdays, weddings, and deaths” (“*Gelegenheitsdichtung*”). Women however rarely wrote poems honoring political events or nobility, writing instead on topics that women were assumed to be more familiar with such as baptisms, marriage, funerals, and the exchanging of gifts (“*Gelegenheitsdichtung*”). In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the occasional poem, defined “by its purpose rather than its form...was one of the more sanctioned genres for women” (“*Gelegenheitsdichtung*”). The occasional poem “did not lay claim to superior quality but added luster to an occasion by honoring it in verse...” (“*Gelegenheitsdichtung*”). This writing model was seen as appropriate for women in that it allowed them to enter poetry as *women*. The occasional poem in effect kept women in their place as *women* poets.

Jennifer Keith, in “‘Pre-Romanticism’ and the Ends of Eighteenth-Century Poetry,” noted that many critics associated late eighteenth-century poetry with “feminine qualities such as sensibility” (286). This feminized view of eighteenth-century poetry emerged from the growing numbers of women reading and writing poetry. The presence of more women poets led to a more gendered view of the labor of women poets. In “Satire and Domesticity in Late Eighteenth-Century Women’s Poetry: Minding the Gap,”

⁷ From John C. Shields’ “Notes” in the Schomburg Library’s *The Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*.

Adeline Johns-Putra observed that “the domestic ideology of separate spheres” in the eighteenth-century extended itself to poetry, as the actual division of labor between men and women that saw the “mutual exclusion of ‘outside’ and ‘inside’ labor in terms of a dichotomy between waged and unwaged labor” found itself attached to the page space (67). Certain genres, typically those considered private or more modest genres such as diary writing, the epistolary tradition, and occasional verse, came to be seen by men as more fitting genres for women writers. The ideology of separate spheres in poetry, activated by the increase in women poets, enabled Wheatley, a young Black female unwaged laborer, to safely give the impression, through the occasional quality of the title of her poem, that what was about to be read was nothing more than a “woman’s work,” a poem written “for the Amusement of the Author, as they were the Products of her leisure Moments” (Wheatley, *Poems on Various Subjects*...iv).⁸ Surely, no threat to the natural order of things could come from the mere scribbles of a woman and certainly not from the “leisurely” scribbles of an enslaved Black woman.⁹ And yet, it was this very veil of femininity afforded by the occasional poem that masked the hyper-masculine quality of Wheatley’s poem and the political nature inherent in her subject matter. Not only did Wheatley write “On Being Brought from Africa to America” in heroic couplets, a form associated with the hyper-masculine epic tradition, she cast herself as the hero of her epic odyssey of transformation. In signaling the occasional poem through both versions of “On Being Brought from Africa to America,” Wheatley re-cited the white male gaze’s

⁸ The title *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* also strategically performed to give the impression that what was about to be read was “nothing more” than a woman’s work.

⁹ The epithet of the “scribbling” woman was borrowed from Nathaniel Hawthorne’s 1855 letter to his publisher where he irately reflected on the threat of women authors to his success declaring “America is now wholly given over to a damned mob of scribbling women, and I shall have no chance of success while the public taste is occupied with their trash...” (qtd. in Frederick 231).

assignment of the occasional poem as the fitting poetic vehicle for a woman poet. This act of mimicry allowed Wheatley to betray her reader into thinking she had indeed entered the page space *in her place* as a woman.

Although the occasional quality of both “Thoughts on being brought from Africa to America” and “On Being Brought from Africa to America” typed Wheatley’s poem as a feminized literary production, the careful modification of the original title showcased Wheatley’s ability to masculinize her voice while preserving the cover of femininity associated with the occasional poem. While “Thoughts on being brought from Africa to America” intimated to the reader the private musings of a female speaker on a subject, “On Being Brought from Africa to America” postured as a declarative, formal commemoration of a subject by a female speaker to a public audience. The omission of the word “Thoughts” from the original title masculinized the title of the poem by doing away with an “inside voice” in favor of an “outside voice,” a particularly strategic and powerful gesture by a poet whose identity as a Black person, as a woman, as a young Black woman, and as an enslaved person depended upon her erasure, her quiet. By transforming her voice from private to public, Wheatley exploded the “domestic ideology of separate spheres” all the while maintaining the veneer of “place” accorded her by the impress of the occasional poem (Johns-Putra 67). She would continue to explode the domestic ideology of separate spheres in the body of her poem. By cunningly assimilating the master’s literary discourse, Wheatley made that discourse “‘bear the burden’ of [her] own cultural experience, or, as Raja Rao [put] it... ‘convey in a language that [was] not [her] own the spirit that [was her] own’” (Ashcroft et al. 39). In mastering the master’s language, Wheatley “[stripped] the word of [the master’s] intentions,”

assuming “complete single-personed hegemony over her own language...”(Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel” 676). It is through language in the settled title, “On Being Brought from Africa to America,” that Wheatley would begin her “original hoodoo.”

The title “On Being Brought from Africa to America” performed as a template for how words could be doctored into routes of dissemblance. In “Tripping With Black Writing,” Sarah Webster Fabio wrote about how early Black poets used language treacherously “to speak out of both sides of their mouths”:

...language has played an important part in communicating the experience from within and without...They had to not only devise ways of speaking in tongues so that ‘the man’ would not always understand everything, but also had to speak out of both sides of their mouths –hurraing Black; badmouthing White. Original hoodoo, badmouthing the man...Early turnings; trying to turn those bedeviled mothers around, shame them in their human trafficking; these wrenchings of conscience from those short on conscience but long on bread and black gold –earliest forms of Black power (224).

Double-voiced, Wheatley spoke out of both sides of her mouth in the title “On Being Brought from Africa to America.” Through the title, Wheatley duplicitously re-possessed her identity as a human being and as a poet, divested whites of credit for her transplantation, and tactically misdirected her audience into believing they would be reading a slave poet. Furthermore, by locating her origins in Africa, Wheatley covertly actuated a moment of Black power never before seen among her Black literary contemporaries. Wheatley’s “original hoodoo” would begin with the very first word in the title of her poem – “On.” Two definitions of the word “On” would conspire to reveal that the master’s “teaching words [had] not [entered] [Wheatley’s] inside” (qtd. in Ashcroft et al 42).

The decision to begin “On Being Brought from Africa to America” with the word “On” as opposed to “Thoughts” allowed Wheatley to speak fork-tongued in multiple ways. As a function word, the word “On” worked to indicate “the subject of study, discussion, or consideration” (“On”). The word “On” in the title of Wheatley’s poem prepared the reader for the subject of the title and by extension, the subject of the poem. “On” performed to “identify the work; ...designate [the work’s] content; [and] highlight” the content of the work (Genette, “Structure and Functions of the Title...” 708). What would this poem be “On”? It would be “On” a trans-Atlantic journey from Africa to America. Wheatley did not refer to that trans-Atlantic journey however as the Middle Passage. All that was indicated in her title was movement from a continent to a country. Why would Wheatley keep the imprint of slavery from her title?

Wheatley’s “failure” to openly point to her enslavement in the title to her only true autobiographical poem was no failure at all but an incredibly subversive and empowering act. Wheatley did not explicitly point to slavery in her title (or in her poem) because slavery was not what defined her. Though she seemed, through one voice, to mimic the white gaze’s tendency to avoid the troublesome issue of slavery, through her other voice, Wheatley outright resisted the all-consuming power of the white gaze by refusing to declare slavery as *her* defining reality. To paraphrase June Jordan in “Poem About My Rights,” Wheatley decided in her poem and in her collection of verses that “Slave” would not be her name, “[Her] name [would be] [her] own [her] own [her] own...” (109-110). Refusing to be marked by slavery, Wheatley re-marked herself as *she* saw herself and that was as a Christianized African poet. In doing so Wheatley privileged, above all else, her gaze.

“On” worked to divest whites of power in another important way. Defined as “On the occasion of (an action),” “On” indicated to readers that the poem written was written on the occasion of a particular act transpiring – in this case on the occasion of having been brought from Africa to America (“On”). *Something* was being commemorated in the title of the poem, not *someone*. This critical distinction between *something* and not *someone* being commemorated was obscured by the very mode Wheatley invoked and by a deliberate silence in the title of her poem.

Contemporaneous readers would have surely assumed that Wheatley was inclusively paying tribute to both the event of having been brought from Africa to America and the actors who brought about that event since it was whites, after all, who were responsible for her “journey.” There would have been very little doubt, given the poet’s identity and a title page branding the poet as a “Negro Servant,” as to how Wheatley had come to America or who had brought her to America. As such, readers would have likely missed the fact that Wheatley’s title focused strictly on the act of transplantation and not the persons responsible for that transplantation. Through her carefully worded title, Wheatley stealthily withheld “crediting” whites for something they deserved no credit for by giving the impression that her “migration” from Africa to America, from root to branch, was indeed something worth crediting. To a white presence that saw itself as *the* divine agent in her fortunate fall, Wheatley’s title would have likely read as an implied tribute to them. However, by beginning the title with a constructed silence, Wheatley proved that her title was indeed crafted to displace and not laud Anglo-Europeans’ role in her epic of transplantation.

The title “On Being Brought from Africa to America” opened with a silence, a stealthy omission that would continue in the body of Wheatley’s poem. Wheatley began her poem by withholding from her readers who or what had brought her to America. This subversive maneuver stripped whites of their place in her autobiographical narrative-as-poem. By not naming who or what had brought her from Africa to America, Wheatley was able to provide enough room for white readers to center themselves in her story without calling attention to the fact that she had de-centered them from her story. The act of divesting whites of power over her trans-Atlantic crossing would be bolstered by the very first line in Wheatley’s poem where, through metonymy, we would find Wheatley crediting God and not man for her “journey” from Africa to America and ultimately, to Christianity.

“On” would perform treacherously in a third and final way. Although “On” signaled to readers that the poem would be about a trans-Atlantic journey, the poem itself did not speak to a trans-Atlantic journey but a spiritual journey. The title, while seeming to reveal the topic of the poem, actually concealed it. Aside from the first line of the poem, no spatial journey was ever mentioned in the poem, except perhaps the one from earth to heaven in the final line of the poem. Upon reading the actual poem, the word “On” as an indicator of subject matter would have come into sharp relief because of how incongruous it was with the actual subject of the poem. This asymmetry was purposeful. The title allowed Wheatley to lure readers into her poem by craftily presenting her poem as familiar. By playing with white readers’ expectations of what an enslaved poet’s subject matter should be (slavery, the Middle Passage, the fortunate fall), Wheatley was

able to secret away a subject matter that would have been far more threatening to the white gaze – her Christianity.

Be it in her collection of verse or in newspapers announcing her poems, observers made it a point to introduce Wheatley as a slave, an extraordinary slave, but nonetheless a slave. Her condition was constantly being pointed to. In an October 11, 1770 advertisement for “An Elegaic Poem on the Death of...George Whitefield,” the *Massachusetts Spy* priced the poem at seven coppers, making sure to note that it was written “by PHILLIS, A servant girl of seventeen years of age, belonging to Mr. J. Wheatly [sic], of Boston: [who had] been but nine years in this country from Africa” (qtd. in Isani 266). The Sep. 24, 1773 issue of the *New London Gazette* announced the return (from London) of “the extraordinary poetical Genius, Negro Servant to Mr. John Wheatley” (qtd.in Isani 270). The constant calling attention to Wheatley’s station in life would have surely informed white readers’ expectations of her poetry. What else would a slave write about but slavery? And yet, save for a few instances, Wheatley did not engage the topic in any sustained kind of way. Although *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* announced to readers everything but the subject matter expected of an enslaved poet, it is safe to assume that readers would have likely expected a treatment of slavery to weave itself somehow into her collection of poems. But Wheatley defied these predictable expectations by not dedicating her poems to the one thing that, in the eyes of whites, defined her personhood. Enter “On Being Brought from Africa to America.”

Except for “Liberty and Peace,” a poem not included in *Poems on Various Subjects...*, no other title came close to gesturing toward slavery the way “On Being

Brought from Africa to America” did.¹⁰ “On Being Brought from Africa to America” was the *only* title in Wheatley’s literary repertoire that prepared readers to expect a poem about slavery. As the opening to her autobiographical poem, “On Being Brought from Africa to America” played into audience’s expectations of what an enslaved poet’s poems should be about. Through this title, Wheatley disarmed her audience with familiarity, ushering them in, unaware, into an unfamiliar and radical space – the space of Black Christianity. Dickson Bruce Jr. warned that while “one should be careful not to overestimate the impact of Christianity on African Americans in the colonial era, one should also be careful not to underestimate Christianity’s cultural importance”:

[Christianity] allowed for the possibility of an entrance by black people into an intellectual setting, a realm of thought, and a world of skills that might otherwise have been defined as exclusively white. Giving a place to the black voice, it challenged any definition of intellectuality based on color. Providing for at least one kind of a community in which a black voice could be heard, it placed at least a measure of such authority in the hands of people of African descent, even slaves (17).

Christianity furnished people of African descent with moral authority, an authority that had been institutionally earmarked (via religion, science, law, and culture) for their self-professed betters. Wheatley was able to temper white readers’ reception of her moral authority, of her Christianity, by presenting herself superficially as a Christianized *slave* poet. This strategic re-presentation of Wheatley as a Christianized *slave* poet skillfully masked Wheatley’s revolutionary and autogenic brand of liberation theology, a theology that found her equal as a Christian before God and man, a theology that would be boldly espoused in the second quatrain of her poem.

¹⁰ Considering the Revolutionary context in which this poem emerged, even “Liberty and Peace” would not have been immediately understood as a title about slavery – at least not African-based slavery.

The reader did not need have to wait until the body of the poem however to enter a revolutionary space. Wheatley daringly affirmed her humanity in the title of her poem under the shell of a workaday function word. “Being,” a surrogate for “Occurrence [or] happening,” hid in the open as an existential claim (“Being”). Understood in context as meaning “On the occurrence or happening of having been brought from Africa to America,” “Being,” in truth, did not need to be in the title. Alternate versions of the title such as “Brought from Africa to America” or “From Africa to America” would have preserved not only the theme of the journey, but the ambiguous finish of the established title. The decision to employ “Being” at a time when persons of African descent were summarily denied their humanity was not simple happenstance. While it is true that poems published after Wheatley’s death indicated editorial tampering, there were enough poems in either manuscript form or published during Wheatley’s lifetime that Wheatley had control over to give proof to the idea that she conscientiously reworked her poems. Changes to “On the Death of the Rev. Mr. George Whitefield,” “To the University of Cambridge,” and “On Atheism” for example, testified to a poet concerned with revision and improvement of her poems (Shields 195). The use of the word “Being” in other words was assuredly a conscientious and purposeful decision. The following definition of “Being” underscores just how deliberate a decision this was.

As a noun, “Being” is defined as “A living creature, either corporeal or spiritual; esp. a human being, a person” (“Being”). “Being” in “On Being Brought from Africa to America” worked unassumingly to underline Wheatley’s status as a human being. Neither slavery nor the Middle Passage, lurking in the title of Wheatley’s poem, was sufficient enough a force to have made Wheatley see herself otherwise. In a world that, at

every turn, attempted to strip her of her humanity, the inclusion of “Being” in the title of Wheatley’s poem was Wheatley’s way of reasserting her humanity in the face of a people and an institution that saw and treated her otherwise. By re-citing a seemingly inoffensive, plain, function word, by mastering the master’s language, Wheatley was able to articulate and control her vision of self.

It is in the use of the phrase “On Being Brought” however that things seem to fall apart. Of the several moments in Wheatley’s poem that could have been pointed to as proof of her uncritical absorption of whiteness, “On Being Brought” would have surely soared to the top of the list. “On Being Brought” problematically seemed to rid both slavery and the agents of slavery of the full burden of responsibility for Wheatley’s violent seizure from Africa. Written in a passive voice, “On Being Brought” externally erased any sign of force or resistance to force that would have spoken to the forceful, quick, unexpected, and inhumane capture of Wheatley. Since it was written so as to emphasize Wheatley’s journey *to* America as opposed to her journey *away* from Africa, “On Being Brought” in effect expurgated the horrific beginnings of Wheatley’s terrible transformation by propelling the poem forward and away from the triangle slave trade. We know from Wheatley’s poem “To The Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth...” that she was, in her own words, “snatch’d from Afric’s fancy’d happy Seat” (25). We know as well that while she was truly grateful, however problematic to modern readers, for her conversion to Christianity, she was not grateful for the act committed against God that brought her to Christianity.¹¹ Stolen from her father,

¹¹ In her 1774 “Letter to ‘Reverend and Honoured Sir’ [Samson Occom]” Wheatley proclaimed: “for in every human Breast, God has implanted a principle, which we call Love of Freedom; it is impatient of Oppression, and pants for Deliverance; and by the Leave of our Modern Egyptians I will assert, that the

Wheatley's own voyage to America took 240 days. She was one of 96 slaves on board the *Phillis*. Of 96 slaves, only 75 of the slaves she traveled with survived the Middle Passage (Carretta 7,10). Additionally, she was one of millions transported to the Americas and the Caribbean and one of over 500,000 of such children of Ham in the colonies. "Snatch'd from Afric's Fancy'd Happy Seat" would have been a more fitting and accurate title for Wheatley's autobiographical poem.¹² Why then would Wheatley have used such a fallacious phrase?

"On Being Brought" allowed Wheatley to re-present her abduction to America as a journey not a confiscation. This strategic re-presentation of Wheatley's passage to America as a journey and not a forced transplantation was not a sign of Wheatley's ideological whitewashing but a deft act of resistance. "On Being Brought" covertly performed to displace slavery and the agents of slavery from Wheatley's autobiography-as-poem. That displacement would be fully realized in the first line of Wheatley's poem. "'Twas mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land" cast Wheatley's transplantation to America as an act of God's mercy, as part of a sacred process and design, not as part of a profane process and design. By carefully crafting a title that gestured to slavery without prostrating itself before slavery, Wheatley performed in "place" as a slave poet without turning her title and by extension her poem into a literary site of enslavement. The use of the word "Brought" in "On Being Brought" would prove her double-voicedness.

same principle lives in us." The implication of white Americans as modern Egyptians revealed a Christian able to separate the gift of salvation from the curse that brought it about.

¹² The alternate title "Snatch'd from Afric's Fancy'd Happy Seat" comes directly from Wheatley's poem "To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth..." It is the only poem where Wheatley speaks directly about her kidnapping.

With the removal of one letter, Wheatley could have transformed her ambiguous and innocuous title into a barefaced indictment of Anglo-Americans. The decision to use “Brought,” a word so orthographically close to “Bought,” was surely not by chance but by design. By using a word so close to “Bought,” Wheatley was able to stain the title of her poem with a trace of the peculiar institution without kneeling the title or kneeling herself before that institution. Wheatley provided just enough in “On Being Brought” and the remaining title of her poem for her readers to read slavery into the title without explicitly marking herself as a slave. This deft negotiation of her poetic persona would allow Wheatley to desert her “place” as a slave poet and subvert whiteness from behind the mask of a known and knowable slave. Wheatley would continue her masterful performance in the second half of the title of her poem.

In “If Black English Isn’t a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?” James Baldwin asserted, “Language, incontestably, reveals the speaker. Language, also, far more dubiously, is meant to define the other” (132). By mimicking the white gaze’s practice of othering Blacks, Wheatley revealed herself according to her own image and redefined America as the other. Through “from” and “Africa to America,” Wheatley smuggled in a biting riposte to the white gaze.

“From,” as it appeared in the title of Wheatley’s poem, functioned to denote “the starting point or the first considered of two boundaries adopted in defining a given extent in space” (“From”). Wheatley’s audience would have surely understood “from” as indicating spatial movement, in this case the movement from Africa to America. “From” however also performed “as a function word to indicate physical separation or an act or

condition of removal” or “subtraction” (“From”). Wheatley spoke movingly about her subtraction from Africa in “To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth”:

I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate
Was snatch’d from *Afric*’s fancy’d happy seat:
What pangs excruciating must molest,
What sorrows labour in my parent’s breast?
Steel’d was that soul and by no misery mov’d
That from a father seiz’d his babe belov’d:
Such, such my case... (24-30).

“From,” as a counterpoint to “On Being Brought,” shifted the direction of the poem back to Africa. “From” called attention the fact that Wheatley had been *taken away* from Africa. The second definition of “from” colored Wheatley’s physical separation from Africa as a removal not a migration and shadowed the title of the poem with the specter of slavery’s violence. Through this workaday function word, Wheatley installed into the title of her poem a quiet accusation that would intensify into an indictment of slavery, false Christians, and the fortunate fall in the body of her poem. A third definition of “From” would lead to one of the more unexpected moments in Wheatley’s poem.

Used to “indicate the place where someone lives or was born,” “from” in “On Being Brought from Africa to America” announced to readers that Wheatley was “from” Africa. Wheatley, in the title to the only autobiographical poem she would ever write, identified herself as African. This profound moment of self-identification may have been lost to Wheatley’s contemporaneous readers, who would have likely understood Wheatley’s act of self-identification as an act of othering. By identifying herself as African, Wheatley “naturally” cast herself as an “other.” But this moment of self-identification was in fact a critical assertion effected by Phillis Wheatley. Phillis Wheatley, the refuse slave who was only about seven years old when first brought to

shore to be sold, who had lived outside of Africa the majority of her life, who mentioned her specific place of birth with fondness only once in all of her poems, who received the cultural privileges of literacy and knowledge reserved only for true Americans (read: whites), identified *herself* as an African.¹³ In doing so she revealed two things. First she revealed that the full weight of slavery and cultural imperialism had not stripped her of her sense of identity. By locating her origins in Africa, Wheatley undid the myth of the de-culturating Middle Passage that held that Africans arrived to the shores of the Caribbean and the Americas as a collective tabula rasa. Wheatley's self-identification as African showed that not even the full force of slavery and its ever-ready handmaiden, racism, could dissuade her from identifying as African. Secondly, in proclaiming an African identity, Wheatley disproved all of the ugliness, the stereotypes, the scientific racism passing itself off as truth levied against Africans. After all, it was an African's poem that was being read. In claiming herself as African, Wheatley redefined *African*. In re-citing a marker of identification used to other and smear "others," Wheatley was able to give lie to the signifier's sign, recreating it according to her own gaze. In doing so, Wheatley wrested the power of naming from the lords of the land, reclaiming *African* in the process and rejecting *American* as a consequence. Wheatley would continue to identify herself as an "Ethiop" or "Afric's muse" and not as an American, slave, or Negro, throughout the body of her work.¹⁴

¹³ In Wheatley's response to "The Answer [By the Gentleman of the Navy]," a poem not included in *Poems on Various Subject, Religious and Moral*, she warmly alluded to Gambia: "In fair description are thy powers display'd / In artless grottos, and thy 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..." (19-23).

¹⁴ Wheatley referred to herself as American only once in her published works. In "On the Death of the Rev. Mr. George Whitefield," Wheatley extended Americans' condolences to the Countess of Huntingdon for the loss of Rev. Whitefield: "Great Countess, we *Americans* revere / Thy name, and mingle in thy grief

While Wheatley's identification as African instantiated a moment of Atlantic world Black pride, it also revealed Wheatley to be a stealthy tactician. Wheatley had referenced her place of birth once, in her response to "The Answer [By the Gentleman of the Navy]," a poem not included in *Poems on Various Subject, Religious and Moral*. In that poem, she warmly alluded to her home country of Gambia, presenting it not only as Edenic but also as missed:

In fair description are thy powers display'd
In artless grottos, and thy 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...
Her soul spontaneous, yields exhaustless stores;
For phoebus revels on her verdant shores...
(19-23, 27-8).

Wheatley did not, however, specify her place of birth in the title "On Being Brought from Africa to America." Instead of citing Gambia as her place of origin, Wheatley cited "Africa" as her place of origin. The concept of Africa "was mainly geographical" in the eighteenth-century and it was a concept exterior to Africans. The people native to Africa did not see themselves as Africans. They saw themselves instead as members of "any one of a number of ethnic groups with differing languages, religions, and political systems" (Carretta 2). Africa "was not a social, political, or religious category in the way that *Europe* was in the eighteenth century" (Carretta 2). To the white gaze however, all benighted persons were from a dark and unknown continent named Africa and occupied the amorphous, indistinguishable umbrella term of *African* – a catch-all identity that

sincere" (38-9). Wheatley also eschewed identifying herself as a Negro. Though she referenced "Negroes" in the penultimate line of "On Being Brought from Africa to America," she did so in a distanced way. She instead proclaimed herself as part of a "sable race" in "On Being Brought from Africa to America," casting off the traditional "New World" nomenclature ascribed to persons of African descent.

denied individuality, culture, history, and the specific lingual, religious, and regional identities of the many ethnic groups throughout Africa. While it is true that some slave traders and masters, especially those trading to or owning slaves in slave societies, took a particular interest in slaves' ethnic identities, believing some ethnic groups to be more recalcitrant or skilled than others, for most whites, it mattered not where Africans came from.¹⁵ Once in the "New World," the Ashanti, the Yoruba, the Fante, the Wolof, the Mandinka were transformed into Negroes or slaves. No other identity was necessary in the concentrated labor camp that was the Atlantic world. Wheatley's identification as African as opposed to Gambian in the title of her poem however was not a re-inscription or legitimization of the white gaze but a means to an end. Wheatley installed the catch-all concept of "Africa" into the title of her poem as a means to install and activate the catch-all concept of "America" in the title of her poem without drawing attention to the fact that she had returned whites' gaze. If Africa was an indistinguishable, dark and unknown landmass to whites, then America was most certainly an indistinguishable, dark and unknown landmass to Blacks. Just as Africa was the same everywhere in the white imagination, so too was America the same everywhere for Blacks. In short, by mimicking Anglo-Europeans' tendency to reduce people and places to stock signifiers, Wheatley was able to talk back to one of the more dehumanizing discourses of her day.

In not specifying where in Africa she was removed from or where in America she was shipped to, Wheatley importantly reproduced for the reader the disorientation that Africans must have felt once plunged into the triangle slave trade. How could captured

¹⁵ In *Many Thousands Gone, The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America*, Ira Berlin noted that "Both buyers and sellers dwelled upon the regional and national origins of their human merchandise" in the lowcountry (145). The Gambian people were desired "above all others" followed by Africans from the Gold Coast or the Windward Coast. Of the Calabar a planter remarked, "There must not be a Calabar amongst them" (145).

Africans have known where in “Africa” they were being walked to or what slave port in “Africa” they were shipped from? During those months at sea, how could they have known where in the Americas they were being carried off to or what fate would meet them upon arrival? And even if they knew a name – Massachusetts, Brazil, Jamaica, Mexico – what did that name mean to them? By mimicking, subversively, the African gaze in the title of her poem, Wheatley surreptitiously centered the African gaze, displacing whiteness yet again.

In not naming where in Africa she came from and where in America she was sent to, and in not indicating outright that it was she who was brought from Africa to America, Wheatley created a title that performed as a representative space. “On Being Brought from Africa to America” could have been the title of Lucy Terry Prince’s story or Venture Smith’s narrative or millions of other slaves’ stories. The poem “On Being Brought from Africa to America” may have offered a cross-section of the experience of a particular slave, but Wheatley’s experience was not a particular one. In looking at the title of the poem and its representative nature in relation to the body of the poem and its subject-specific nature, we see a poet who, while singular and exceptional in the white imagination, understood herself as one of many.

Poetry, for Black women, has never been a luxury. For a genius in bondage, poetry became “the language to express and charter [her] revolutionary” gaze (Lorde, “Poetry Is Not a Luxury 1925). For Phillis Wheatley, poetry became the North Star to her freedom:

The white fathers told us: I think, therefore I am. The
Black mother within each of us—the poet—[whispered]
in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free. Poetry
[coined] the language to express and charter this revolutionary

demand, the implementation of that freedom...For within living structures defined by profit, by linear power, by institutional dehumanization, our feelings were not meant to survive...feelings were expected to kneel to thought as women were expected to kneel to men. But women...survived. As poets...it [was] our dreams that [pointed] the way to freedom. Those dreams [were] made realizable through our poems that [gave] us the strength and courage to see, to feel, to speak, and to dare (Lorde, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury" 1925, 1926).

Understanding the "inherent dangers...in building an identity based on the prejudices of one's oppressor," Wheatley strategically mimicked the literary prejudices, customs, and practices of her oppressors in the title to her collection of poems and in the title to her most controversial poem to free herself from the cage of her oppressor's gaze (Morgan, "strongblackwomen" 101). In doing so, Wheatley positioned herself "on the margins in the sense of the word 'frontier'...[changing] her relationship to the dominant culture immediately" (Philip, "Father Tongue" 129). Through her poems, Wheatley introduced "a new order of things which [displaced] or [modified] the old abstractions" and answered, hundreds of years in advance, Carolyn Rodgers' seminal question in "Breakthrough" (Lukács, "Art and Objective Truth" 797). In "Breakthrough," Carolyn Rodgers asked, "How do I put myself on paper / The way I want to be or am and be / Not like any one else in this / Black world but me [?]" (12-15). In 1773, Phillis Wheatley showed us how.

CHAPTER III

“MORE POWERFUL THAN GAMMA RAYS”: A CLOSE READING OF “ON BEING BROUGHT FROM AFRICA TO AMERICA”

Many styles, more powerful than gamma rays
My grammar pays, like Carlos Santana plays ‘Black Magic Woman’
So while you’re fumin’ I’m consumin’ mango juice under Polaris
You’re just embarrassed cuz it’s your last tango in Paris
And even after all my logic and my theory,
I add a motherfucker so you ignorant niggas hear me.
“Zealots” - Lauryn Hill of The Fugees

“On Being Brought from Africa to America” was written in 1768, seven years after a seven or eight-year-old Phillis Wheatley arrived to British North America.¹ Phillis Wheatley was about fifteen years old when she wrote “the most reviled poem in African American literature” (qtd. in Carretta 60). Charged with thinking white and writing white, both poet and poem were condemned for imitating the white gaze – a gaze that overwhelmingly saw slavery as necessary and defensible. The charge of parroting whites was an understandable albeit unfair one and was partly informed by the works of Wheatley’s literary predecessors. Briton Hammon and Jupiter Hammon had both produced texts that seemed to implicitly accept the institution of slavery.² Like Wheatley, Briton Hammon and Jupiter Hammon’s works privileged “the faith shared between author and reader” but unlike Wheatley they minimized “the complexion and social conditions that separated the black speaker and his or her overwhelmingly white audience” (Carretta 52).

¹ Phillis Wheatley arrived in Boston, Massachusetts on July 11, 1761 (Carretta 6).

² See Briton Hammon’s 1760 *A Narrative of the Most Uncommon Sufferings and Surprising Deliverance of Briton Hammon, A Negro Man* and Jupiter Hammon’s 1760 “An Evening Thought. Salvation, by Christ, with Penitential Cries: Composed by Jupiter Hammon, a Negro Belonging to Mr. Lloyd.”

Although accused of “straightening” her tongue, Phillis Wheatley did not imitate the white gaze in “On Being Brought from Africa to America,” she mimicked it.³ “On Being Brought from Africa to America” was not an exercise in imitation but cunning assimilation. Wheatley cunningly assimilated “the language [of her oppressors], [replaced] it in a specific cultural location...[all the while] maintaining the integrity of Otherness...historically employed” to keep colonized subjects “at the margins of power, of ‘authenticity,’ and even of reality itself” (Ashcroft et al. 77). By strategically maintaining her position as other, her position as a stranger in a strange land, Wheatley was able to speak back, double-voiced and double-langued, to the dominant culture by using the word “to break through to its own meaning and its own expression across an environment full of alien words...harmonizing with some of the elements, and striking a dissonance with others” (Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel” 270). By turning her poem into a linguistic arena of “intense interaction between [her] own and another’s word,” Wheatley furtively moved from the margins of power to the center of power (Peterson, “Response and Call...” 91). In doing so, she abrogated the centrality of “English” by creating a way of saying without saying:

Whether written from monoglossic, diglossic, or polyglossic cultures, ...writing [by colonized subjects] [abrogated] the privileged centrality of ‘English’ by using language to signify difference while employing sameness which [allowed] it to be understood (Ashcroft et al. 51).

Without an alternative language to problematize or reject the signs of the colonizer, Wheatley had to turn the language she had into “an obedient organ” to talk

³ Here “straightening,” as a way to remove all signs and traces of Blackness, comes from the discourse on / politics of Black hair.

through and truth to the oppressor's language (Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel" 286). By taking the oppressor's language and turning it against itself, Wheatley created "a counterhegemonic speech [act], liberating [herself] in language" (hooks 301). To paraphrase Ursa, the protagonist in Gayl Jones' *Corregidora*, "They squeezed [English] into [Wheatley], and [she] sung back in return" (103).⁴ The counter-language that Wheatley developed in "On Being Brought from Africa to America" was effective precisely because of how treacherous it was. Wheatley invisible-ized her counterhegemonic speech-act by using resemblance to hide difference. Through mimicry, Wheatley betrayed her "place" as an enslaved Black woman and defied the hegemony of whiteness.

bell hooks pondered what newly arrived Africans such as Phillis Wheatley must have thought upon first encountering English. hooks imagined Africans thinking, "this language would need to be possessed, taken, claimed as a space of resistance" ("this is the oppressor's language..." 297). And so it was. Africans "reinvented, remade the language so that it would speak beyond the boundaries of conquest and domination" (hooks 297).

In "Dedication," Gustavo Perez Firmat provided a useful and critical entrance into the poetic struggle that Wheatley, along with other Black writers, must have surely experienced as colonized subjects writing in and through the language of the colonizer:⁵

The fact that I
am writing to you

⁴ Through bloodlines and history, *Corregidora*, a slave master, was forced upon Gayl Jones' protagonist Ursa in *Corregidora*. Thinking back to her mother and grandmother's stories of *Corregidora*, Ursa, ever the blues singer reflected on her inheritance of violence, rape, and slavery and thought triumphantly to herself "They squeezed *Corregidora* into me, and I sung back in return" (103).

⁵ See Gustavo Perez Firmat's 1995 collection, *Bilingual Blues*.

in English
already falsifies what I
wanted to tell you.
My subject:
how to explain to you that I
don't belong to English
though I belong nowhere else (1-9).

How could a sign of conquest and domination (language) be transformed into a sign of resistance? How could Wheatley explain through English that she did not “belong” to English?

Outwardly, “On Being Brought from Africa to America” performed as proof of conquest, as proof that Wheatley *belonged* to English. “English” as representative of European imperialism seemed to own or possess Wheatley literally and literarily. After all, “On Being Brought from Africa to America” was written in English, it was written in heroic couplets – the stateliest and most esteemed form in English verse by the sixteenth century, it invoked the pro-slavery and religious argument that slavery was a fortunate fall for Africans, and it was written by a slave in/of British North America. The poem however, was not a site of conquest but a site of resistance. “On Being Brought from Africa to America” problematized and turned on its head the entire notion of belonging to “English.” “On Being Brought from Africa to America” revealed that Wheatley belonged to Africa, not America; Wheatley belonged to God, not whites; Wheatley belonged to Christianity, not slavery, and most importantly, poetry belonged to Wheatley. Wheatley did not belong to English; in the space of the poem, English belonged to her. Wheatley’s tooling of the master’s “chattel language” in “On Being Brought from Africa to America” proved that once she acquired English, it became her property (Philip, “The Question of Language” 73).

Understanding the power inherent in words, Humpty Dumpty explained to Alice, “‘When I use a word...it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less’... ‘The question is, said Alice, ‘whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.’ ‘The question is,’ said Humpty Dumpty, ‘which is to be master – that’s all’” (qtd. in Hamilton, Ture 36). Of all of Wheatley’s poems, “On Being Brought from Africa to America” was the most important because of how Wheatley mastered words. Because of the closed nature of the heroic couplet, “a two-line unit...in which words [were] carefully set...diction [was] made to count” (Wolosky 160). The particular words used in “On Being Brought from Africa to America” “in [the] particular order and way the poet [used] them [were] irreplaceable. No other words [would] do, [would] fit” (Wolosky 135).

Of the sixty-five words used in Wheatley’s succinct eight-line poem (including the words in the title of the poem), forty-six words were monosyllabic. While the abundance of monosyllabic words gave the poem the appearance of simplicity and directness, both monosyllabic and polysyllabic words labored quietly and duplicitously to belie the plainness and guilelessness suggested by the lot of monosyllabic words. Be they monosyllabic or polysyllabic words, Wheatley weaponized English to “...mean so many different things.” In doing so, she created a doubled language that grinned and lied “[and] [mouthed] with myriad subtleties” (Dunbar, “We Wear the Mask” 5).

In “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” Zora Neale Hurston observed the differences between the white dancer and the Negro dancer. Hurston concluded that “Negro dancing [was] dynamic suggestion” and “every posture [gave] the impression that the dancer [would] do much more” (84):

For example, the performer flexes one knee sharply, assumes a ferocious face mask, thrusts the upper part of the body forward with clenched fists, elbows taut... That is all. But the spectator himself adds the picture of ferocious assault, hears the drums and finds himself keeping time with the music and tensing himself for the struggle. It is compelling insinuation. That is the very reason the spectator is held so rapt. He is participating in the performance itself—carrying out the suggestions of the performer. The difference in the two arts is: the white dancer attempts to express fully; the Negro is restrained but succeeds in gripping the beholder by forcing him to finish the action the performer suggests (84).

In observing the differences between the white dancer and the Negro dancer, Hurston unknowingly pointed to the historical difference between the dance of the white poet and the dance of the Black poet. Whiteness gave white poets the privilege and authority of expressing fully. Blackness restrained the Black poet so that all the Black poet could do was compellingly insinuate, leaving it to the spectator to add “the picture of ferocious assault” (Hurston 84). It would be Wheatley’s words that would be the dancers in “On Being Brought from Africa to America.” It would be Wheatley’s words that would don familiar masks to flex, assume, thrust, and compellingly insinuate the unfamiliar. Wheatley’s dance, her ferocious assault on “English,” would begin in the very first line of her poem.

The very first line of “On Being Brought from Africa to America” seemed to resolve a silence present in the title. The title “On Being Brought from Africa to America” did not signal who or what had brought Wheatley from Africa to America, only *that* she was brought from Africa to America. “’Twas mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land” settled that silence by citing a personified “mercy” as the source of Wheatley’s

transplantation (1). To a contemporaneous reader, the sentiment expressed by Wheatley in her very first line would have been very familiar as it repeated one of the circulating discourses of the day. At times called “the paradox of the Fortunate Fall,”

this notion found early expression in Augustine, who articulated it in both specifically Christian and generally theological terms. Perhaps his most concise Christian articulation [appeared] in *Enchiridion*: ‘Since men are in the state of [God’s] wrath through original sin...a Mediator [i.e., a redeemer] [is] required.’ And that redeemer, according to Augustine, [made] possible the individual’s salvation – a condition more fortunate even than Eden itself (Welch, Greer 363-364).

The notion of Providential design in the form of “Felix Culpa” or the “Fortunate Fall” was reinvigorated in the eighteenth-century to explain African-based slavery. Pro-slavery and anti-slavery advocates alike turned to this doctrine to justify the enslavement of millions of their brethren:

Quakers and others opposed to slavery expounded the idea that God, working in mysterious ways, had temporarily countenanced slavery so that Africans could be Christianized and civilized in the New World and then return to their ancestral homeland to convert Africans (Gruesser 7).

As early as 1700, Samuel Sewall, in *The Selling of Joseph; A Memorial*, rejected the notion of the fortunate fall writing, “Evil must not be done, that good may come of it. The extraordinary and comprehensive Benefit accruing to the Church of God, and to *Joseph* personally, did not rectify his brethrens Sale of him” (13). Sewall’s protest aside, the doctrine remained. Even eighteenth-century Black writers invoked the fortunate fall. In the “Dedication” to his narrative, Olaudah Equiano explicitly cited the doctrine of the fortunate fall when he expressed his gratitude for having been “compensated” for slavery with “knowledge of the Christian religion”:

By the horrors of that trade was I first torn away from
all the tender connections that were naturally dear to
my heart; but these, through the mysterious ways of
Providence, I ought to regard as infinitely more than
compensated by the introduction I have thence obtained
to the knowledge of the Christian religion...(3).

Wheatley herself alluded to the fortunate fall in the very first stanza of “To The University of Cambridge, in New-England”:

‘Twas not long since I left my native shore
The land of errors, and *Egyptian* gloom:
Father of mercy, ‘twas thy gracious hand
Brought me in safety from those dark abodes (3-6).

Wheatley would have been very familiar with the doctrine of providential design.

Baptized into the Congregationalist faith on August 18, 1771, Wheatley was not only exposed to but also already quite fluent in the language of Providence and Providential design (Carretta 34):

Providence [was] God acting as the designer, caretaker,
and superintendent of the world and its inhabitants...
and because God [was] benevolent, all events, no matter
how apparently evil, [were] part of the grand design God
[had] revealed in the Bible.... Thus slavery could even be
seen as a kind of fortunate fall whereby the discomfort of
the slaves’ present life was compensated by the chance
given them of achieving eternal salvation (Carretta 28, 29).

Though baptized at the age of eighteen, “because Congregationalists were commonly baptized at the age of eighteen,” Wheatley had already “[undergone] a literary and religious catechism” long before she was baptized in 1771 (Carretta 34, 35). However, contrary to Cotton Mather’s prediction in “The Negro Christianized” that Christian conversion would keep slaves in their place, Wheatley’s figurative and literal baptism into Christianity had not succeeded in keeping her in her place. Her letter to John

Thornton would reveal just how judgmental her absorption of Christian “doctrine” had been.

In the spirit of the fortunate fall, John Thornton, the evangelical and British philanthropist, proposed to Wheatley, shortly after she was manumitted, that she return to Africa with Bristol Yamma and John Quamine as a missionary. In a letter dated October 30, 1774, Wheatley responded to Thornton, detailing why she would be unsuitable for such an “undertaking”:

...why do you hon'd sir, wish those poor men so much trouble as to carry me so long a voyage? Upon my arrival, how like a Barbarian shou'd I look to the Natives; I can promise that my tongue shall be quiet / for a strong reason indeed / being an utter stranger to the language of Amamaboe. Now to be serious, this undertaking appears too hazardous, and not sufficiently Eligible, to go—and leave my British & American Friends—I am also unacquainted with those Missionaries in person...I thank you heartily for your generous Offer With Sincerity... (“Much Hon'd Sir [John Thornton]”).

Wheatley gave six “reasons” as to why she could not return to Africa.⁶ The veracity of her reasons aside, the letter to John Thornton was incredibly important in that it gave lie to the notion that Wheatley indiscriminately consumed and repeated all things taught her. Had this been true, she would have welcomed the offer to fulfill providential design. This letter also proved that her invocation of the fortunate fall years earlier in the first line of “On Being Brought from Africa to America” had not been a legitimization of the doctrine of the fortunate fall but a strategy. By re-citing the discourse of the fortunate fall in “On Being Brought from Africa to America,” Wheatley was able to cunningly speak back to

⁶ Her reasons were as follows: (1) she did not want to trouble Yamma and Quamine with her presence; (2) she was concerned about looking like a barbarian to the natives; (3) she did not know the language of the Amamaboe; (4) the undertaking seemed too dangerous; (5) she did not want to leave her friends; (6) she did not know Yamma or Quamine.

the lords of the land through the mask of a grateful slave all the while thrusting, with “clenched fists,” at the very people and institution that had brought her to Christianity (Hurston 84). By donning the mask of a fortunate slave, Wheatley was able to traffic in subversion, divesting whites of power over her transplantation while couching a scathing critique of the institution of slavery in the process.

Wheatley inaugurated her performance in double-voicedness with the word “’Twas” (1). Elided to preserve the traditional meter of English heroic verse (iambic pentameter), “’Twas” more importantly introduced into the body of the poem the theme of withholding. “’Twas” ushered in a series of symbolic acts of withholding that began with the word “mercy.” Through “mercy,” Wheatley would prove that the “irreverent double-talk that American Blacks [would get] away with in spirituals, blues, and tale-tellings” had a much earlier starting date than ever imagined (Peterson 92).

Defined as “clemency and compassion shown to a person who is in a position of powerlessness or subjection; or to a person with no right or claim to receive kindness,” readers would have surely understood Wheatley, the recipient of “mercy,” as both the person in a position of powerlessness and the person with no right to receive kindness (“Mercy”). Her very status as both an African and a slave would have secured this reading. In choosing to cite a personified “mercy” as the force that brought her to America, Wheatley highlighted the action and not the actor responsible for her transplantation. Because of the familiar doctrine of the fortunate fall, readers would have ascribed the act of “mercy” to whites. After all, it *was* whites that had brought Wheatley from her “*Pagan Land*” (1). By conjuring the impress of the fortunate fall through the word “mercy” and withholding the identity of the person or persons who had granted her

“mercy,” Wheatley gave her audience enough room to read themselves into the text and congratulate themselves for their beneficence. This tactic would provide cover for the next two acts of treachery.

For readers who understood “mercy” as “forbearance, compassion, or forgiveness shown by God (or a god) to sinful humanity,” Wheatley’s first line (along with the rest of the quatrain) would have simply read as the re-citation of the fortunate fall by a thankful slave (“Mercy”). It would be the very veil afforded by the re-citation of the doctrine of the fortunate fall, however, that would allow Wheatley to covertly dethrone earthly gods, white men and women who had appointed and conducted themselves as God by proxy. Through metonymy, Wheatley restored the one and only God as the “superintendent” of her world. By gesturing to and crediting a power commonly associated with God, the power of “mercy,” for her removal from Africa to America and for her introduction to Christ, Wheatley credited God, not man, for that removal and for that introduction.⁷ By mimicking the discourse of the fortunate fall in the very first line of the poem, Wheatley hoodwinked readers into thinking she was crediting them and the institution of slavery for her introduction to Christianity. In crediting God for her journey and for her admission into Christianity, Wheatley divested whites of any claim to her redemption. Further, in crediting God for her removal from Africa, Wheatley displaced slavery as the reason for that removal, choosing instead to believe in a sacred process and design as opposed to a profane process and design. While this may have read as acquiescence to the doctrine of the fortunate fall, it was really another way in which Wheatley resisted slavery as *the* defining reality of her life. Wheatley was judicious enough to be thankful

⁷ “Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (Peter 1:3).

for Christianity without feeling the need to be thankful for the “seeming cruel fate [that] snatch’d [her] from *Afric*’s fancy’d happy seat” (Wheatley, “To the Right Honourable...” 24-5). Through the third definition of “mercy,” Wheatley would prove that her invocation of the fortunate fall in the first line of her poem was indeed a strategy.

Hannah Crocker, Phillis Wheatley’s contemporary, noted in her personal letters that ““Phillis was sent to school and educated with Miss Mary. She soon acquired the English language and made some progress in latin””(qtd. in Carretta 37). Phillis Wheatley had a working knowledge of Latin. “Mercy” in Latin is defined as “wages, payment, reward for service” or “price paid for service”(“Mercy”). There was indeed a price paid for Wheatley’s service as a slave. Lest their souls were “Steel’d...and by no misery mov’d,” one can imagine that slavers paid some kind of price (monetary, ethical, psychic) for her kidnapping and subsequent enslavement (Wheatley, “To The Right Honourable...” 28). One knows that an actual price was paid for Wheatley once she arrived in Boston. The advertisement “for the human cargo that included the future Phillis Wheatley first appeared in the Boston Gazette on 13 July 1761” (Carretta 12). The advertisement read:

Just Imported
From *Africa*
A Number of prime young
SLAVES from the Windward Coast, and to
Be Sold on board Capt. *Gwin* lying at New-Boston
(qtd. in Carretta 12)

One certainly knows that Wheatley herself paid the dearest price of all for her enslavement. She paid with her freedom. The third definition of “mercy” would have quietly transformed the act of “mercy” that brought Wheatley from Africa to America from a religious transaction to a monetary transaction (1). Through this last definition of

“mercy,” an acerbic critique of the fortunate fall was made possible. This third definition of “mercy” polluted the notion of the fortunate fall by reinstalling into the “mercy” of the doctrine the very violence and capitalist exploitation it sought to erase. Wheatley would offer critiques of slavery in two other poems. In “To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth...” Wheatley uncompromisingly spoke about the tyranny of slavery:

Should you, my lord, while you peruse my song,
Wonder from whence my love of *Freedom* sprung,
Whence flow these wishes for the common good,
By feeling hearts alone best understood,
I, in young life, by seeming cruel fate
Was snatch'd from *Afric*'s fancy'd happy seat:
What pangs excruciating must molest,
What sorrows labour in my parent's breast?
Steel'd was that soul and by no misery mov'd
That from a father seiz'd his babe belov'd:
Such, such my case. And can I then but pray
Others may never feel tyrannic sway? (20-31).

“To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth...” would be the only poem in which Wheatley would address the topic of African bondage directly. She would approach the topic again, indirectly, through the voice of General Wooster in the 1778 poem “On the Death of General Wooster.”⁸ By mimicking the discourse of the fortunate fall in the first line of her poem, Wheatley was able to secret away a critical rejoinder to that doctrine through the voice of a “fortunate” slave.

The first line of Wheatley's poem would house yet another instance of treachery through mimicry. In the title of her poem, Wheatley mimicked the white gaze by pointing to “Africa” as her place of origin and extraction. In the eighteenth-century, “Africa” existed in the white gaze, in the white imagination. “Africa” did not exist in the African

⁸ Wheatley placed the following anti-slavery sentiment in the mouth of “the expiring hero,” General Wooster: “But how presumptuous shall we hope to find / Divine acceptance with th' Almighty mind—/ While yet (O deed Ungenerous!) they disgrace / And hold in bondage *Afric*'s blameless race?” (11, 27-30). “On the Death of General Wooster” did not appear in *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*.

gaze or imagination in the same way. In the eighteenth-century, the people indigenous to Africa did not think of themselves as Africans. They belonged to peoples, not to a continent. Wheatley would repeat the white gaze in the first line of her poem in the same way she had repeated that gaze in the title of her poem by indicating that she had been brought from a “*Pagan* land” (1). Twice now in the poem, Wheatley had refused to name where in Africa she had come from opting instead to re-present Africa according to an exterior gaze. It wasn’t that Wheatley did not know where in Africa she had come from. She knew. In a poem not included in her 1773 collection, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, Wheatley warmly recalled her home country of Gambia.⁹ Why then would she opt to refer to her land according to a condition assigned to it by an exterior gaze? She would do so to undo that gaze.

“On Being Brought from Africa to America” is the only known writing in which Wheatley referred to her land explicitly as “*Pagan*”(1). In the 1767 variant of “To The University of Cambridge...” Wheatley referred to Africa as “the sable land of error’s darkest night” (4). The line reappeared in the 1773 version of the same poem as “The land of errors, and Egyptian gloom” (4). In a private letter to her friend Abour [sic] Tanner, she wrote: “...let us rejoice in and adore the wonders of God’s infinite love in bringing us from a land semblant of darkness itself, and where the divine light of revelation (being obscur’d) is as darkness” (“To Abour Tanner, in Newport”). “*Pagan*” came into use as early as 1440 to denote “A person not subscribing to any major or recognized religion, especially the dominant religion of a particular society; a heathen, a un-Christian, especially considered as savage, uncivilized” (“*Pagan*”). Wheatley’s readers

⁹ See Wheatley’s verse on Gambia in “The Answer [By the Gentleman of the Navy]” featured in the Chapter II of this manuscript.

would have likely understood “*Pagan* land” as a stand-in for “heathen or savage land” (1). The view of non-Christian lands and non-Christian people as savage and uncivilized had been cemented by both the Spanish Inquisition and Pope Alexander’s 1493 Papal *Bull of Donation* (Inter Caetera) in which he pronounced all nations not under Christian rule as “barbarous” nations (“Inter Caetera”). Did Wheatley really believe she had come from a pagan land? Yes. And no.

At the time of Wheatley’s arrival in colonial New England, “All that she is known to have recalled to her white captors about her native land is the fact that *‘her mother poured out water before the sun at his rising’* (italics in original)” (qtd. in Shields 241). Sun worship combined animism and fetishism: “Animism [constituted] a belief in expired souls and their probable interaction with and influence on events of the natural world; fetishism [belonged] to ‘the doctrine of spirits embodied in, or attached to, or conveying influence through certain material objects’” (Shields 242). Wheatley’s memory of her mother suggested that Wheatley’s mother had been a sun worshipper. The memory of her mother’s sun worship found its way into Wheatley’s poems: “[in] her poetry...Wheatley ...syncretized the memory of her mother’s sun worship with Christianity. Because of the pun on sun and Son, the blend [would have been] an easy one to...[make]” (Shields 242).¹⁰ In “Thoughts on the Works of Providence” for example, Wheatley identified the sun as the symbol of divine wisdom: “While day to night, and night succeeds to day: / That *Wisdom*, which attends *Jehovah’s* ways, / Shines most conspicuous in the solar rays...” (30-32). It was not that Wheatley came from a land or a people devoid of religion, it was that she came from a land and a people that did not

¹⁰ See Phillis Wheatley’s “Thoughts on the Works of Providence,” “On the Death of the Rev. Mr. George Whitefield,” and “An Hymn to the Morning.”

subscribe to an imperial religion. The use of “*Pagan*” in the first line of the poem was not a sign of Wheatley being stricken with exteriority but a tactic (1). The signaling of an un-Christianized land (in contradistinction to a land absent of religion) where the people were “heathens” because they did not know Christ would be juxtaposed later in the second half of the poem by presenting Christians in a Christian land (America) who knew Christ and still behaved “black as Cain”: “Remember, *Christians, Negros*, black as *Cain* / May be refin’d, and join th’ angelic train” (7-8). Her re-citation of “*Pagan*” in the first line of the poem would prove to be a treacherous act of mimicry and not evidence of her complicity in disparaging her origins (1).

The use of the word “my” before “*Pagan*” and the use of the word “land” after “*Pagan*” suggested that Wheatley’s re-marking of Africa as “*Pagan*” was indeed a ploy and not a sign of her ideological whitewashing (1). In noting that she was brought from her “*Pagan* land,” Wheatley laid claim, yet again, to that land. She had already laid claim to Africa in the title by locating it as her point of extraction, but more importantly by noting it as her point of origin via the word “from.”¹¹ Had she not wanted to emphasize her connection to her land, Wheatley, ever the poet, could have written the line as follows: “’Twas mercy brought me from [a] *Pagan* land.” Instead, she used the personal pronoun “my.” By indicating that Africa, a “*Pagan* land,” was hers, Wheatley quietly positioned America as the foreign land (1). By re-presenting herself according to the white gaze as other, as a stranger from a strange land, Wheatley dexterously positioned herself as a stranger *in* a strange land. This strategy of othering the colonizer and his land would prove critical in the latter half of the poem.

¹¹ See Chapter II for discussion of the word “from.”

The word “land” immediately after “*Pagan*” would further problematize the notion that Wheatley uncritically absorbed and regurgitated an imperial gaze (1). In economics, land “encompasses the natural resources used in production. In classical economics, the three factors of production are land, labour, and capital. Land [is] considered...the ‘original and inexhaustible gift of nature. In modern economics, it is broadly defined to include all that nature provides, including minerals, forest products, and water and land resources” (“Land”). The use of the word “land” in the first line of Wheatley’s poem was in keeping with Africans’ eighteenth-century identity politics. People in Africa did not identify themselves or their land according to the geopolitical constructs of country or nation or continent but according to ethnic groups, kingdoms, and religions. In fact, it would not be until the end of the eighteenth-century that people, once forcibly removed from Africa, would even “begin to embrace the diasporan public, social and political identity of *African*” (Carretta 4). In unnamng Africa as a “land,” Wheatley resisted and abrogated imperial nomenclature, “[sloughing] off a repressive, external-empirical mode of experiencing the world” (Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* 232). Meeting force with force, Wheatley asserted her “unmediated power” as a poet “to assign meaning” (Bakhtin, “Discourse on the Novel” 285). Wheatley’s unnamng of Africa would stand in sharp contrast to an imperial gaze obsessed with the Adamic power of naming (1). By repeating the commonly held view of Africa as “*Pagan*” in the first line of the poem, Wheatley was able to speak double-voiced, using “‘the means at hand’...which had not been especially conceived with an eye to the operation for which they [were]...used” to resist the hegemony of the master’s tongue (Derrida, “Structure, Sign, and Play...” 88). Wheatley would resist the hegemony of the master’s tongue in

another way. In referring to her land as “*Pagan*,” Wheatley interestingly identified the land and not the people as “*Pagan*” (1). Africans may have not believed in a Christian god but that did not mean they did not believe in their own god(s). In not identifying Africans as “*Pagan*,” Wheatley challenged, quietly, the authority of an exterior gaze. She would do this again, elliptically, through the word “benighted.” Wheatley would continue “hurrahing Black; badmouthing White” in the second line of her poem (Fabio 224).

In the second line of her poem, Wheatley would again “[take] up a definite position vis-à-vis reality by stepping outside of reality’s spell” (Adorno 233). Wheatley would do this by invoking the spell of the fortunate fall, a spell that had transfigured whites into Africans’ saviors. Wheatley, in the second line of her poem, would break that spell by divesting whites of credit for her enlightenment by signaling that it was through “mercy” and not man that she was taught “to understand”: “’Twas mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land, / Taught my benighted soul to understand / That there’s a God, that there’s a *Savior* too.” (1-3). Not only had God brought her to America, *He* made possible her learning about *Him*. Because of asyndetism however, it may not have been immediately clear to Wheatley’s audience that it was God’s mercy from the first line that was being credited for her introduction to Christianity. In beginning the line with “Taught,” readers may have found themselves asking, “*Who* taught her to understand?” By not clearly joining the first two lines with “and,” Wheatley created enough room to bewitch white readers into thinking that they indeed were responsible for her salvation. After all, who else would have taught Wheatley to “understand” Christianity but whites? In conjuring the appearance of a grateful slave, thankful to whites for her salvation, Wheatley was able to make her words bow “only the better / to rise and strike / again”

(Nichols, “Skin Teeth” 9-11). Wheatley would strike again in the second line of her poem through “Taught” and “benighted soul” (2).

An incredibly significant existential claim appeared in the second line of Wheatley’s poem. In indicating that her “benighted soul” was “Taught... to understand,” Wheatley not only affirmed her identity as a human being (through “soul”), but also struck down an oppressive discourse in the process (2). In beginning the second line of her poem with the word “Taught,” Wheatley made an immediate and bold counterclaim against Africans’ innate inferiority (2).

Race theory, with its ancient biblical and classical origins, “developed first as a theory of racial difference, but in the seventeenth century, scientific schemes of race classification evolved [and] gave the strength of evidence to...assumptions concerning [the] superiority and inferiority” of races (Lowance, Jr. 250). By the end of the seventeenth-century, race theory had consecrated as truth the innate inferiority of all persons of African descent. This “truth” would be reified for the next two centuries. In 1758 for example, Carl von Linnaeus introduced, in the tenth edition of *Systema Naturae*, “a fourfold division of humanity in which *Homo Europeaus* was at the pinnacle of development, and *Homo Afer* near the bottom of the scale” (Lowance, Jr. 250). In 1781/2 Thomas Jefferson himself concluded that in regard to the “faculties of memory, reason, and imagination,” Africans were “in memory...equal to the whites; in reason much inferior” (*Notes on the State of Virginia* 7). The inferiority of Blacks, an “essentialist argument,” was “correlated with a perceived absence of literature and culture” (Lowance, Jr. 251). Phillis Wheatley had both. Wheatley’s poem was proof that Africans could be “Taught...to understand” (2). Wheatley’s decision to use “Taught” was a purposeful one.

With a plethora of words at her disposal, Wheatley could have just as easily used the word “Showed” in place of “Taught” to render a likewise idea. “Showed” would have preserved the metrical pattern of the poem and would have satisfied the widely held belief that Blacks could parrot but not think. In deciding to use “Taught” however, Wheatley intentionally aimed at and collapsed one of the central and authoritative discourses of her time (Enlightenment science) by calling attention to the fact that she had been taught to understand. Considering that “schools were...infrequent in the 18th century and normally only for the elite [since] children learned mainly at home or as apprentices” and considering that “Black children...learned manual skills but also a special set of abilities – to be deferential to owners” Wheatley’s decision to brandish “Taught” was, quite simply, an act of defiance (Lemon 132). Wheatley defied not only notions of what her “place” should be as an enslaved Black woman but white supremacy as well. Through “Taught,” Wheatley disproved one of the more defining gazes she was subjected to. Wheatley would continue to use language to exorcise rituals of oppression.

In her poems, Wheatley observed, to some degree, some typological rituals of oppression. Wheatley occasionally maintained “the essential characteristics of a white and black aesthetic” in the sense that she observed “the dichotomy of superior vs. inferior” associated respectively with whiteness and blackness (Gayle, Jr. 157). This dichotomy “would assume body and form in the 18th century” (Gayle, Jr. 157). The words that she most often used in her poems to point to a “black aesthetic” (in the way Addison Gayle, Jr. formulated it in “Cultural Strangulation: Black Literature and the White Aesthetic”), were “dark,” “night,” “dreary,” and “gloom.” These words were often used as surrogates for “black” to signal something ominous or undesirable in her poems.

She never used the word “benighted” in service of such ideas (2). In fact, the word “benighted” never again appeared in any of her poems (2). It did appear in her February 9th, 1774 “Letter to Rev. Samuel Hopkins” in reference to her adopted nation within a nation. In that letter, Wheatley shared with Reverend Hopkins her belief that “this [was] the beginning of that happy period foretold by the Prophets, when all shall know the Lord from the least to the greatest” (“Letter to Rev. Samuel Hopkins”). In regard specifically to unconverted Blacks in colonial America she cheerfully confessed to Hopkins that her “heart [expanded] with sympathetic joy to see at a distant time the thick cloud of ignorance dispersing from the face of [her] benighted country” (“Letter to Rev. Samuel Hopkins”). Her joyous anticipation about and belief in the future conversion of un-Christianized Blacks was immediately followed by the very charge against white Christians found in the second half of “On Being Brought from Africa to America”: “Europe and America have long been fed with the heavenly provision, and I fear they loathe it, while Africa is perishing with a spiritual Famine” (176).

Although Wheatley’s use of the word “benighted” in the second line of her poem performed to outwardly maintain “a white and black aesthetic,” it was really another means to an end (2). Defined as “overtaken by intellectual, moral, or social darkness,” “benighted” was used to describe Wheatley’s previously unconverted status but it may not be supposed that the word worked overtime to play into white readers’ sensibilities (“Benighted”). Though “benighted” gestured to Wheatley’s once moral blackness, it most certainly also signaled to contemporaneous readers Wheatley’s *phenotypical* Blackness. She was, after all, congenitally “overtaken by darkness or night.” Wheatley could have referred to her un-Christianized soul as “lost,” “ungodly,” “godless,” or “unbelieving.” In

fact, she used the word “unbeliever” to describe a non-Christian in “An Address to the Deist.”¹² Why then would Wheatley use a word that would connote to readers her phenotypical blackness to speak about her un-Christianized soul? Wheatley did so to rupture the typology of blackness. In assigning her darkness to her soul and not her skin, a darkness that could be and was overcome with knowledge of God, Wheatley relocated the alleged “sin” of blackness onto the soul and not the skin. This rupturing of the typology of blackness would find its truest and most radical articulation in the second quatrain of the poem. There, Wheatley would prove that goodness and evil where “spiritual conditions which [transcended] the physical peculiarities of race...and which [were] ultimately discernable through actions and motives” (Levernier, “Wheatley’s On Being Brought...” 26). Through “benighted,” Wheatley signified on the signifier’s sign through the signifier’s sign.

The third line of Wheatley’s poem would have probably read as inconsequential to contemporaneous readers in that it seemed, on the exterior, to uneventfully expand upon the second line of the poem. In the third line of her poem, Wheatley, reflecting on her journey to redemption, identified what she was taught to understand. “Mercy” taught her to understand “That there’s a God, that there’s a *Saviour* too” (3). In this line, Wheatley unmistakably identified herself as Christian. It is true that some slaveholders felt particularly threatened by the existence of Christianized slaves in that Christianity exposed the “interplay of ideas of equality and subordination”: “The idea that conversion might bring freedom was widely known [and hoped for] among slaves...” (Bruce, Jr. 11). Some however saw and used Christianity as yet another instrument for controlling

¹² In “An Address to the Deist,” Wheatley asked, “Must Ethiopians be employ’d for you? / Much I rejoice if any good I do. / I ask O unbeliever, Satan’s child / Hath not thy Saviour been too much revil’d” (1-4).

Blacks. After all, nowhere in the New Testament was slavery explicitly prohibited. In fact, Leviticus permitted the enslavement of outsiders:

Both thy bondmen, and thy bondmaids, which thou shalt have, *shall be* of the heathen that are round about you: of them shall ye buy bondmen and bondmaids. Moreover of the children of the strangers that do sojourn among you, of them shall ye buy, and of their families that *are* with you, which they begat in your land: and they shall be your possession. And ye shall take them as an inheritance for your children after you, to inherit *them* for a possession; they shall be your bondmen for ever: but over your brethren the children of Israel, ye shall not rule one over another with rigour (Lev. 25: 44-46).

Others, like Cotton Mather, implored slaveholders to Christianize the “Poor NEGROES”:

“Who can tell but that this Poor Creature may belong to the Election of God...The condition of...Servants,” Mather argued, “loudly [solicited]” their Christianization (“The Negro Christianized” 19). The third line of Wheatley’s poem would have likely gone unnoticed as a site of resistance precisely because it performed to verify the impress of the fortunate all summoned in the first line of the poem. In this line, Wheatley confirmed her acceptance of a religion that saw her, an outsider, as fit to be enslaved. How treacherous could this line be? However, what the third line appeared to do and what it actually did were two very different things.

In the seemingly inconsequential third line of Wheatley’s poem, a seemingly inconsequential function word appeared twice. The indefinite article “a” appeared once before “God” and once before “*Saviour*”: “That there’s a God, that there’s a *Saviour* too” (3). “A” as an indefinite article and aptly named function word is capable of performing in multiple ways, including the following: “it can be used as a function word before singular nouns when the referent is unspecified” or “it can be used like *one*” (“A”).

Readers would have surely read the third line of Wheatley's poem according to the latter definition of the word: "That there [is one] God, that there [is one] Saviour too." But what of the former definition of "a"? Why would Wheatley risk a word that would leave the referents – in this case "God" and "Saviour" –unspecified?

While Wheatley herself knew that there was *one* God and *one* Savior, she lived in a world where whites, in professing to be Christian, had appointed themselves and behaved as Gods and Savors, by proxy, of the so-called sons of Ham. The doctrine of the fortunate fall was proof of this. The use of "a" allowed Wheatley to at once rid whites of any belief that there was any other God and Savior but God and Jesus by using "a" as a stand-in for *one* while simultaneously and subversively pointing to the unspecified number of self-appointed gods and saviors inhabiting America. This line in effect performed stealthily as a retort to the doctrine of the fortunate fall that positioned whites as Africans' gods and saviors. In repeating, in a catechetical way, religious doctrine, she reminded Christians who had conducted themselves otherwise, of religious doctrine. She would shatter the façade of the fortunate fall once and for all in the last line of the first quatrain.

In *Poetics*, Aristotle observed, "the same word may be at once strange and current but not in relation to the same people" (41). Through the word "redemption," Wheatley disproved, once and for all, the "benevolence" of the fortunate fall. Through the mask of a "fortunate" slave, Wheatley repeated the narrative of the fortunate fall with a destabilizing difference, "unfold[ing] [her] limbs to rise up and bare teeth" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 3).

In *The Book of Negroes*, Dr. Alexander Falconbridge, thinking back remorsefully to his days as a surgeon on slave ships, asked the formerly enslaved protagonist Aminata, “Do you believe in redemption?” Indicating that her father was a Muslim and she was a native born African, she responded for herself and for her people: “I don’t know... We worked together. Ate together. Pounded millet together. We believed that we would gather when we died, return to those ancestors who had brought us to life. But nobody spoke of redemption” (Hill 405). Dr. Falconbridge responded, “Redemption is invented by the sinner. I have sinned...” (Hill 405). In the last line of the first quatrain of “On Being Brought from Africa to America,” Wheatley would prove that redemption was indeed invented by the sinner.

Following the script of the fortunate fall, Wheatley disclosed to the reader, “Once I redemption neither sought nor knew” (4). Preceded by a colon, this fourth line was intended to elaborate on, define, illustrate, or explain a previous thought – in this case the central theme of the previous three lines – Providential design. Wheatley’s fourth line explained her former condition (lost) in order to highlight the grace in her present condition (found). The fourth line was the “before” to the first three lines’ “after.” Before, in Africa, she was Pagan. Now, in America, she was a Christian. This fourth line gave credence to the idea of the fortunate fall being a necessary evil since it was slavery that “brought [Wheatley] from [her] *Pagan* land” where she was taught to understand “That there’s a God, that there’s a *Saviour* too” (1, 3). The fourth line in effect completed Wheatley’s first-hand account of Providential design. But the fourth line was not a mirror, it was a veil. While the fourth line outwardly performed to mirror back Wheatley’s “fortunate” fall to Anglo-Americans vis-à-vis Wheatley’s personal reflection,

the word “redemption” covertly deployed an epistemological assault on Providential design from behind the veil of conformity.

Defined as “Deliverance from sin and damnation, especially by the atonement of Christ; salvation,” Wheatley’s readers would have immediately understood “redemption” in its religious context (“Redemption”). Considering that the previous three lines had tracked her journey from Paganism to Christianity, readers would have naturally understood redemption to mean Christian salvation. In referring to her “redemption” and in citing “mercy” as the source of that redemption, Wheatley whispered something very significant (1, 4). God had deemed Wheatley worthy enough to not only bestow “mercy” upon her but to grant her “redemption” from her sins (1, 4). God had elected Wheatley for salvation. If God could be merciful and redeem her, couldn’t whites do the same?

A second definition of “redemption” would speak more clearly to the deliverance hoped for by the Christianized slave: “the act of freeing a prisoner, captive, or slave by payment” (“Redemption”). According to Christian doctrine, Christ had already paid for Wheatley’s sins and yet, she was still a slave. Wheatley had accepted God and Jesus as her Savior and yet, she was still a prisoner, a captive. Didn’t her redemption merit her release from slavery since she was now equal, before God, to all other Christians? Was Christianity not an equalizing force? Was grace also meted out according to a racial caste system? What did Christianity really mean then to white Christians? What did redemption really mean for the enslaved? If God deemed her worthy of salvation, why was she still in a state of damnation? How fortunate was her fall? In re-citing her own “fortunate” fall, Wheatley inconspicuously called into question the very notion of fortune in that fall. Wheatley would rid the very notion of fortune from the fortunate fall by

tacitly reminding readers that she was brought to redemption. Both in the title and in the first line of her poem, Wheatley used “brought” to characterize her transplantation. That word, the only word to repeat in the poem, would prove critical to understanding the fourth line of Wheatley’s poem.

The concept of providential design cast slavery as a merciful act in that “Enslavement of bodies introduced pagans to the means to freedom for their souls through conversion to Christianity” (Carretta 29). In making the matter of fact claim that she had never known “redemption,” Wheatley implicitly substantiated the view of Africa and Africans as pagan. But Wheatley did something else in the fourth line of the poem. Wheatley made it a point to tell readers that she had not sought redemption. That sentiment did not need to be expressed. She had already fulfilled the narrative of the fortunate fall by proclaiming herself as a former pagan from a pagan land. Why then would she have included the gratuitous claim that she had never searched out redemption? In asserting that she had never “sought” redemption, Wheatley intimated something quite profound (4). Because of the word “nor,” knowing redemption and seeking redemption were positioned as distinct ideas. It wasn’t that Wheatley did not seek redemption *because* she did not know about it; she neither sought redemption *nor* knew about it. Either way, the line pointed to a time when Wheatley existed “*other than [on whites’] terms*”: “as in: once I existed beyond and without these terms under consideration” (Jordan 178). By specifically indicating that she had never sought redemption, Wheatley left room for one to wonder whether she would have sought redemption had she known about it. That question would matter not since Wheatley was brought *to* redemption. Any agency she may have had over the matter was denied her.

Although Wheatley credited God for having been brought to redemption, that did not erase the truth about how the fortunate fall was actually carried out. In indicating that she had never sought redemption whilst writing about her redemption, Wheatley obliquely signaled to readers that her “journey” to redemption had not been by choice. The fourth line of Wheatley’s poem indirectly pointed to slavery, the agent of the fortunate fall, as something that was inflicted upon Wheatley not bestowed upon her. As staged in the white imagination, this redemption was as an act of mercy, civilization, and necessity. In performing for that white imagination by bearing witness to her own “fortunate” fall, Wheatley was able to suggest otherwise.

The revelatory claim that Wheatley never sought redemption was finalized by a terminal caesura. The period after “knew” would demarcate the first quatrain from the second and final quatrain of the poem. The student in the first quatrain would transform herself into the ministerial teacher by the second quatrain. The solitary speaker in the first half of the poem, the one reflecting on her spiritual transformation after having been brought from her God-less land, would transform her voice to a collective voice, and would find herself, still, in a God-less land. The act of mimicry would also be transformed from a covert technique in the first quatrain to an overt vehicle for treachery in the second quatrain. Most important of all, Wheatley’s gaze would shift from an introspective gaze in the first quatrain to a pointed glare in the second quatrain. This pointed glare would be aimed directly at whites.

Wheatley would begin the second quatrain of her poem by shifting her gaze to whites. In shifting her gaze to whites, Wheatley shifted her audience’s gaze to whites as

well. In doing so, Wheatley ostensibly shifted her audience's gaze back onto themselves and what Wheatley re-presented to her audience was a damning image of whites.

In the first two lines of the second quatrain, Wheatley displayed the gaze of "Some" whites to white readers: "Some view our sable race with scornful eye / 'Their colour is a diabolic die'" (1, 5-6). Wheatley was calculating enough to single out to her readers only those whites that had viewed her race with scorn. The qualifier "Some," functioning as a mirror, compelled Wheatley's readers to assess whether they were part of the "Some" being exposed. Turning their own gaze upon themselves, white readers were tasked with appraising not only their scornful "eye" but also their scornful "I." Wheatley's decision to address how "Some" whites viewed her and her "sable race" demonstrated how incredibly aware she was of that scornful gaze (5). She was so aware of that scornful gaze that she provided "textual evidence" in order to prove her claim that "Some [viewed her] race with scornful eye." Her offering of textual evidence was telling. It signaled a deep understanding about her voice as a *Black* poet. While she would later on (and in other poems as well) assume her authority as a *Christian* poet without difficulty, the offering up of (textual) evidence to prove her charge against whites to whites visible-ized her understanding of the Black voice as one that could not be taken at face value without accompanying machinery that vouched for the truthfulness of that voice. As such, she cited an imagined collective white voice (the voice of "Some") to support her charge that her sable race had indeed been viewed "with [a] scornful eye" (5). That imagined collective white, which held more authority than an actual Black voice, said of Blacks, "'Their colour is a diabolic die'" (6).

In re-citing “Some” whites’ view of Blacks, Wheatley was able to bring to light two insidiously linked thoughts on phenotypical blackness. Enlightenment thinkers of every stripe grappled with finding a physiological explanation for physical blackness. Thomas Jefferson, domestic purveyor of the typical kind of Enlightenment science circulating in the eighteenth-century, concluded, “Whether the black of the negro resides in the reticular membrane between the skin and the scarf-skin, or in the scarf-skin itself; [or] whether it proceeds from the color of the blood, the color of the bile, or from that of some other secretion, the difference is fixed in nature, and is as real as if its seat and cause were better known to us” (*Notes on the State...6*). This fixed physical difference had already been “explained” by Christian pseudo-doctrine. By the eighteenth-century, the “equation of darkness with evil and sin” found defenders in those who “embraced the notion that in Genesis 4: 1-16 and 20-27 God cursed the descendants of Cain and / or Ham... with black skin” (Carretta 63). Corroborated by both the mark of Cain and the curse of Ham, this unknown “die”—blackness—came to be seen as proof of the “diabolic” nature of all persons of African descent (6).¹³ By re-citing the white gaze, Wheatley illustrated the extent to which whites had absorbed the association between physical blackness and evil. More importantly, the re-citation of the white gaze exhibited whites’ moral blackness by unmasking whites’ persecution of Blacks, a persecution that had been solely based on Blacks’ topical as opposed to moral darkness. Whites’ persecution of Blacks would come undone in the most radical line ever written in all of Wheatley’s poems. Wheatley, in the seventh line of her poem, would again make “de

¹³ Nineteenth-century science would later be handed the Enlightenment’s racist baton and would run furiously with it, finding perhaps one of its most dangerous articulations in Joseph Arthur, Comte de Gobineau’s *The Inequality of Human Races*.

Queen's English [an] accessory"...this time to her greatest "offence" (Agard, "Listen Mr Oxford Don" 38-9).

Just "sixteen months after her entry into the Wheatley household Phillis was talking the language of her owners. Phillis was fluently reading the Scriptures. At eight and a half years of age, this Black child, or 'Africa's Muse', as she would later describe herself, was fully literate in the language of this slaveholding land" (Jordan, "The Difficult Miracle..." 177). She was so fluent in fact, that she would use the very language of the slaveholding land –Christianity—to unmask false "*Christians*" (7). Wheatley would bare "all [her] logic and her theory...[adding] a motherfucker" in the way of the seventh line so "ignan't" people could hear her.¹⁴ Through the most brazen marriage of mimicry and defiance, Wheatley would reveal the truly God-less land and the real heathens in the seventh line of her poem.

In a 1774 letter to Sam Occom, Wheatley elaborated on the hypocrisy of false Christians who she referred to as "Modern Egyptians":

...I desire not for their Hurt, but to convince them
of the strange Absurdity of their Conduct whose
Words and Actions are so diametrically opposite.
How well the cry for Liberty, and the reverse
Disposition for the Exercise of oppressive Power
over others agree, – I humbly think it does not
require the Penetration of a Philosopher to determine (177).

Wheatley had addressed these "Modern Egyptians" and "the strange Absurdity of their Conduct" as a moral superior six years earlier in "On Being Brought from Africa to

¹⁴ "Behold as my odes manifold on your minds / Two emcees can't occupy the same space at the same time / It's against the laws of physics / So weep as your sweet dreams break up like Eurythmics / Rap rejects my tape deck, ejects projectile / Whether Jew or gentile, I rank top percentile / Many styles, more powerful than gamma rays / My grammar pays, like Carlos Santana plays 'Black Magic Woman' / So while you're fumin' I'm consumin' mango juice under Polaris / You're just embarrassed cuz it's your last tango in Paris / And even after all my logic and my theory, I add a motherfucker so you ignan't niggas hear me" ("Zealots").

America.” Her addressing of “Modern Egyptians” would begin with the word “Remember” (7).

Appropriating “the persona of authority or power normally associated with men and her social superiors,” Wheatley suffered “*Christians, Negros, black as Cain,*” to remember that they too could be “refin’d, and join th’ angelic train”: “Remember, *Christians, Negros, black as Cain, / May be refin’d, and join th’ angelic train*” (7-8). Religion had invested Wheatley with the moral authority to lay down her mask, step out of her “place” as a slave, and speak, as a religious exemplar, to Christians and Negroes. Wheatley had already assumed this voice in the 1767 variant of “To the University of Cambridge...” and would do so again in “An Address to the Deist”: “Like a teacher to students, or a minister to his flock...” Wheatley spoke “[f]rom a position of moral superiority gained through experience...” (Carretta 59). In fact, the first quatrain of “On Being Brought from Africa to America,” though draped in the shroud of the fortunate fall, had stealthily provided Wheatley’s religious credentials in preparation for the shift in her voice in the second quatrain of the poem.

Wheatley’s authority was immediately made visible through the word “Remember” (7). While readers may have naturally assumed, given the identity of the speaker, that “Remember” was a request, it was not a request; it was a command (7). In beginning with word “Remember,” Wheatley explicitly “assumed a voice that [transcended] the ‘privileges’ of those who [were] reputedly her superiors in age, status, abilities, authority, race, and gender” (Carretta 59). Nothing in Wheatley’s lived experience had authorized her to think that she could take on such a voice and urge anyone to “Remember” anything about their own salvation, save for Christianity.

Exhortations and commands, after all, belonged to white men, not enslaved Black teenaged girls. The twin institutions of Christianity and slavery must have surely taught her that. And yet, it would be her invocation of those two very institutions in the seventh line of her poem – institutions that had certainly taught her her “place” – which she would use to put false Christians in their place.

Implicit in the act of telling “*Christians, Negros*” to remember that they too could “be refin’d, and join th’ angelic train” was the imputation that Christians and Negroes had not been refined and saved (7). This “reminder” would have been a fitting one for Negroes who, through no fault of their own, had oft been denied entrance into the kingdom of Christianity. But why were “*Christians*” being reminded that they too could be refined and saved? By virtue of being Christians, hadn’t they already been refined and saved? The two previous lines in the second quatrain had answered “No.”

Wheatley had already, albeit unnoticeably, signaled the moral blackness of Christians in the first line of the second quatrain through the use of the word “our”(5). Wheatley understood that readers would have read, “Some view our sable race with scornful eye” as “Some view [her] sable race with scornful eye” (1). A white audience would have never thought to include themselves in “our sable race” (5). In the construction of blackness and enslavement “could be found not only the not-free but also, with dramatic polarity created by skin color, the projection of the not-me” (Morrison, *Playing in the Dark* 38). In other words, “sable,” to a white audience, meant not-them (5). The use of the word “our” however implicated the audience as part of that “sable race” (5).

Had Wheatley really intended to distinguish herself from her white audience in the first two lines of the second quatrain, she would have written, “Some view *my* sable race with scornful eye” [emphasis added]. She did not do that. She had done so before. In fact, the only time Wheatley used “our” to discuss her sable race was in a letter to her enslaved friend, Obour Tanner, who was also a member of that sable race.¹⁵ By contrast, in her letter to the Reverend Samuel Hopkins, she referred to her race as “my benighted country”.¹⁶ Wheatley’s use of “our” in the fifth line was purposeful. Wheatley clandestinely expanded the notion of blackness to move beyond physical blackness to accommodate whites’ moral blackness. This strategy would allow her to assert and maintain authority over whites in the second quatrain of the poem by positioning them as others. By re-placing them into the “sable race,” Wheatley was able to “delineate the Other as radically different from the self...to valorize [judgment and] control over” them (Ashcroft et al. 103).

But if whites were included in “our sable race,” then who was viewing them with scorn? It would be Wheatley, pointing to their blackness in the seventh line of her poem, who would be viewing “*Christians...black as Cain*” with scorn (6, 7). Wheatley’s gaze would become a glare by the seventh line of the poem. That glare however would not become immediately apparent to readers. The tactical invocation of Cain would blind readers to Wheatley’s counterhegemonic stare.

¹⁵ In a May 19, 1772 letter to Obour Tanner, Wheatley, after rejoicing that she, like Obour had been brought from “a land semblant of darkness” lamented, “Many of **our** fellow creatures are pass’d by, when the bowels of divine love expanded towards us” (“To About Tanner, in Newport”). Later, acknowledging that some Blacks were indeed moving toward Christianity, Wheatley noted, “It gives me pleasure to hear so many of **my** nation, seeking with eagerness the way to true felicity” (“To About Tanner, in Newport”).

¹⁶ In her February 9, 1774 letter to Reverend Hopkins, Wheatley shared the following: “My heart expands with sympathetic joy to see at a distant time the thick cloud of ignorance dispersing from the face of my benighted country” (“To the Rev. Samuel Hopkins”).

Through a literary sleight of hand, Wheatley nestled into the seventh line of her poem an incredibly radical claim. Through italicization, Wheatley rendered “*Christians*,” “*Negros*,” and “*Cain*” as equals on the page space. While this typographical decision appeared to be just that, typography performed as a literary technique “to escape...the inadequacies and imperial constraints of English as a social practice...that is, to escape from the implicit body of assumptions to which English was attached, its aesthetic and social values, the formal and historically limited constraints of genre” (Ashcroft et al 10-11). Through italicization, “*Christians*,” “*Negros*,” and “*Cain*” were given the same visceral weight. The staging of those words as visual equals would aid Wheatley in subverting the master narrative on race and redemption.

To level “*Christians*,” “*Negros*,” and “*Cain*” as equal through italicization was as extraordinary as Wheatley’s decision to literally and literarily stand Christians (understood as white) and Negroes side by side on the same line: “Remember, *Christians*, *Negros*, black as *Cain*, / May be refin’d, and join th’ angelic train”(7-8).¹⁷ Wheatley however was wily enough to separate “*Christians*” and “*Negros*” with a comma (7). She was also astute enough to place “*Christians*” before “*Negros*” (7). By using a comma to separate the two, and by arranging and segregating them on the page space as they were hierarchically arranged and segregated in the socio-political space of America, Wheatley mimicked a socio-political practice to later do away with, literarily, that very same practice. Those commas may have appeared to separate, but they also joined. Wheatley in effect used italics, line arrangement, and commas as equalizing forces, proving that

¹⁷ See Roxanne Wheeler’s *The Complexion of Race: Categories of Difference in Eighteenth-Century British Culture* in which she documents the use of the word Christian as a surrogate for white in eighteenth-century British culture.

though “[Whites] taught [Wheatley] how to read ...[she] learned how to write” (Jordan “The Difficult Miracle...” 10). Through “technical paraphernalia,”¹⁸ Wheatley made a provocative assertion about all “*Christians*.”¹⁹

In the only true autobiographical poem ever written by Phillis Wheatley, Wheatley defeated “assertions alleging distinctions between the black and white races” through clever syntax (Scheick 118). This clever syntax, made possible by one of the tools of the heroic couplet – the zeugma –enabled the seventh line to be read in two ways: (1) “Remember, *Christians* [that] *Negros*, black as *Cain* / May be refin’d, and join th’ angelic train” and (2) “Remember, *Christians* [and] *Negros*, black as *Cain* / May be refin’d, and join th’ angelic train” (7-8). The comma between “*Christians*” and “*Negros*” may have outwardly performed to distinguish Christians from Negroes but in truth, it served to jointly charge Christians and Negroes with being “black as *Cain*” (7). It was clear how “*Negros*” could be “black as *Cain*” (7). Pro-slavery apologists, reinterpreting Genesis 4:2-16, had “translated” the mark the Lord set upon Cain as the mark of blackness.²⁰ “*Negros*” therefore were phenotypically “black as *Cain*” (7). But how could white Christians be “black as *Cain*” (7)? Una Marson’s poem “Politeness” would explain how:

They tell us
That our skin is black

¹⁸ Dylan Thomas referred to poetic devices and techniques as “technical paraphernalia” in “Notes on the Art of Poetry.”

¹⁹ Earlier in the second stanza, Wheatley had made sure not to accuse all whites of viewing her “sable race” with scorn. She cautiously used the word “Some” to avoid a sweeping indictment of whites (5). Wheatley would not do the same again. In directing “*Christians, Negros*, black as *Cain*” to remember that they could be refined and possibly saved, Wheatley did not distinguish between different kinds of “*Christians*” (7). All Christians needed to be refined and possibly saved.

²⁰ “And the Lord said unto him, Therefore whosoever slayeth Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold. And the Lord set a mark upon Cain, lest any finding him should kill him” (Gen. 4:15).

But our hearts are white

We tell them
That their skin is white
But their hearts are black (1-6).

Earlier in the second quatrain, Wheatley had provided evidence as to the blackness of whites' hearts. Quietly in the first quatrain, through the doctrine of the fortunate fall, Wheatley had done the same. Not only had Christians not comported themselves as their brothers' keepers (as evidenced through their scorning of Blacks), they too had figuratively or literally killed or sanctioned the killing of their brothers (as evidenced through the fortunate fall). By attaching the mark of Cain to Christians, Wheatley inculpated Christians as murderers and the institution of slavery as murderous. In doing so, Wheatley fell the fortunate fall and identified Christians as false.

By juxtaposing the blackness present in the first quatrain with the blackness present in the second quatrain, Wheatley moved the reader to consider which was worse – the blackness of un-Christianized Blacks or the blackness of Christianized whites? In attaching the mark of Cain to white Christians, Wheatley presented a scathing disapprobation of Christians who “[professed] that they [knew] God; but in works...[denied] *him*.”²¹ Black poets, writers, thinkers, and orators would echo this critique of Christians, and by extension Christianity, time and time again in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Frances E.W. Harper herself echoed Wheatley's rebuke of errant Christians in her 1854 poem “Bible Defence of Slavery”:

Oh! when we pray for the heathen lands,
And plead for their dark shores,
Remember Slavery's cruel hands

²¹ Titus 1:16.

Make heathens at your doors! (21-4).

The staging of a forceful comparison between those who were physically benighted and those who were morally benighted would have likely been lost upon a white audience who would have read the last two lines of Wheatley's poem as follows: "Remember, *Christians*, [those] *Negros* [who are] black as *Cain*, / May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train" (7-8). These lines would have been understood as such for two reasons: the first quatrain, which focused on Wheatley's benightedness and her eventual spiritual refinement, supported this reading. Wheatley was proof that *Negros* could be "refin'd, and join th' angelic train" (8). Secondly and more importantly, the simile-as-idiom "black as *Cain*" would have immediately conjured in readers' minds pro-slavery apologists' all too familiar version of the biblical story of Cain and Abel, which reconfigured the mark placed on Cain by God as the mark of physical blackness (7).²² Hence, the allusion to Cain would not have been understood in relation to "*Christians*" but to "*Negros*" (7). Whether understood or not, the indictment against Christians remained. By re-citing one of the most insidious biblical discourses used to justify slavery (the mark of Cain) as well as whites' behavior and the doctrine of the fortunate fall, Wheatley was able to quietly highlight how all discourses and institutions used to "kill" Abels (science, Christianity, Providential design, language) turned Christians into Cains. Although Wheatley would offer up the possibility of refinement and salvation to both Christians and *Negros*, the mark of Cain would temper that possibility for Christians.

²² See, among others, David M. Goldenberg's *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* in which he attempts to trace, in a chapter titled "The Curse of Cain," how Cain came to be associated with Blackness.

The final line of “On Being Brought From Africa to America” found Wheatley invoking Calvinist doctrine through the phrase “May be”: “Remember, *Christians*, *Negros*, black as *Cain*, / May be refin’d, and join th’ angelic train” (7-8).

Congregationalists followed the teachings of John Calvin. Calvinism held the idea that “very few Christians [were] among the elect, those predestined or elected by God to be saved...Grace [was] given, not earned” (Carretta 25). “May be” may have spoken to the Calvinist roots of Wheatley’s Congregationalist faith that said that grace was not guaranteed to all, but it may not be supposed that it also spoke to God’s warning to “whoever slayeth Cain [that] vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold” (Gen. 4: 15). Although Wheatley invoked the mark of Cain to admonish white Christians about their behavior toward Blacks, she also invoked and observed the mark of Cain as a means to warn white Christians about the consequences of their behavior. God warned that “whosoever slayeth Cain” for his sins would be punished. In keeping with the eighteenth-century understanding of the mark of Cain, that warning would translate as follows: If anyone kills someone for their (real or imagined) sin of *being* black (corporal or moral), they will be punished seven times over. The qualifier “May be” may have been installed into the final line of the poem to caustically remind white Christians that they had jeopardized their road to salvation by slaying (physically, psychically, morally, linguistically, religiously, culturally, socio-politically) countless Cains. This reminder to white Christians in particular, issued by an enslaved Black girl, was in itself an act of resistance. Wheatley was speaking as one elected by God (her election was evidenced in the first quatrain) to people who had imagined themselves and behaved as custodians of

that election. In spreading the gospel of salvation, Wheatley quietly reminded Christians about the possibility of damnation.

Wheatley concluded her poem with an egalitarian vision of heaven where elected Negros and Christians could board the same “angelic train” (8).²³ Not only had Wheatley joined Christians and Negros on the same page space, she had also joined them in heaven. In dutifully repeating Christian doctrine from behind the mask of a grateful, Christianized slave, Wheatley was able to undo a multiplicity of discourses that conspired to keep her in her place.

Speaking of Phillis Wheatley, Sondra O’Neale commonsensically emptied the charge of Wheatley’s “talking white” by providing a proper historical and literary context for understanding Wheatley’s poems. In doing so, she highlighted contemporary readers’ anachronistic expectations of this eighteenth-century enslaved, African, female poet:

The writing of these enslaved authors resemble the Southern plantation hymns of the nineteenth-century, which the slaves sung on one level with intense religious commitment and on another level as a code language to protest slavery and to plan for escape. In a more formal tactic, Wheatley challenged eighteenth-century evangelicals in their cherished religious arena by redeploying the same language and doctrine that whites had used to define the African, thereby undercutting conventional colonial assumptions about race and skin color...Her methodology included biblical language and allusions that were much more comprehensible to readers in the eighteenth-century revivalist era than to those in this more secular age (“A Slave’s Subtle War...” 145, 157).

²³ “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free: there is neither male nor female for ye are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3: 28).

Religious discourse for Black poets in the eighteenth-century was a *discreet* avenue for protest. For Phillis Wheatley, Christian discourse as a vehicle for dissent was *the* only viable game in town:

While her behavior now seems to some as merely typical of a Black woman who was brainwashed into ‘thinking white,’ the truth is that the evangelical church was the only functioning social institution that desired to put the issue of slavery on the national agenda. To phrase it bluntly, ‘there was no other “game” in town’ (“Challenge to Wheatley’s Critics...” 503).

Religion as an avenue for talking back would continue being an important and effective dialogic strategy for Black writers: “Wheatley’s identification of self as both overtly black and Christian, and her shifting of Christ’s scrutiny back upon colonial interpreters who [equated] slavery with the will of God, became the signal traits of virtually every slave narrative which [followed] the publication of her volume of poetry” (Harris 38-9).

Phillis Wheatley may have had to mimic and dissemble in order to speak, but speak she did. With “no mother tongue” and only “a father tongue” to speak of “English” as “a foreign lan lan lang / language / l/anguish / anguish / --a foreign anguish,” Wheatley had to modify that foreign “l/anguish,” writing over it and through it to create a literary palimpsest of resistance (Philip, “Discourse on the Logic of Language” 4-8). Making a way out of no way, Wheatley passed the language of the colonizer through the loom of her technique and found “a geography / of [her] own” (Clifton, “what the mirror said” 5). In doing so, Wheatley proved herself “more powerful than gamma rays” in creating a kingdom of her word. Black magic woman indeed.²⁴

²⁴ “Many styles, more powerful than gamma rays / My grammar pays, like Carlos Santana plays ‘Black Magic Woman’ / So while you’re fumin’ I’m consumin’ mango juice under Polaris / You’re just embarrassed cuz it’s your last tango in Paris / And even after all my logic and my theory, / I add a motherfucker so you ignorant niggas hear me” (“Zealots”).

CHAPTER IV

“NO WEAPON BUT POETRY”: “ON BEING BROUGHT FROM AFRICA TO AMERICA,” THE MAKING OF A “NEW WORLD” BLACK EPIC

In the literary antecedent to the Black Atlantic epic *Omeros*, Derek Walcott introduced the future hero of his epic – “a rusty head sailor with sea-green eyes / that they nickname Shabine” (“The Schooner Flight” 36-7). “Shabine,” “the patois for / any red nigger,” had fled his Caribbean island in “idle August,” leaving “the slums of empire” behind for a baptismal “sea-bath” on the schooner “Flight” (“The Schooner Flight” 37-8, 1, 39, 34). Armed with nothing more than “a sound colonial education,” the exile/d poet-narrator told a story similar to that of Phillis Wheatley’s:

I had no nation now but the imagination
After the white man, the niggers didn’t want me
when the power swing to their side.
The first chain my hands and apologize, “History”;
the next said I wasn’t black enough for their pride
(“The Schooner Flight” 41, 152-6).

With “no nation but the imagination” and with “no weapon but poetry,” the exile(d) Shabine looked up from “some lonely beach” determined to make his “pages [be] the sails” that would give “voice to one people’s grief”: “Well, when I write / this poem, each phrase go be soaked in salt; / I go draw and knot every line as tight / as ropes in this rigging; in simple speech / my common language go be the wind” (“The Schooner Flight” 152, 370, 70, 176, 406, 71-5).¹

¹ Walcott’s likening of lines of verse to “lines” on ships is reminiscent of Herman Melville’s “The Line” in *Moby Dick* in which Ishmael, noting the “aesthetics in all things,” appraised the golden Manila rope as much more becoming rope than the darker hemp rope. The symbol of the rope would allow Melville to engage and assess “lines” as both modes of entanglement and modes of communication (as in the lines used to compose the novel).

With “no weapon but poetry” and “with no nation but the imagination,” Afric’s muse also looked up from the lonely beach of exile determined to make her “common language go be the wind” (“The Schooner Flight” 370, 152, 75). Using her “sound colonial education,” Phillis Wheatley “soaked” “On Being Brought from Africa to America” in the “salt” of tradition and transgression, drawing and knotting her lines tightly to escape the literary slums of empire. By rigging her lines with the structural accoutrements of the heroic couplet, the most privileged poetic form in the Anglo-European literary empire, Wheatley elevated herself to the status of epic hero, assuming a power on the page space denied her in real life. Through the use of heroic couplets, Wheatley simultaneously observed and abrogated neoclassical tradition, a tradition that treated “‘high’ subjects exclusively,” by “[elevating] the status of the poem’s lowly [subject],” a young African girl, “to [her] proper role in providential drama” (Zafar 19).² In doing so, Wheatley created a “New World” Black epic in literary shorthand and a “New World” Black hero in the process.

Well-versed in the canon of classical and neoclassical literature –the foundation for her neoclassical style –Phillis Wheatley, in her October 18, 1773 letter to General David Wooster, reported on the augmentation of her “sound colonial education”:

The Earl of Dartmouth made me a Compliment of 5 guineas, and desired me to get the whole of Mr. Pope’s Works, as the best he could recommend to my perusal, this I did, also got Hudibrass, Don Quixot, & Gay’s Fables [...] Was presented with a Folio Edition of Milton’s Paradise Lost, printed on Silver Type...by Mr. Brook Watson Mercht, whose coat of arms is prefix’d (“Sir [David Wooster]”).

² Wheatley would later elevate the African painter, Scipio Moorhead, by apostrophizing him in “To S.M., A Young African Painter, on Seeing His Works.” She would “insert [him] into the array of notables apostrophized in her collection of poems...” (Zafar 19).

Adding to her already capacious knowledge of patrician writers were the eighteen volumes of Pope's works that she had acquired during her trip to London (Mason 81). The classical and neoclassical influence "visible in Wheatley's poetry [was] certainly prodigious" (Hairston 65). Of thirty-nine poems in *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, "at least twenty-five (64 percent) [contained] classical allusions, ranging from the mere mention of the Muses to Wheatley's translation of Ovid's myth of Niobe from *Metamorphoses*" (Hairston 65). Including "poems in which Wheatley neoclassically [personified] Christian themes or admirable qualities, then virtually all her poems [reflected] direct or indirect classical influence" (Hairston 66). Although inspired by classical and neoclassical tradition, Wheatley did not indiscriminately consume those traditions. Though she "[participated] in a white, Western, largely male tradition," Wheatley attuned that literary tradition "into an expressive, 'black' vehicle" (Zafar 19).

As a neoclassical poet, Phillis Wheatley "produced her art under [the] heavy formal constraints" of a literature characterized by its rigidity of form and vision (Watson 107). Those constraints however did not thwart Wheatley's ability to address "exceptional issues in unremarkably unexceptional styles" (Zafar 16). Though structurally isomorphic and therefore unexceptional in kind, the orthodox verse forms used by Wheatley were often used in service of exceptional speech-acts. The overt structure of her poems may have signaled assimilation, but the texts themselves as activity often performed as abrogation. Evolutionary biology's notion of mimicry helps clarify the strategy behind Wheatley's structural isomorphism:

Mimicry, in biology, [is a] phenomenon characterized by the superficial resemblance of two or more organisms that are not closely related taxonomically. This resemblance confers an advantage—such as protection from predation—

upon one or both organisms through some form of “information flow” that passes between the organisms and the animate agent of selection... In the most studied mimetic relationships the advantage is one-sided, one species (the mimic) gaining advantage from a resemblance to the other (the model). A key element in virtually every mimetic situation is deception by the mimic, perpetrated upon a third party, which mistakes the mimic for the model.³

The poetic model that Wheatley most often mimicked was the heroic couplet. While elegies were her preferred verse form, accounting for one-third of her poems in *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, “her preferred line was the heroic couplet” (Zafar 15). The heroic couplet, the mainstay of English verse, had assumed privileged cultural standing by the sixteenth-century. By the eighteenth-century, the form had come to represent the essence of the Age of Reason through its reasoned and orderly “encapsulation of a whole idea within its two-lined, closed system” (Hall 259).

Wheatley’s repeated use of heroic couplets in her poems evinced both her familiarity with and expertise in English epic verse. Wheatley maintained, with very few exceptions, “the general regularity of... [English epic] meter” in the majority of her poems and employed, with some regularity, devices common to heroic couplets, such as the caesura, syllepsis (zeugma), and enjambment in her writings (Mason, Jr. 20-1).⁴

Wheatley’s fluency in epic verse would be displayed in her epyllia, “Goliath of Gath” and “Niobe in Distress for Her Children Slain by Apollo...”⁵

³ See “Mimicry” in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

⁴ The three tools of the heroic couplet were present in “On Being Brought from Africa to America.” The second and third lines of the poem were enjambed, the fourth line featured a terminal caesura, and the seventh line of the poem depended on syllepsis to make its revolutionary claim.

⁵ Taking issue with the term epyllia, Walter Allen, Jr., in *The Epyllion: A Chapter in the History of Literary Criticism*, dismissed the classification “epyllion” from critical literary vocabulary, noting that it had “no proper place” as a definite literary form: “It is a folly to talk of authors writing in a definite literary form before it is known that there was such a form and that they believed themselves to be writing in that form”

The anachronistic classification of Wheatley's longest narrative poems as epyllia, or short epics, surely emerged from the debt both poems revealed "to major textual antecedents like Homer, Virgil, Horace, Terence, and Ovid" (Hairston 65). Wreathed in the rhetorical strategies and poetic conventions of Greek and Roman epics, and housed in the form of English epic verse, "Goliath of Gath" and "Niobe in Distress..." revealed a poet who, like Homer, had "inherited a large store of traditional material" (Hurte, Wilke, 118). Although not written in dactylic hexameter, the meter of Greek epics, Wheatley's short epics nonetheless bore the impress of the European epic tradition. "Goliath of Gath" and "Niobe in Distress..." commenced with the conventional invocation of "ye tuneful nine" (Wheatley, "Goliath of Gath" 1). Both works featured heroes – one of superior physical and moral standing (David), the other a flawed and unexpected *heroine* (Niobe); both epyllia featured supernatural forces or divinities "utterly superior to human beings...continually [intervening], especially at key moments, to shape the course of events on earth [thereby limiting] human freedom"; both poems featured epic similes and an elevated writing style; both poems began *in medias res*; and both poems figured a war or crisis as a platform to display their respective hero's epic bravery (Hurt, Wilke, 120). Wheatley's epic gaze however did not begin or end with "Goliath of Gath" and "Niobe in Distress..." In "Re-membering America: Phillis Wheatley's Intertextual Epic," Robert Kendrick argued that Wheatley's epic gaze in truth began with the first poem in her

(4). Although the epyllion "naturally preserved some of the appearance of epic poetry and style" it was not a literary type recognized by the ancients (Allen, Jr. 14, 1). Clarifying its origin, Allen, Jr. argued that Aristophanes first used "ἔπος" as meaning a 'vesicle' or 'scrap of poetry' to make fun of Euripedes" (5). The word was later used to describe a pseudo-Homeric poem. "Epyllion" however would not emerge until the turn of the twentieth-century, long after Phillis Wheatley had produced poems that bore the marks of the epic tradition (14, 1).

collection of verse, “To Maecenas,” and “[echoed] across her entire work, transgressing the borderlines that [divided] each poem in her 1773 volume” (72).

Like “Goliath of Gath” and “Niobe in Distress...” “To Maecenas” re-cited “the stylistic traits which [indicated] that the text [‘belonged’] to the [epic] genre” (Kendrick 73).⁶ Maecenas was not only Ovid, Horace, and Virgil’s patron, but also holder of the “‘poetic fire’ that [created] and [inspired]” (Kendrick 75). Importantly, Maecenas had the power of canonizing and legitimizing a work “by means of his literary influence” (Kendrick 75). In beginning her collection of verse with “To Maecenas,” a poem replete with the signposts of the epic tradition, Wheatley not only “[acknowledged] epic poetry as the most esteemed and challenging poetic genre” but also recognized the power of the epic tradition in legitimizing and canonizing writers of that tradition (Carretta 104). Importantly, “To Maecenas” enabled Wheatley to claim a place in Western literary tradition “which...included Africans since its beginning” (Carretta 106).

In “To Maecenas,” Wheatley appended a footnote reminding readers that “The happier *Terence*...*” was an African by birth (37). The intentional “invocation of [an] African predecessor” allowed Wheatley to position herself as a conceivable and rightful heir to the epic tradition (Carretta 107). In opening *Poems on Various Subjects*... with “To Maecenas,” Wheatley immediately and automatically propelled herself onto the same literary stage as the “the *Mantuan* Sage,” positioning her “page” as a “rival” to “*Virgil’s* page” (“To Maecenas” 24, 23). In “[snatching] a laurel from [Maecenas’] honour’d head / While [he] indulgent [smiled] upon the deed,” Wheatley began her oeuvre by crowning herself an epic poet (46-7).

⁶ “To Maecenas” is understood to be a Horatian ode.

According to Jennifer Thorn, Wheatley's unauthorized "snatching" of the epic tradition served a practical purpose: "Having failed to find an American publisher, Wheatley adapted the original manuscript *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* in pursuit of London publication...[prompting] the addition of the volume's several classically-inflected poems" (234-5).⁷ The absence of classically inflected poems from Wheatley's original manuscript was likely a consequence of an American cultural milieu that saw "rapidly growing tensions between Britain and its North American colonies" (Carretta 104). Americans had begun to doubt "the applicability of English models to new American situations" (Thorn 235). Although classical and neoclassical works, particularly those of Alexander Pope, were important to Americans of the eighteenth-century, by the 1770s and 1780s, there was an "intensified scrutiny of English-derived, traditional curricula by self-styled American patriots" (Thorn 235). Nonetheless, in an effort to secure publication of her work in London and understanding England's "abidingly high estimation of the classics, familiarity with which marked gentility and class standing," Wheatley accommodated her collection of verse to suit an English gaze (Thorn 235).⁸ The particularly lengthy title of "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" included a literal homage to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Richard Wilson's *The Destruction of Niobe's Children*. This title clearly performed to court the approval of an English audience by strategically pointing not only to its

⁷ Among the poems not included in the original manuscript were "To Maecenas," "Niobe in Distress...", "Thoughts on the Works of Providence," "On Imagination," "On Recollection," "Ode to Neptune...", "An Hymn to the Morning," and "An Hymn to the Evening."

⁸ This included the removal of several "arguably anti-British poems advertised in the 1772 subscription proposal" such as "On the Arrival of Ships of War, and landing of the Troops" (Carretta 104, 80).

classical Roman influence but to its English influence as well. Although the majority of the poems in *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* would be somehow classically inflected, only “Goliath of Gath” and “Niobe in Distress...” would be recognized as epic in kind. Not everyone however would see those works as epic in kind.

Problematizing the notion that Phillis Wheatley ever wrote any epics, Robert Kendrick used Mikhail Bakhtin’s “three ‘consecutive features’ of the epic” to appraise Wheatley’s epyllia. Kendrick concluded that Wheatley, according to Bakhtinian epic criteria, “*could* not write an epic according to Western standards [emphasis added]” (Kendrick 72). In “Epic and Novel,” Bakhtin identified the three features of the epic:

(1) a national epic past—in Goethe’s and Schiller’s terminology the ‘absolute past’—serves as the subject for the epic; (2) national tradition (not personal experience and the free thought that grows out of it) serves as the source for the epic; (3) an absolute epic distance separates the epic world from contemporary reality, that is, from the time in which the singer (the author and his audience) lives (Bakhtin 13).

These criteria, according to Kendrick, disqualified “Goliath of Gath” and “Niobe in Distress...” from being considered rightful epics. Kendrick explained that “The rupture caused by [Africans’] abduction and subsequent enslavement left African Americans with a cultural past which could not address the culture of the present, and a present culture which denied the legitimacy of the culture of the past” (Kendrick 72). Kendrick “bolstered” his argument by citing Wheatley’s own words in “To Maecenas.” Mistaking Wheatley’s aporia in “To Maecenas” for a confession, Kendrick pointed to Wheatley’s “confession” (a conventional assertion of poetic inadequacy typical to eighteenth and nineteenth-century poetry, particularly women’s poetry) as proof that Wheatley understood that she could never write a “‘legitimate’ epic” (Kendrick 73): “But here I sit,

and mourn a grov'ling mind / That fain would mount and ride upon the wind / ...I less happy, cannot raise the song, / The fault'ring music dies upon my tongue" (29-30, 35-6). Twenty-eight lines had preceded this "confession." Nineteen lines followed this "confession." Wheatley's song had clearly not died upon her tongue. Although Wheatley announced herself as unequal to her poetic task in "To Maecenas," her strategic modesty was belied by the very act of her accomplishing that task. Wheatley denied an ability that the text, in praxis, proclaimed. Not only had Wheatley raised her first song in "To Maecenas," dressing it in the fineries of antiquity, she continued to sing for thirty-eight more "songs." Wheatley's epyllia may not have fulfilled Bakhtin or Kendrick's criteria for the epic as a genre, but her epyllia, save for length, certainly met Greek, Roman, and English epic criteria. Moreover, her two recognized epyllia were in fact re-inscriptions of established epics making her poems also epic in kind. While it is true that Wheatley "did not attempt to create a neo-classic epic patterned after the *Iliad* or the *Aeneid*, or a Christian epic along the lines of Dante's *Commedia* or Milton's *Paradise Lost*," the epyllia she did create, from root to branch, were in fact epyllia.⁹ Her re-citations of classical works however were not only informed re-citations but also customized re-citations.¹⁰ Wheatley created "New World" epics from the material of Old World epics

⁹ One wonders if Kendrick thought Wheatley followed Alexander Pope's recipe for epics. In his satirical essay, "A Receipt To Make an Epic Poem," Alexander Pope made it "manifest" that "epic poems may be made *without a genius*, nay, without learning or much reading" (Pope 234). Pope "proved" this by providing a "receipt" to make an epic poem: "Take out of any old poem...those parts of the story which afford the most scope for *long descriptions*. Put these pieces together, and throw all the adventures you fancy into *one tale*. Then take a hero, whom you may choose for the sound of his name, and put him into the midst of these adventures. There let him *work* for twelve books; at the end of which you may take him out ready prepared to *conquer* or to *marry*; it being necessary that the conclusion of an epic poem be *fortunate*" ("A Receipt..." 234).

¹⁰ Though she re-wrote the story of David and Goliath and the story of Niobe, her re-citations were customized re-citations. In both epyllia, she elevated feminized / feminine actors to the status of heroes, disrupting the hyper-masculine tradition of the epic genre.

(Kendrick 72). Her “New World” epics were in fact amalgams of English and American “tradition”: “Wheatley [was] like the English in her matter-of-fact [turning] to the classics, and like Americans in her interest in [the classics] as...moral [tales]” (Thorn 235). In commencing her book of poems with “To Maecenas,” Wheatley inaugurated not only her epic gaze but also her epic aspirations. Wheatley’s epic aspirations would extend beyond “Goliath of Gath,” “To Maecenas,” and “Niobe in Distress...” to settle in the literary topography of “On Being Brought from Africa to America.”

In using four sets of heroic couplets to speak of mercy, salvation, judgment, and redemption, Wheatley did something monumental in “On Being Brought from Africa to America”; Wheatley cast herself as the hero of her epic odyssey. Considered the fitting poetic vehicle for dealing with heroic subjects, Wheatley’s decision to use heroic couplets to tell of her transplantation from Africa to America was not a careless one. Wheatley could have arguably used the more fitting plaintive hymn stanza or blank verse or the elegiac stanza (all which appeared in her collection of poems) to tell of the death of one life and the birth of another. She instead used a verse form that summoned the hyper-masculine epic tradition.¹¹ Wheatley’s deliberate use of heroic couplets in “On Being Brought from Africa to America” allowed her to execute (double entendre intended) tradition in multiple ways. By forcing an interface between gender and genre, Wheatley, through the non-lexical “language” of form, exploded the traditional discourse on gender and genre by writing in a form not deemed suitable and appropriate for women. Wheatley would execute tradition in preparation for her epic “strain” through meter (iambic pentameter) and rhyme (paired end rhymes) – the handmaidens of the heroic couplet.

¹¹ While it is true that the pentameter couplet was also used in narrative poems, “Dryden’s translation of Virgil’s *Aeneid* and Pope’s translation of Homer’s *Iliad*” fortified the association between the pentameter couplet and the epic tradition (Finch, Varnes 110).

Though birthed during the Middle Ages, iambic pentameter, a required feature of the heroic couplet, came to power as a neoclassical form. A “historical invention,” iambic pentameter was “invented twice” (Easthope 54). It first took form in the fourteenth-century in Geoffrey Chaucer’s “Middle English pentameter” but was reintroduced in the sixteenth-century because “massive phonological changes [had taken] place in the development of Modern English from Middle English [and] poets could no longer discern Chaucer’s metre” (Easthope 54). Though Chaucer fathered the form, “[regularizing] the English line into ten syllables with five beats,” iambic pentameter did not become an established poetic institution until after Edmund Spenser (*Faerie Queen*, 1590), Philip Sidney (*Astrophil and Stella*, 1591), and William Shakespeare (*Venus and Adonis*, 1592-3) published their works (Wolosky 137-8). Those works “perfected” the technique of writing in iambic pentameter by allowing variation in the alternating stress-patterns of syllables (Keppel-Jones 4). It would be John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* however that would give this centuries old meter “an even heavier weight of authority” than had the works of Chaucer, Spenser, Sidney, or Shakespeare (Finch 168).

By the time Ethiop’s muse began writing in the meter of Chaucer and Milton, iambic pentameter had been “an uninterrupted and nearly uncontested standard” for three hundred years (Finch 168). In bowing to “the winner” of English versification in her poems, Wheatley outwardly mimed for her audience her absorption and acceptance of English literary tradition (Wolosky 139). More importantly, in using iambic pentameter, Wheatley signaled to her readers her identification with a tradition that had itself become a sign of the “properly poetic”: “Once established as a national poetic institution, pentameter [became] a hegemonic form. It [became] a sign which [included] and

[excluded], [sanctioned] and [denigrated], for it [discriminated] the ‘properly poetic’ from the ‘improperly’ poetic. Poetry from verse” (Easthope 65). But Wheatley’s decision to write under the aegis of literary tradition and appear “properly poetic” also made possible the abandoning of tradition in favor of the “improperly poetic.”

As “a signifier of a signified concept,” iambic pentameter had come to “sign” to readers not only “‘epic sensibility’ [and] ‘traditional poetry’” but “‘patriarchal poetry’” as well (Finch 166). Ever since Chaucer “narrowed” the options for English versification with the “triumph” of his works, iambic pentameter had dominated the English literary scene – a literary scene created, defined, codified, circulated, and controlled by men— (Wolosky 137-8). Wheatley’s appropriation of the meter of a patriarchal poetic tradition not only confirmed her craftswomanship but her cunning craftswomanship. Through her seemingly unremarkable use of iambic pentameter, Wheatley deserted her “place” as a female poet by employing a meter tied to a tradition that symbolically masculinized her poem.¹² Through meter, Wheatley shifted herself from the status of marginalized poet-speaker (de-centered because of age, race, gender, and apolitical status) to centered poet-speaker by presenting her poem not only as a site of the properly poetic but also as a masculinized space. By structurally imitating “male verse” through “male meter,” Wheatley dressed her poem, and by extension her voice, with the kind of patriarchal

¹² Wheatley was certainly not the first or only woman poet to write in iambic pentameter. In Wheatley’s case however, she repeatedly employed “masculine” poetic genres or took on a “masculine” or at least androgynous poetic persona to assert a kind of authority on the page space not available to her in real life. Her epyllia, her constant use of heroic couplets, and even her elegies revealed a poet unafraid to use genres and her voice to assert power in discreet and unexpected ways. Her elegies alone (a seemingly modest and acceptable genre for women poets) were in and of themselves brazen acts. Wheatley’s use of elegies revealed a poet who deemed herself worthy enough to ode white souls into the after life. Her repeated use of heroic couplets was even more startling in that she saw herself as poet enough to write in the verse form most associated with canonical white male poets. In short, Wheatley may have repeated traditional genres and structures, but she did so with a destabilizing difference.

literary paraphernalia that would invest into her poem and into her voice an authority not available to her otherwise.¹³ In “claiming the mantle of poetic authority” through metrical masculinization, Wheatley asserted herself as an “authoritative creator” of poetry (Wolosky 120). This authoritative posture would prove foundational to the creation of Wheatley’s Black epic and to her elevation as a Black heroic figure. Wheatley would continue the masculinization of her poem through end rhyme.

In “An Essay on Criticism,” Alexander Pope bitinglly commented upon the second required feature of the heroic couplet – end rhyme. Pointing to the artificiality and predictability of the closed heroic couplet’s “phonological tissue,” Pope sardonically noted the following (qtd. in Hurley 60):

...ten low words oft creep in one dull line:
While they ring round the same unvary’d chimes
With sure returns of still expected rhymes;
Where-e’er you find ‘the cooling western breeze,’
In the next line, it ‘wispers thro’ the trees:’
In crystal streams ‘with pleasing murmurs creep,’
The readers threaten’d (not in vain) with ‘sleep:’
 (“An Essay on Criticism” 347-353).

Speaking to the contrived quality of rhymed couplets, Pope cautioned readers against “dull rhymes” reminding them that “sound must seem an Echo to the sense” (“An Essay on Criticism” 358, 365).¹⁴ In diminishing the end rhyme associated with closed heroic couplets as jejune, unnatural, and trite, Pope disingenuously disregarded the power

¹³ Wheatley, in presenting herself and the Countess of Huntingdon as men, trans-gendered “To Maecenas”: “With no classical models of female patrons available to her, Wheatley’s decision to address the countess [Selina Hastings] in the guise of a male would be understandable and a fitting way for her to assert the proper places of her own and Huntingdon’s individual talents as a poet and her patron in male-dominated traditions” (Carretta 106).

¹⁴ In “A Few Don’ts By An Imagist,” Ezra Pound likewise offered up his critique of end rhyme: “Don’t chop your stuff into separate *iamb*s. Don’t make each line stop dead at the end, and then begin every next line with a heave. Let the beginning of the next line catch the rise of the rhythm wave, unless you want a definite longish pause. In short, behave as a musician, a good musician, when dealing with that phase of your art which has exact parallels in music. The same laws govern, and you are bound by no others.”

inherent in end rhyme. The power of rhymed couplets would prove very important to “On Being Brought from Africa to America.” From behind the mask of the “merely mechanical,” Wheatley would again force an interface between gender and genre, masculinizing both poem and poet in the process (Wolosky 155).

Rhyme first appeared in English verse in the late seventh century and would become a staple feature in English verse after the thirteenth century (McKie 817). By the end of the sixteenth century, Elizabethans had accepted that the iambic pentameter line, “clearly noticeable in the poems printed in *Tottel’s Miscellany* of 1557 and...explicitly advocated and practiced by Gascoigne around 1575,” should be “defined by rhyme” (Piper 308). The rhymed couplet “would begin as an imitation of a narrowly neat and pretty Latin form [the elegiac distich]” (Piper 309). The development of the rhymed couplet, “which furnished one-syllable metrical [brakes], allowed English poets to define their materials as neatly and precisely as the Latin poets...without the elaborate metrical mechanics of the elegiac distich” (Piper 308). English poets grew the rhymed couplet into a device “by which their most vital and their most complex issues could be submitted to the scrutiny of sense and reason” (Piper 309). For Wheatley, this poetic device enabled her to establish power and authority in two ways.

First, as the second of two indicators of a hegemonic, patriarchal poetic form (iambic pentameter being the first), paired end rhymes legitimized “On Being Brought from Africa to America” as a site of the “properly poetic.” The legitimizing power of end rhyme invested into Wheatley’s poem a kind of authority by association (association to heroic verse) that would have been difficult for her to establish sans structure. This

superficial adoption of tradition however would prove nothing more than a cover for Wheatley's unsettling of tradition.

In using a marker (rhymed couplets) of a poetic domain not typically associated with women's poetry (epic verse), Wheatley abandoned the ideology of separate spheres in poetry by again transgressing gendered borders.¹⁵ By employing a poetic device that was attached to a genre that was outside of the more modest, private genres expected of women writers (epistles, diaries, the sonnet, occasional verse, elegies), Wheatley stepped out of her accepted and expected place as a woman poet into the hyper-masculine space of the epic genre. The prosodic language used to "speak" of end rhyme would reinforce Wheatley's stepping out of place. Wheatley's illicit crossing of gendered literary borders would not be her last.

Distinguished either as "feminine" or "masculine," the nomenclature used to characterize end rhymes would find its origins in French: "The terms 'feminine' and 'masculine' rhymes were adopted from French...[and referred] to endings with or without a mute *e* respectively, whether the word [did] or [did] not gender" (Tsur 1). In English, the terms came to refer to "rhymes that [bore] linguistic stress on their penultimate or last syllables, respectively" (Tsur 1). According to scholars, the terms "feminine" and "masculine" were not, in their original application, indicators of feminine or masculine characteristics.¹⁶ However, a closer look at the defining phonological

¹⁵ An early example of a woman writer crossing gendered poetic borders was Lady Mary Wroth [author of *Pamphilia and Amphilantus*] who "daringly wrote in genres beyond those...that were comfortably associated with women's (private) spheres" (Wolosky 122).

¹⁶ In "Bouncing Off Walls, A Primer on Rhyme" for example, Susan Tichy made clear that the terms "feminine" and "masculine," inherited from the poets of Provençal, had nothing to do with feminine or masculine characteristics.

features of “feminine” and “masculine” end rhymes would find one hard pressed not to read gender into the terms:

Structurally, masculine rhyme in the tonic-syllabic metre consists of a metrical strong position occupied by a stressed syllable; perceptually, it generates an abrupt cut-off point. In the feminine rhyme, by contrast, this clear-cut ending is followed by an unstressed syllable rendering the halt more gradual, more fuzzy-edged. Consequently, it is perceived as softer, less forceful, more pliable. Clive Scott...pointed out a similar effect in French versification: ‘masculine rhymes are abrupt, unrelenting, circumscribed, . . . feminine rhymes are evanescent, yielding, reverberant’...(Tsur 3).

Reuven Tsur described masculine end rhymes as “strong”; feminine end rhymes were described as “softer.” Intended or not, “masculine” and “feminine” end rhyme designations would come to bear/bare the full weight of typological masculinity and femininity. By virtue of the intonational strength attached to “masculine” end rhymes and the intonational weakness attached to “feminine” end rhymes, “masculine” end rhymes would come to be associated with a masculinized voice while “feminine” end rhymes would come to be associated with a feminized voice. Phillis Wheatley wrote “On Being Brought from Africa to America” using masculine end rhyme. She in fact wrote most of her poems using masculine end rhyme.¹⁷ Reuven Tsur would go on to explain the overabundance of masculine end rhymes in English poetry: “In English, feminine rhymes are rare owing to the scarcity of words with a stress on their penultimate syllable. Feminine rhymes are, therefore, sporadic in English, and only rarely assume structural significance...” (Tsur 1-2). The preponderance of “masculine” words in English did not

¹⁷ Wheatley, unlike Anne Bradstreet for example, did not explicitly figure her gender into her poems. Her poems remained largely androgynous spaces, if not structurally masculinized spaces. Her strategic androgenizing / masculinizing of her poems helped offset the impact of one of the several “disadvantages” she labored under –her gender.

negate the symbolic masculinizing effect of “masculine” end rhymes in Wheatley’s verses, particularly in “On Being Brought from Africa to America.” “Masculine” end rhymes would provide Wheatley another discreet avenue for asserting power and authority in her poems. Wheatley would complete the masculinization of her poetic performance by installing herself into the position of epic hero.

Learned in classical and neoclassical literature, Wheatley would have surely understood the import of writing in heroic verse. Its significance to literature had been established centuries before the “sacred nine” inspired a “vent’rous *Afric* in her great design” (Wheatley, “On Recollection” 62). The term “heroic verse” came to be “used for *epic in the Middle Ages” (Brogan 625). It had been known to English “since the second half of the fourteenth century when Chaucer used it in *The Merchant’s Tale*” and would later be popularized by Dryden who “favored and developed” the verse form (Bluhme 286). In terms of “measure” alone it was, according to Aristotle, “the stateliest and the most massive” (*Poetics* 50). Isidore of Seville, in his seventh century work *Etymologiae*, “[defined] *heroic poetry* (carmen heroicum) as being so named ‘because in it the affairs and deeds of brave men [were] narrated (for heroes [were] spoken of as men practically supernatural and worthy of Heaven on accounts of their wisdom and bravery)’” (qtd. in Brogan 625).¹⁸ Like Aristotle, Isidore of Seville also proclaimed the heroic meter to be superior to all other meters (Brogan 625). In the preface to his 1697 collection, *The Works of Virgil: Containing His Pastorals, Georgics, and Aeneis. Translated into English Verse; by Mr. Dryden*, John Dryden opened his tribute to Virgil by stating that “a heroick Poem, truly such, is undoubtedly the greatest Work which the Soul of Man is

¹⁸ De Seville’s *Etymologiae* was the most commonly used textbook during the Middle Ages.

capable to perform” (qtd. in Brogan 625). By the time Wheatley was introduced to heroic verse, the verse form had become one of the most popular and certainly the most venerated of verse forms in English literature.

Wheatley had been exposed to heroic verse at an early age: “Wheatley reportedly read the translations of Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* by Alexander Pope (1688-1744)” as well as Ovid, Horace, and Virgil (Carretta 51). From subject to structure, the corpus of Wheatley’s literary work evinced her knowledge of the epic tradition and her understanding of the eminence of that tradition. Not only had she written epyllia in which she pointed back to her own paronomastic “strains” as “lofty” and “high design,”¹⁹ she also used heroic couplets regularly in her poems. While it is true that the heroic couplet was the literary standard of the day, Wheatley’s use of that particular verse form took on superadded meaning because of her positionality.²⁰ Writing and publishing were already “acts bordering on rebellion” for *free white* women poets of the eighteenth century (Wolosky 121). If the very act of writing and publishing were already acts bordering on dissidence when “committed” by white women poets, how much more true would that have been for an enslaved, African, teenage girl? For white women poets who did publish, they “hedged their literary enterprises with apologies, defenses, and assurances

¹⁹ In “Niobe in Distress...,” Wheatley entreated the “tuneful goddess” Calliope, muse of epic poetry, to “guide [her] pen in lofty strains to show / The *Phrygian* queen, all beautiful in woe” (3, 9-10). In “Goliath of Gath,” Wheatley likewise commanded the “tuneful nine” to “Inspire [her] song, / and aid [her] high design” (1, 2).

²⁰ The concept of “positionality,” as articulated by Linda Alcoff among others, highlights the ways in which “gender, race, class, and other aspects of our own identities are markers of relational *positions* rather than essential qualities” (Maher, Tetreault 118).

that their goals, and selves, [remained] modest” (Wolosky 121).²¹ In Wheatley’s case however, the modesty topos present throughout her work was compromised by the very first poem in her collection of verse. Wheatley not only entered *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* draped in the vestment of heroic verse, she continued to enter the page space swathed in the finery of heroic verse – the most immodest poetic form available to her. Although modesty as a rhetorical marker would “form a central poetic mode for women poets” throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries “serving as a central mode of self-representation,” Wheatley’s repeated use of heroic verse belied any rhetorical pretenses she made toward modesty and deference to a patriarchal (literary) order. In choosing to write repeatedly in a verse form attached to the most grandiloquent and hyper-masculine literary genre of all literary genres, Wheatley “[projected] a muted and marginal stance against a dominant, official one” (Wolosky 120).

Traditional Greek and Roman epics were “long [narratives] written in hexameters (or a comparable vernacular measure) which [concentrated] either on the fortunes of a great hero or perhaps a great civilization and the interactions of this hero and his civilization with the gods” (Toohey 1). The epic hero was “normally of superior social station, often a king or leader in his own right [and] usually tall, handsome, and muscular” (Toohey 9). The epic hero and the epic “landscape” were “admirable because [they were] larger than life” (Toohey 19). As the “archetypal genre of wars and heroes, classical epic poetry, from the *Iliad* onwards” exemplified the notion that masculinity was “everywhere but nowhere” (McAuley 37). The gender of the epic hero “was never in

²¹ This “modesty topos” would also be found in Wheatley and other Black writers’ works of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the form of frontispieces, attestations, prefaces, and letters written by whites or self-deprecating aporias written by Black authors (Wolosky 121).

doubt let alone placed under scrutiny” (McAuley 37). English epic verse, as an ideological and literary heir to these epic traditions, largely continued and maintained the properties of this tradition. Nothing in Phillis Wheatley’s lived experience licensed her to lay claim to a tradition historically used to laud and exalt men. But lay claim she did. Not only did Wheatley lay claim to the epic genre, she inserted herself into that tradition.

Phillis Wheatley was about fifteen years old when she decided to write herself into the stateliest genre of all literary genres. Wheatley’s use of heroic verse in “On Being Brought from Africa to America” would not have seemed unusual or noteworthy considering her habitual use of the verse form. But it was. “On Being Brought from Africa to America” would be the only poem ever written by Phillis Wheatley in heroic couplets that would be, essentially, about her. It would also be the shortest poem in her collection of verse.²²

Wheatley clearly understood heroic couplets to be the appropriate poetic vehicle for treating heroic subjects. Except for “On Being Brought from Africa to America,” every other poem written by Wheatley in heroic verse either paid direct or indirect tribute to European classical or neoclassical tradition, to Anglo-European’s religion, or to Anglo-Europeans – all “heroic” subjects “worthy” of exaltation. “On Being Brought from Africa to America” would be the only poem written in heroic couplets that would deviate from “appropriate” subject matter. In situating a particularly Black experience and a

²² The next shortest poem in *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* was a ten-line poem titled “To Captain H—d, of the 65th Regiment.” One imagines, considering the Revolutionary spirit circling the colonies at the time, that a poem heralding one of Britannia’s sons may have been too much for colonial America – hence the brevity of the poem. The final version of *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* notably excluded three poems tied to the Crown: “On the King, do.—, On the Hon. Commodore Hood, on his pardoning of a Deserter, 1769,” and “On the Arrival of Ships of War, and landing of the Troops.” “On Friendship” was the only other eight-line poem in Wheatley’s body of work. That poem was written a year after “On Being Brought from Africa to America” and was not included in her only published collection of verse.

particularly Black voice in heroic verse, Wheatley qualified both as fitting heroic subjects. Though dressed in the robe of Christianity, “On Being Brought from Africa to America” was in fact a “New World” Black epic in drag as a religious poem. That Wheatley refashioned the religion of her oppressors into her own kind of liberation theology and displayed it as the superficial subject of her poem did not obscure the fact that the poem was, in essence, a poem about a uniquely Black and epic worthy experience (slavery, forced transplantation, forced acculturation, anti-Black racism, resistance to anti-Black racism) written by a conscientiously Black poet. Considering the subject matter of the poem, the use of heroic couplets coupled with the brevity of the poem distinguished “On Being Brought from Africa to America” from other of Wheatley’s poems written in heroic verse. Paradoxically, it would be the very brevity of the poem that would raise questions about the impress of the epic genre.

In *Poetics*, Aristotle addressed the “adequate limit” of epic poetry: “...the Epic action has no limits of time...As regards to scale or length, we have already laid down an adequate limit: —the beginning and the end must be capable of being brought within a single view” (49). Aristotle was correct in asserting that the epic poem had “no limits of time.” Homer’s *Iliad* was over 15,000 lines long and the *Odyssey* over 12,000 lines long. Virgil composed *The Aeneid* in 12,000 lines while Milton composed *Paradise Lost* in 10,000 lines. Length was *the* distinguishing structural feature of the epic poem. “On Being Brought from Africa to America” did not satisfy this unique feature. Its conciseness however did not disqualify it from being seen as epic in kind. Considering the subject matter of the poem, its succinctness actually called into question the absence of an epic-like structure. Although the shortest poem in *Poems on Various Subjects*,

Religious and Moral, “On Being Brought from Africa to America” engaged the most epic worthy subject of all of Wheatley’s poems. After all, what in the eighteenth century could have approximated “the imperial width of the thing” that was the enslavement, transplantation, and forced acculturation of millions of Africans transported across and into four continents and the Caribbean basin? ²³ Ralph Ellison addressed the real life American epic born from the New World’s “ritualized violence” that Wheatley’s poem bore witness to: “...I propose that we view the whole of American life as a drama acted out upon the body of a Negro giant, who, lying trussed up like Gulliver, forms the stage and the scene upon which and within the action unfolds. If we examine the beginning of the Colonies, the application of this view is not, in its economic connotations at least, too far-fetched or too difficult to see” (“Twentieth Century Fiction...” 93, 85). Wheatley knew that she had set the “drama acted out upon the body of a Negro giant” into a verse form associated with literary giants. She could not however turn her autobiography-as-poem into a recognizable epic. She had already usurped tradition and overstepped her boundaries by Africanizing the epic genre; she could not call further attention to her Black epic by making it look like an epic. As such, the length of “On Being Brought from Africa to America” was likely delimited to disarm readers from “seeing” Wheatley’s poem as epic in kind. But it was an epic – an epic in literary shorthand. The creation of a “New World” Black epic would necessitate the casting of the most significant actor in all epics – the hero. Wheatley would fulfill this requirement by casting herself as the hero of her epic journey.

²³ In “The Souls of White Folk,” W.E.B. Du Bois explained the difference between European colonialism and the colonialism of a “former world”: “The using of men for the benefit of masters is no new invention of modern Europe. It is quite as old as the world. But Europe proposed to apply it on a scale and with an elaborateness of detail of which no former world ever dreamed. The imperial width of the thing, —the heaven-defying audacity—[made] its modern newness” (24).

It would not have been impossible for a woman in the eighteenth century to write in the epic tradition. Lady Mary Worth had written her 6,000 line romantic epic *The Countess of Mountgomerie's Urania* between 1618 and 1620. Frances Burney, Mary Tighe, Elizabeth Barrett Browning would follow in her footsteps, writing epics themselves or works bearing the literary footprints of the epic genre.²⁴ These women however were white. The wages of whiteness afforded these women a modicum of open agency over their authorship not available to a fifteen-year-old enslaved African girl in 1768. Unlike Worth, Tighe, and Barrett Browning, Wheatley had to secret her writing of her epic, particularly her arrogation of the post of epic hero.

Wheatley maneuvered herself into the post of epic hero by speaking, androgynously, through the patriarchal verse form of heroes.²⁵ By not figuring her gender explicitly into "On Being Brought from Africa to America," Wheatley "avoided writing as [a] (male-constructed) '[woman]'" (Bell Samei 19). This allowed Wheatley to occupy a male gendered office without calling attention to her occupation of that office or to her relinquishing of the office of "male-constructed woman." Moreover, by couching *her* autobiography in heroic verse, Wheatley positioned herself as the understood hero of that heroic verse.²⁶ "On Being Brought from Africa to America" would not be the only time that Wheatley would elevate an unexpected woman actor to the status of epic hero. She

²⁴ See Bernard Schweizer's *Approaches to the Anglo and American Female Epic, 1621-1982*.

²⁵ To expect an enslaved, young, African girl to enter a literary tradition established by men and not write within "the established conventions that constituted that tradition" in the eighteenth century would be asking her "to be [a] [feminist] in an age before feminism existed as a notion" (Bell Samei 19).

²⁶ In *The Epic Gaze: Vision, Gender, and Narrative in Ancient Epic*, Helen Lovatt argued that Camilla in the Aeneid also performed as a hero, particularly as a hero-victim. This would be true as well for Niobe who Wheatley depicted as a hero-victim. Wheatley herself rejected the hero-victim role by purposefully de-centering slavery from her poem.

would do so again in “Niobe in Distress...” by allying the text with “The *Phrygian* queen, all beautiful in woe” (Wheatley, “Niobe in Distress...” 10).²⁷ Like the “semi-divine woman who [refused] to bow down to a goddess arguably no more divine [than] she [was] herself,” Wheatley too would refuse to bow down to tradition by assigning the role of hero to a male actor “no more divine [than] she [was] herself” (Thorn 235). Not only would Wheatley snatch the title of epic hero from the vice grip of literary history, she would perform from the place of masculinized hero to write herself into its most sacrosanct form.

“On Being Brought from Africa to America” would feature nine markers of the epic tradition: 1) a journey motif; 2) the “beginning” of the poem in medias res; 3) a larger-than-life literary landscape; 4) the featuring of a morally superior albeit flawed hero; 5) supernatural or divine forces interfering to shape the course of events, limiting human freedom in the process; 6) a war or crisis highlighting the hero’s bravery; 7) the invocation of a Muse; 8) a journey into an underworld; 9) and the epic hero’s assaultive gaze (Hurt, Wilke 120; Lovatt 310). Through these nine markers, Wheatley would “tell of bodies changed / To different forms” and of “the gods, who made the changes” (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1-2).

In *Poetics*, Aristotle described the literary landscape of the epic poem: “Epic poetry...must be simple, or complex, or ‘ethical’ or ‘pathetic’...it requires Reversals of the Situation, Recognitions, and scenes of suffering” (49). “On Being Brought from Africa to America” would fulfill all of these epic criteria beginning with the reversal of

²⁷ In “Imagined Post-Coloniality and ‘Natural’ Coloniality: The Production of Space in Phillis Wheatley’s ‘Niobe in Distress for Her Children Slain by Apollo,’” April Langley argued that “Niobe in Distress...” was in fact Wheatley’s first post-colonial text. Langley contended that through Niobe, Wheatley transformed the space of the epic from a space of “victimhood to survivorhood and then to autonomous selfhood” (90).

Wheatley's fortune. This reversal, invoked in the title of Wheatley's poem, would introduce an implied scene of suffering born from a war that Wheatley not only survived but also eventually triumphed over. This implied scene of suffering would introduce Wheatley's poem in *medias res*.

In *medias res* was first introduced in Horace's *Ars Poetica*. The technique was originally employed as a "local variant" and was not at first "constitutive of the [epic] genre" (Turner 97). It became a forming part of the epic genre once it was "picked up and exploited by the whole of Western tradition, by Virgil, Dante, Ariosto, Tasso, Milton, and so forward" (Turner 97).²⁸ Not all epics however employed this narrative technique. Michael Baumbach and Silvio Bar noted the particular use of in *medias res* in shorter epics:

...while a long epic almost invariably [started] with an invocation of Muses or, if it [treated] a religious topic, with a prayer to God, Christ, or the Virgin Mary, or a saint, this [was] not the rule with short epics... They rather [liked] to jump *in medias res* or otherwise [preferred] to address minor deities such as nymphs (533).

The technique of starting a work literally "in the middle of things" enabled epic poets to ally readers with heroic actors. By positioning both the reader and the heroic actor in *medias res*, epic poets joined readers and actors in navigating unknown environments "of struggle and outcome, of causes and consequences, of murky doubt and attempted prophetic clarity" (Hurley, O'Neill 120). The technique joined "[both] the singer and the listener, immanent in the epic as a genre, ...in the same time and on the same evaluative...plane" (Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel" 14). In Phillis Wheatley's case however,

²⁸ The narrative technique of *in medias res* would be famously exemplified in Homer's *Odyssey*.

the technique of in medias res allowed her to differentiate herself from her readers. This differentiation would be necessary to fulfilling the heroic ideal.

The “presence of a hero undertaking a quest determined by higher powers” was an obligatory component of the epic tradition (Hurley, O’Neill 121). The epic quest required “obstacles of a commensurate magnitude” (Turner 104). The hero would be measured according to his or her ability to overcome obstacles and to overcome enemies. Wheatley would overcome both in the course of her poem.

In keeping with epic tradition, Wheatley introduced through the title of her poem her “quest” – a “quest” that had been determined by higher powers. The title “On Being Brought from Africa to America” innocuously introduced to readers Wheatley’s trans-Atlantic journey from Africa to America. Wheatley however sharpened the title of her poem to accentuate her *forced* journey from Africa to America through the word “from.”²⁹ “From” specifically registered Wheatley’s journey as a removal, not a departure.³⁰ Through the word “from,” Wheatley quietly invoked the brutal “womb / push” that was the Middle Passage (Nichols, “One Continent / To Another” 1-2). Although the signaling of a forced exile in the title of Wheatley’s poem topically echoed another epic hero’s forced exile – Aeneas’—Wheatley’s calling attention to her involuntary exile from Africa repeated the epic journey motif with an arresting difference. Unlike Aeneas, whose exile was compelled by a mythic Juno, Wheatley’s exile was compelled by a real “violence of the gods” (Virgil, *The Aeneid* 5). Anglo-

²⁹ In Virgil’s *Aeneid* (also an epic of displacement and exile), Juno, “the queen of heaven,” exiles Aeneas from Troy and sets him wandering for a period of time until he finally, by the end of the poem, reaches Italy (12).

³⁰ See Chapter III of this manuscript for a fuller discussion on the word “from.”

Europeans, the “New World’s” Homeric divinities, had intervened to shape the course not only of history but also of Wheatley’s history, limiting human freedom in the process.

The invocation of the Middle Passage in the title of Wheatley’s poem paradoxically “began” Wheatley’s autobiographical poem literally and literarily in the middle of things. Wheatley opened her autobiographical poem not at the beginning of her life but at the most critical juncture in her life. That juncture, the interval between two lives and two worlds, would usher in her epic of transplantation, a transplantation that would come to define the African experience in the New World. By beginning her poem with the Middle Passage, Wheatley opened her poem with the one experience that indisputably separated her from her reading audience – slavery. It would be that experience that would distinguish her as the hero of her poem.

By commencing her text in *medias res*, Wheatley fulfilled a narrative technique typical to shorter epics but more importantly shepherded in five other central components of the epic tradition: a larger than life landscape (the triangle slave trade); the journey motif (the Middle Passage); the introduction of a wandering but flawed hero (a kidnapped slave); supernatural forces or gods that would intervene to shape the course of events (Anglo-Europeans); and a war or quest that would highlight the hero’s bravery (racism / slavery). Like the wanderer Odysseus, or the exiled hero Aeneas who was driven into “So many toils and perils,” so too would Wheatley be driven into so many toils and perils (Virgil, *The Aeneid* 1.14). Like the classical and neoclassical heroes before her, it would be that first journey across a literal and symbolic ocean that would embark her on the road to heroism. Wheatley’s journey to heroism would begin in the first quatrain of her poem.

Traditional epic poems opened with the summoning of “ye sacred nine” (Wheatley, “On Recollection” 1). The very first words of the *Odyssey*, “Sing in me, Muse, and through me tell the story / of that man skilled in all ways of contending,” typified the opening to an epic song (Homer 1. 1-2). The sacred nine, “goddesses of poetry and song,” were in origin “nymphs, spirits of the springs and the mountains” (Parke 104). Over time, these nymphs were transformed into “singers and inspirers equal to that of the chief gods and goddesses” (Parke 104). Revered as “the special protectors of poets,” these goddesses of “poetry, dance, music, the sciences, [history], and learning in general...fostered and protected” their respective branch of art (Baker, Baker 18). Wheatley had invoked “ye tuneful nine” in a number of her works (Wheatley, “Goliath of Gath” 1). In “On Recollection,” Wheatley called on the sacred nine to inspire her “great design”: “Mneme begin. Inspire, ye sacred nine, / Your vent’rous *Afric* in her great design” (1-2). In “Niobe in Distress...,” Wheatley directed her Grecian muse to guide her pen “in lofty strains to show / The *Phrygian* queen, all beautiful in woe”: “Muse! lend thy aid, nor let me sue in vain, / Tho’ last and meanest of thy rhyming train! / O guide my pen in lofty strains to show / The *Phrygian* queen, all beautiful in woe” (7-10). In “An Hymn to the Morning,” Wheatley invoked Calliope by name, demanding that she awake her “sacred lyre”: “*Calliope* awake the sacred lyre / While thy fair sisters fan the pleasing fire: / The bow’rs, the gales, the variegated skies / In all their pleasures in my bosom rise” (13-16). In “To the University of Cambridge, in New England,” Wheatley opened her song with a promise from the muses: “While an intrinsic ardor prompts to write, / The muses promise to assist my pen” (1-2). “Constitutive of the human poetic imagination,”

the tuneful nine could “be read as a kind of shorthand for...a godly power... present to all times and places”:

Given the idea that the remarkable in human life, including brilliant or crucial or otherwise impressive language or speech, often [came] from the gods, it [was] utterly natural that a culture like the Greek’s should hypostatize the Muses or some similar divine agent as the source both of the power and content of its poetry (Franke 3).

While it is true that Wheatley did not invoke the divine nine at the outset of her poem, she did satisfy epic tradition by invoking “a godly power of being present to all times and places” (Franke 3). In the very first line of her poem, Phillis Wheatley obliquely invoked the muse of the Judeo-Christian world. Wheatley invoked God. By pointing to a power associated with God (the power of “mercy”), Wheatley introduced into her poem the most important source of her divine inspiration (1). God, through His mercy, had brought Wheatley from a Pagan land and it would be God who would give Wheatley the power and authority to battle as a hero “skilled in all ways of contending” (Homer, *Odyssey* 2). Wheatley’s ascension to the status of epic hero would necessitate the cleansing of her mortal “flaw.” This cleansing would occur in the first quatrain of Wheatley’s poem.

In order to assume the post of epic hero, Wheatley had to first establish herself as morally superior to her oppositional forces. The “inborn and natural superiority” of the hero was one of two understood hallmarks of the heroic model (Miller vii). Although very rarely articulated, the ethical superiority of the hero was second only to “the superior force of the weapon wielder and war maker” (Miller vii). In order to transition herself into a divine war maker, Wheatley would first need to absolve herself of her mortal

“flaw” – her moral blackness (Welch, Greer 99).³¹ In a catechetical way, Wheatley performed the sacrament of penance in the first quatrain of her poem by confessing to her listener, “Once I redemption neither sought nor knew” (4). This last line of the first quatrain declared to the listener Wheatley’s once mortal flaw. That flaw however had already been absolved in the first three lines of the quatrain by God: “’Twas mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land, / Taught my benighted soul to understand / That there’s a God, that there’s a *Saviour* too” (1-3). Her absolution from the “sin” of paganism prepared Wheatley to enter the second quatrain of her poem not only cleansed of her “flaw,” but overtaken with “the spirit of a god [who had] taken possession” of her (Welch, Greer 99). This divine possession would allow Wheatley to enter the battlefield of the second quatrain of the poem as a kind of demi-god, as a divinely anointed and inspired Christian warrior dressed in the celestial armor of God’s salvation. As a Christianized poet-warrior, Wheatley would engage in an epistemological battle that would elevate her to the status of “New World” Black hero. That battle would necessitate a trip to the netherworld that was the eighteenth-century white imagination.

Epic poems “normally [involved] a journey into the underworld, where, preparing for the future demands made on him by destiny, the hero [would meet] ghosts from his past” (Hurley, O’Neill 122). The second quatrain of “On Being Brought from Africa to America” would find Wheatley in the underworld that was the psyche of eighteenth-century white, “Christian” America. In that second quatrain, she would meet and slay a Biblical ghost of the past that had come into rule as one of the great powers of the white

³¹ In 1769, the French *Dictionnaire de l’Académie* defined “hero” as “a demi-god [and] ‘a man who distinguished himself in a war by extraordinary acts” (Miller 2). This definition of the epic hero as either a supernatural force or a demi-god had been in place long before 1769. It’s to be noted that the archaic definition of “hero,” used in Homer’s time, referred to any free man (Miller 3).

psychic underworld. Donned in the celestial armor provided by God, Wheatley would meet the gaze of false gods with the blazing eyes of a hero.³²

In the tradition of Medea, Hector, and Achilles, Wheatley turned her assaultive gaze onto the “New World’s” gods and the armed force that was the pseudo-Christian doctrine of the mark of Cain.³³ In shifting her gaze to the unseemly behavior of “New World” gods who, like ancient Greek gods before them, “[appeared] to have passed all bounds of propriety...[patently] descending to the level of immoral behavior,” Wheatley prepared the stage for her *aristeia*, for the most important moment of battle in all of her poems (Dietrich 131).³⁴

By the eighteenth-century, religion, science, law, politics, economics, and culture had all allied under the banner of white supremacy to wage a transnational war against all Black bodies. In 1733, Elihu Coleman, an early abolitionist, “described one defense” of that war: “But some may object, as I myself have heard them, that there was a Mark set upon Cain, and they do believe that these Negroes are the Posterity of Cain because of their hair, and their being so black” (qtd. in Killian 1). In Genesis 4:15, “the Lord set a mark upon Cain, lest any finding him should kill him” for murdering his brother, Abel. Defenders, advocates, and apologists of slavery and white supremacy alike interpreted the mark set upon Cain as the mark of blackness. The Cain theory held that “Cain was

³² The celestial armor of Christianity would function as Wheatley’s shield. Like Ajax’s shield, which covered the whole person from head to toe, so too would Christianity shield Wheatley from head to toe.

³³ Eyes in ancient epics “[did] not just passively receive images, they...also [emited] light. This fire from the eyes [was] associated with power and violence...The might and anger of a hero [came] out through the eyes” (Lovatt 312). Medea, Hector, and Achilles all emitted “fire” from their eyes.

³⁴ An *aristeia*, an “extended brilliant solo-performance” in Greek epics, highlighted the hero’s martial excellence. These battles were common and obligatory components of the hyper-masculine epic tradition. One of the more famous and well-known instantiations of this epic convention was Achilles’ almost single-handed defeat of the Trojan army in the *Iliad*.

smitten with dark skin as punishment for killing his brother” (Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham* 178). This theory had an advantage over the curse of Ham in that it “[mentioned] a ‘mark’ put on Cain, even if it [didn’t] specify what it was” (Goldenberg 178). The mark of Cain became foundational to “the eighteenth century equation of darkness with evil and sin” (Carretta 63). The mark of Cain however was not specific to America. It was “found in the seventeenth and eighteenth century Portuguese empire,” and in seventeenth and eighteenth century English and French texts:

In England, Thomas Peyton referred to the black African as the ‘cursed descendant of Cain and the devil’ in his *The Glasse of Time* published in 1620, and in 1785 Paul Erdman Isert more expansively recorded the view that Black’s skin color ‘originated with Cain, the murder of his brother, whose family were destined to have the black colour as punishment.’ In France, the Curse [was] mentioned in a 1733 *Dissertation sur l’origine des nègres et des américains*, and [was] recorded by Jean-Baptiste Labat, the Dominican missionary (Goldenberg 179).

Native to America or not, its reign had become supreme by the time a teenage slave girl decided to meet force with force. The mark of Cain in relation to Black bodies was clear. It would be the mark of Cain however, ascribed to “*Christians*,” that would prove Wheatley the victor in a war “marked out by the symbolism of colours” (Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic* 1).

In the penultimate line of her poem, Wheatley jointly charged Negroes and Christians (understood to be white) with being “black as *Cain*”: “Remember, *Christians*, *Negros*, black as *Cain*, / May be refin’d, and join th’ angelic train” (7-8). In accusing “*Christians*” of being “black as *Cain*,” Wheatley vanquished false gods in “*Jehovah*’s name –[with] no other arms [to] bear” but the very weapon formed against her

(Wheatley, “Goliath of Gath” 156). Wheatley’s indictment of “*Christians*” as morally black (juxtaposed with the lesser “sin” of phenotypical blackness) dethroned not only false gods but the supremacy of whiteness itself that had come to deify all whites as superior beings. Using scripture as “*materia medica*, as a therapeutic means of revising and transforming social reality,” Wheatley stormed Biblical “tradition” to “[undercut] colonial assumptions about race” (Scheick 108). In doing so, this “New World” Black hero spoke back to the gods of the land, victorious in the face of their demise: “Today the Lord of Hosts to me will give / Vict’ry, to-day thy doom thou shalt receive; / The fate you threaten shall your own become (“Goliath of Gath” 158-160).

In “Epic and Novel,” Mikhail Bakhtin observed, “[one] may, and in fact one must, memorialize with artistic language only that which is worthy of being remembered, that which should be preserved in the memory of descendants” (18-19). Included in *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, was Phillis Wheatley’s singular memorial to herself. That memorial would usher in to the literary world the stirrings of a new tradition – the Black epic literary tradition. Through her seeming unremarkable recitation of epic verse, Afric’s muse turned herself into Afric’s hero. In doing so she proved that “those who break a tradition first hold it in awe” (Walcott, “The Muse of History” 354).

CONCLUSION

listen,
you a wonder.
you a city
of a woman.
you got a geography of your own.
listen,
somebody need a map
to understand you...

“what the mirror said” – Lucille Clifton

In the summer of 1761, Susanna Wheatley visited the slave market in search of “a young negress, with the view of training her up under her own eye, that she might, by gentle usage, secure to herself a faithful domestic in her old age” (Odell 11). There, she made “a personal selection from [a] group of unfortunates offered for sale” (Odell 11). Phillis Wheatley was “the choice of the lady” (Odell 12). Phillis Wheatley was brought from Africa to America on board the *Phillis* on July 11, 1761. The *Phillis* had reached Boston, Massachusetts “at the peak of the annual season for selling imported slaves” (Carretta 10). Between 1760 and 1769 alone, 38,522 Africans would be imported as slaves (Purvis 166). By the start of the American Revolutionary War, “500,000 of the thirteen colonies’ 2.5 million inhabitants” would be counted as slaves (Baptist 4). By the time Ethiop’s muse picked up her quill to engage in a kind of labor not associated with slaves, every person of “visible African descent” in the American colonies was presumed enslaved (Baptist 3).¹ It was in this context – in the context of a burgeoning slave nation – that a young slave girl emerged to take her place on the literary stage.

¹ In 1660, the Virginia Assembly began to establish which persons might be treated as perpetual slaves by pronouncing who could not be treated as a perpetual slaves: ““for the future no servant comeing into the country without indentures, of what christian nation soever, shall serve longer than those of our own country, of the like age”” (qtd. in Jordan, *White Over Black* 73). In 1705, the Virginia Assembly passed the

With the 1773 publication of *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, Phillis Wheatley became “the most famous individual of African descent in England and America” to take up a pen (Waldstreicher 527). Wheatley had already garnered the attention of both the literary and abolitionist worlds with her 1770 elegy on the Reverend George Whitefield. That elegy had brought Wheatley “instant intercolonial and transatlantic fame after it appeared on 11 October 1770” (Carretta 78). On November 16, 1770, the *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* in London “advertised a version of the elegy...as ‘An Ode of Verses, composed in America by a Negro Girl seventeen years of age...’” (Carretta 78). By the end of that year, Wheatley’s funerary panegyric would be republished as a broadside “in New York, Philadelphia, and Newport, Rhode Island, as well as four more times in Boston” (Carretta 78). Considering that literacy in the colonies was generously understood as the ability to read and maybe sign one’s name, the domestic and international success of Wheatley’s poem was no small feat for any colonial subject—especially a young, female slave.

“Come to a country to be docile and dumb,” how did this slave girl rise to become anything other than a slave (Jordan 174)? How did this sickly child, likely advertised as a refuse slave, dare to dream herself a poet if “[a] poet [was] somebody free” and not just a body for sale (Jordan 175)? As June Jordan declared in her “sonnet” for Phillis Wheatley, “It was not natural. And she was the first”—the first enslaved Black woman poet to be recognized as a poet by her self-professed betters (174).

Phillis Wheatley was “one of only three Americans who were able to publish poetry and prose” while still enslaved (O’Neale 144). Like Jupiter Hammon before her

Virginia Slave Codes, which ensured that only Negroes could be enslaved. Whites could not be enslaved “because they were Christian” (Mirza 135).

and George Moses Horton after her, Wheatley knew quite well what her entrance into an almost exclusively male and white space would entail. Entering the most esteemed literary genre of all literary genres while speaking out “against one’s ‘owners’ or the society which either condoned or ignored the ‘owner’s’ actions” would prove a monumental task for any person of African descent – free or enslaved (O’Neale 144). For Phillis Wheatley, her entrance into the exclusive world of belles-lettres would have to be carefully staged so as to ensure that it was in “no way incendiary” to those tasked with sanctioning her lays:

[Appropriate] whites had to authenticate the writer’s mental and moral capacity, and then the slave’s master had to agree that the slave could publish the work. Moreover, the slave’s offering was carefully censored to ensure that it was no way incendiary. While Wheatley did not have to acquire the language skills stealthily, she was subject to authentication for proper classical and evangelical content (O’Neale 145).

Because knowledge validation was “controlled by elite white men,” Wheatley knew her poetic performance had to, superficially, “reflect this group’s interests” (Hill Collins 409). Her very life as a slave had taught Wheatley to “perform” for the interests of elite white men. A visit from a gentleman on October 10, 1772 would prove just how deft Wheatley was at performing for that gaze.

On October 10, 1772, Thomas Woolridge visited the Wheatley’s home seeking an audience with their famed domestic:²

It didn’t seem unusual for a gentleman to stop by the big house on King Street, a few blocks from the Long Wharf, and ask to see Susanna Wheatley’s eighteen-year-old slave, Phillis, or hear her recite some of her own

² Wheatley may have been nineteen-years old by the time of the visit. Because her age upon arrival was determined by missing front teeth, her true age would remain unknown.

poetry. She was already famous, in and beyond Boston, for having written the best of dozens of eulogies published upon the death of the revivalist George Whitefield a year earlier. Hers had appeared in London as well as Boston (Waldstreicher 522).

A London merchant and sometimes colonial official, Woolridge's visit to Wheatley went far beyond the typical visit of the day. Just weeks before his visit, Thomas Woolridge's patron, William Legge, the earl of Dartmouth, had been assigned colonial America's secretary of state. Aware of his patron's "well-known charitable interest in the spiritual welfare of Native Americans and Africans," Woolridge sought to curry favor with Legge (Waldstreicher 523). His intent? To bring Legge proof of "a second-hand story about an eighteen-year-old slave" in return for a post in East Florida by the end of the year (Waldstreicher 523).

Used to meeting dignitaries in their parlors, borrowing their books, and occasionally reciting poems at their behest, Wheatley could not have been prepared for what could only be described as Woolridge's outright racism. One can only imagine what Phillis Wheatley must have felt having to offer up her manuscripts yet again to another incredulous white man. One can only imagine what Phillis Wheatley must have felt when Thomas Thornbury Woolridge told her that she would have to compose something in front of him right then and there. Right then and there. Just as she would on the page space, Wheatley would bow "only the better / to rise and strike / again" (Nichols, "Epilogue" 9-11):

[She] told her demanding auditor, Woolridge, in a distinctly ladylike fashion that nevertheless allowed for her slave status that 'she was then busy and engaged for the Day,' but he could 'propose a Subject,' and return for the results in the morning. Woolridge suggested 'The Earl of Dartmouth' and was more than happy to come

back. When he did, Phillis took out some paper and rather theatrically began writing out a forty-eight-line praise poem, ‘To the Right Honourable William Legge, Earl of Dartmouth, his Majesty’s Secretary of State for America, &&’” (Waldstreicher 524).

Woolridge would have his post in East Florida by the end of the year.

What resulted from Wheatley’s encounter with Woolridge was one of the most important poems to ever come from Wheatley’s pen. In “To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth,” Wheatley spoke scathingly, through the language of republicanism, about the master’s tyrannical practice of enslavement. But what also resulted from Wheatley’s encounter with Woolridge was an entrance into Wheatley’s strategic use of deference as a way of escaping her “place” as a slave. Through her “traditional and seemingly deferential” performance, Wheatley evinced how a Black body could occupy a counterhegemonic space (Waldstreicher 527). Just as the “tea-table” encounter would give insight into Wheatley’s skilled performance as a young, female slave, so too would this meeting with Woolridge tell us much about Phillis Wheatley’s ability to maneuver and sidestep the white gaze. By bowing down just enough to assuage the prejudices of her oppressor without prostrating herself, Wheatley found a way to navigate as a self-possessed Black body around Woolridge. In “On Being Brought from Africa to America,” Phillis Wheatley would do the same. Through mimicry – Wheatley’s version of deference on the page – Wheatley would prove more than just a “colorless” canary murmuring some “terrible theology” from a “comparatively gilded cage” (Carretta 23).

In 1913, William J. Long said the following of the African “canary in a cage”:

Here is no Zulu, but drawing-room English; not the
wild, barbaric strain of march and camp and singing

fire that stir's a man's instincts, but pious platitudes, colorless imitations of Pope, and some murmurs of a terrible theology...she sings like a canary in a cage, a bird that forgets its native melody and imitates only what she hears (qtd. in Watson 104).

Though dismissed as just another “eighteenth-century [black] who sold [her] blackness for a pottage of white acceptability,” Phillis Wheatley, in “On Being Brought from Africa to America,” showcased how a Black writer *could* appropriate the marks of a Western literary tradition without being erased by them (Shields xxviii). Using mimicry as her dais for a revolutionary performance in dissemblance, Wheatley turned “On Being Brought from Africa to America” into a model for saying without saying.

In “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women,” Darlene Clark Hine explained dissemblance as a form of resistance historically employed by Black women to disempower the patriarchal white gaze.³

Black women, as a rule, developed and adhered to a cult of secrecy, a culture of dissemblance, to protect the sanctity of inner aspects of their lives. The dynamics of dissemblance involved creating the appearance of disclosure, or openness about themselves and their feelings, while actually remaining an enigma (qtd. in Quashie 15).

By creating alternate public images, Black women were able to preserve themselves, privately, according to their own gaze in the midst of a world that had already created a distorted image of them. In “On Being Brought from Africa to America,” Wheatley would do the same by using dissemblance as a way to preserve and articulate her Self secretly from behind the mask of sameness.

³ Although Hine focused on Black women post-slavery, her observations hold true for women in slavery. A number of scholars (Angela Davis, bell hooks) as well as primary texts (Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*) have pointed to this culture of dissemblance amongst enslaved Black women.

In his 1818 lecture “On Poesy or Art,” Samuel Taylor Coleridge pointed to a feature present in the Romantic concept of imitation that would prove foundational to Wheatley’s strategy of dissemblance.⁴ It would be this paradox that would provide the fissures necessary for Wheatley to sing in and through her own voice in the most controversial poem to ever come from the poet:

It is sufficient that philosophically we understand that in all imitation two elements must coexist, and not only coexist, but must be perceived as coexisting. These two constituent elements are likeness and unlikeness, or sameness and difference, and in all genuine creations of art there must be a union of these disparates. The artist may take his point of view where he pleases, provided that the desired effect be perceptibly produced, —that there be likeness in the difference, difference in the likeness, and a reconciliation of both in one (Coleridge, “On Poesy or Art” 609).

“On Being Brought from Africa to America” would be Wheatley’s master class in “imitation” – a master class in how to create “likeness in the difference, [and] difference in the likeness” (Coleridge 609). In *The Muses of Resistance: Laboring-Class Women’s Poetry in Britain, 1739-1796*, Donna Landry addressed imitation as a viable and subversive route of expression for laboring women poets of the eighteenth-century:⁵

Writing in verse that ventriloquizes and thus challenges the verse forms and values of mainstream culture is a way of speaking out, and of altering social discourses. This is ventriloquism in the sense...[of] ventriloquism with a subversive twist. It is as if a dummy did not merely serve to demonstrate the master’s skill at speaking through another’s body, but took on a life of its own, began to challenge the master by altering the master’s texts (6).

⁴ The Romantic concept of “imitation” is closer to the concept of mimicry in that it privileges resemblance, not sameness.

⁵ Ann Chandler, William J. Christmas, and others have done a substantial amount of work on “the discourse of work” employed by white poets of the eighteenth-century in Great Britain, but the field has remained incredibly and egregiously silent on Black “laboring” slave writers in the British colonies.

Contrary to the historical reception of Wheatley's infamous poem, "On Being Brought from Africa to America" did not demonstrate the master's skill at speaking through the slave's body but Wheatley's skill in speaking through her own body back to the master and his texts. Through the careful construction of a title that presented the poet as both known and knowable, through Wheatley's meticulous selection of words which enabled her to maintain the veneer of "place," and through the use of a verse form typical of the day, Wheatley spoke herself into being fork-tongued and according to her own gaze.

On Resistance, Erasure, and Our Responsibility to the Dead

Phillis Wheatley was fifteen-years-old when she wrote the most reviled poem in Black literature. Read as a thank-you note to the institution of slavery, "On Being Brought from Africa to America" would be used as proof of Wheatley's "apparent acceptance of the contemporaneous justifications for the transatlantic slave trade" (Carretta 60). This misreading of Wheatley's poem would be largely based on the inability to see masking as an already existing strategy in eighteenth-century Black culture. The egregious misreading of both poet and poem as "performers" in whiteface would also be rooted in notions of how Blackness —namely Black resistance—should have been performed by an eighteenth-century female slave.

In *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture*, Kevin Quashie addressed the historical difficulty with seeing Black resistance as anything other than a loud, public, and open articulation against hegemony: "black culture is supposed to be loud, literally as well as metaphorically, since such loudness is the expressiveness that articulates its resistance... Quiet is antithetical to how we think about black culture, and

by extension, black people” (11, 8). Because Black resistance, Quashie argued, became the dominant framework for reading black culture (since black culture was largely characterized “by its responses to racial dominance”), and because Black resistance was understood to be an exclusively public expression, a very particular brand of resistance came to be associated with the Black body (Quashie 11). Geared toward an outside audience, public resistance came to be seen as “the lingua franca” of blackness (Quashie 20). This brand of resistance however would not be Wheatley’s lingua franca. Wheatley’s brand of resistance would operate quietly. Her brand of resistance would be that of many Black women slaves – private, concealed, and intimate –but nevertheless there. Through mimicry, Wheatley enacted a quiet resistance that operated in the interior performance of her text.

Because Wheatley used mimicry as a way to say without saying, her quiet resistance came to be read as a betrayal of her race: “As an identity, blackness is always supposed to tell us something about race or racism...as if black subjectivity exists for its social and political meaningfulness, rather than as a marker of the human individuality of the person who is black” (Quashie 4). Because Wheatley did not seem to tell of race or racism loudly enough or in a recognizable way, her Blackness was historically erased. In a 1972 review of Wheatley’s poems, R. Lynn Maston captured this historic erasure:

Phillis Wheatley has been condemned for more than a century by whites and blacks alike for failing to espouse in any way the plight of her race. No one denies that she was a genius; no one denies her right to be called a poet; no one denies that she was an extremely clever imitator; but almost all deny that Phillis Wheatley was race conscious, or what could be called by any stretch of the imagination a protestor of slavery. The common view, in effect, is that she was the white man’s ideal of a good ‘nigger’ –so good, in fact, that she was almost white (222).

Vernon Loggins asserted that although Wheatley “dwelt at length on common notions of her day regarding liberty” she “neglected almost entirely her own state of slavery and the miserable oppression of thousands of her race” (qtd. in Maston 222). James Weldon Johnson all but un-raced Phillis Wheatley as a Black poet in his peppery appraisal of her poems:

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 (qtd. in Maston 222).

Anthologizers of Black verse would follow. In Rosey E. Poole’s 1962 *Beyond the Blues*, Poole followed “the same worn path of opinion” regarding Afric’s muse: “If this ex-slave had dared to put into her poetry more than just that of Miss Wheatley, if she had the strength to give all that was really hers, and not that which others had given her, she might have been a really important figure and not, as she is now, a literary curio” (qtd. in Maston 222-223).

Perhaps it was the mask of sameness that made us think that she had acquiesced when in truth she had just left “her guard up, never leaving herself unprotected” (Maston 228). Perhaps it was her quiet that made us think that she was not Black enough to represent her race. Perhaps we expected too much of an eighteenth-century slave.

In “Preface to Blackness: Text and Pretext,” Henry Louis Gates, Jr. problematized Stephen Henderson’s notion of saturation – a notion that would come to expel Phillis Wheatley from the Black literary canon and from her race. In assessing the “authentic” blackness of a poem, Stephen Henderson employed the concept of “saturation” to

measure how much blackness was communicated by the poem (Watts 199). A poem only “worked” if the reader, according to Henderson, perceived saturation – “something in [the poem] which he [identified] as Black and meaningful” (qtd. in Watts 199). The more saturated a poem, the blacker the text. Engulfed in racial reification, Henderson’s methodology for assessing the blackness of Black-authored poems placed an onerous burden on the “intuitive sensibilities of black poets, readers, and critics” to determine the blackness of a work (Watts 200). In response to this essentialist framework, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. declared saturation to be “the ultimate tautology”: “One imagines a dashiki-clad Dionysus weighing the saturated, mascon lines of Countee Cullen against those of Langston Hughes, as Paul Laurence Dunbar and Jean Toomer are silhouetted by the flames of Nigger Hill” (249). Laughable to be sure but in there an important point. How much of our inability to see mimicry as a strategy in Wheatley’s most reviled poem (and in truth, her body of work) was simply the result of us not thinking she or her poems were “saturated” enough? How much of Wheatley’s erasure as a resisting, Black woman poet was based on us not recognizing that her very Blackness in the way she articulated it was inherently Black enough? And need I ask the most problematic question of them all? Who would be the reader, poet, critic Black enough to determine that Wheatley was not Black enough? And who had appointed him/her to that post? Surely he or she must have been the Blackest of them all. A troubling and circular discourse for sure.

With “a long history of disguise, ruse, and doubleness” in Black culture, how could we not have seen Wheatley’s use of mimicry in “On Being Brought from Africa to America” as the eighteenth-century’s version of Dunbar’s mask in its earliest form? In “Of Mimicry and Man,” Homi Bhabha explained the mask of mimicry, a mask of

“resemblance and menace,” as a powerful tool to wage war (86). Through mimicry, argued Bhabha, the subaltern could reform him/herself “as a subject of difference that [was] almost the same, but not quite” (86). For Phillis Wheatley, the mask of mimicry would allow her to present herself as “[*almost*] the same but not white” (89). In that gap between sameness and difference, Wheatley would sing through her voice.

Through mimicry, Wheatley was able to create an asymmetrical relationship between the “outside” and the “inside” performance of her poem. This asymmetrical relationship allowed her to speak double-tongued, “communicating the experience from within and without” the white world (Fabio 224). The asymmetrical relationship between the appearance (the loudness) and activity (the quiet) of her poem would prove foundational in establishing Wheatley as more than just a parroting poet. In “The Wheatleyan Moment,” David Waldstreicher challenged the historical discomfort with Wheatley’s quiet “performance” as a slave-poet by commonsensically explaining why she wrote how she wrote:

Had she not mastered their words, their ideas, their song, their political culture as a whole, she could not have sent their calls for liberty and piety back to them, inside out and publicly, with undeniable implications for herself and her fellow slaves (551).

In *We Wear the Mask*, Rafia Zafar reaffirmed Wheatley’s poetic performance, kept “within the parameters of acceptable expression” or “oblique argumentation,” as the literary ancestor to “the rhetorical subterfuge with which, one hundred years later, [Paul Laurence] Dunbar would grow so weary” of (16). Zafar however, also explained why Wheatley’s rhetorical subterfuge would come to be ignored. When combined with eighteenth-century poetics, Zafar argued, the veil – a “recognizable...black literary

convention by the mid to late nineteenth century” would become unrecognizable because of the neoclassical conventions employed in Wheatley’s poems (16). Julian Mason, Jr. unknowingly recognized how eighteenth-century poetics had likely obscured the resistance and Blackness present in Wheatley’s poems when he observed that “The neoclassical influence...may have been responsible for the fact that there [was] little about Phillis Wheatley in her poems” (qtd in Maston 223). Neoclassicism, Mason, Jr. argued, “[left] the reader of [Wheatley’s] poems only slightly aware of her being a Negro and a slave” (qtd. in Maston 223).

Because of the “allusive web” that was the neoclassical tradition, readers of Wheatley may have read the markers of neoclassicism in her poems—the allusions to works written by canonical white men, the tight, rigid, and controlled neoclassical forms created, circulated, and authorized by white men, the genteel language associated with white men—as “too white” to house a Black voice.⁶ Because her “political and didactic [motives]” however “had to be sweetened, veiled, or otherwise masked to be acceptable to a white audience,” Wheatley likely disappeared behind her own neoclassical forms, though “the disappearing act itself was precisely what was aimed for” (Zafar 4). Perhaps Phillis Wheatley disappeared all too well behind her verses. Or perhaps she was simply disappeared because we did not see what we were looking for.

What is our responsibility to the dead? How do we commemorate who has come before us? In “Consuming Trauma; or, The Pleasures of Merely Circulating,” Patricia Yaeger considered how we “narrate or speak for the dead”: “The ventriloquism we lend to the dead, the tropes we clothe them in, can have the power to re-dress their bodies”

⁶ This notion of being “too white” is a speaking back to Henderson’s essentialist notion of race.

(Yaeger 28). The way we speak for the dead can also have the power to leave them “disremembered and unaccounted for” (Morrison, *Beloved* 274).

Long before her death, Wheatley’s literary remains were re-dressed and “[passed] on” (Redding 11).⁷ Just months after the publication of *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, Dr. John Langhorne, writing for the *London Review*, said of Wheatley and her sable race: “they have a turn for imitation, though they have little or none for invention” (qtd. in Slaughter 91). From 1773 on, many others would conclude the same. The “resurrection” of Wheatley’s poetic corpus as the “bloodless” and “unracial” scribbles of a poet would usher in a historical nightmare –the nightmare of “*not being haunted*” enough by Wheatley’s “weight” as a poet (Redding 11):

In calling out to the specter we encounter a new kind
of nightmare: not the gothic terror of being haunted
by the dead, but the greater terror *of not being haunted*,
of ceasing to feel the weight of past generations in one’s
bones (qtd. in Baker, Jr. 30).

For over two hundred years, Phillis Wheatley has occupied an impossible place in both the Black and white imagination. With no other tongue but the father tongue to master, with no model to model herself after, Wheatley had to find a way out of no way. How would this young, enslaved Black woman poet find her place in a literary terrain that was in effect the extension of the everyday world she was forced to navigate? Through mimicry, Wheatley found a way.

⁷ Toward the end of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, the narrator, thinking back on the story of *Beloved*, repeated, “It was not a story to pass on” – as in it was not a story to bequeath to someone else or it was not a story one could afford to forget (274). In terms of Phillis Wheatley, it seems we vacillate between those same poles.

“It Was Not a Story to Pass On”⁸

Studying on “On Being Brought from Africa to America” as a site of mimetic resistance raised many questions about Wheatley’s praxis as a poet. Were there other ways in which Wheatley instantiated her praxis? Were there other ways in which Wheatley negotiated her dual identity as a slave and a poet? Did Wheatley, as a laborer herself, think about her poems as work? How else had Wheatley’s “story” been passed on? A closer look at the body of Wheatley’s poems would reveal another important way in which we left her disremembered and unaccounted for.

A Look Forward: Phillis Wheatley and the Making of Poems

From behind the mask of sameness, Wheatley wrote her poems into “freedom papers” –into emancipatory texts that would free her from the very marks meant to keep her in her place. Though poetry was territorialized as an elite, white, male space, Wheatley’s entrance into that space exploded notions about who could snatch the laurel from Maecenas’ head. Mimicry however would not be Wheatley’s only or even most powerful tool for displaying her pages as rivals to “*Virgil’s page*” (Wheatley, “To Maecenas” 23). Through her poetic discourse on work, Wheatley would redefine the figure of the laboring slave.

In the eighteenth-century, English and American literature saw the emergence of a “new” poetic mode –“the ‘work’ poem which took various types of labor as its subject” (Andrews 105). Written often by laborers themselves, “work” poems manifested “divergent concerns and attitudes about the experience of work” (Andrews 105). Not only did laboring poets literally write about work, by the eighteenth-century, writing

⁸ From Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*.

itself came to be seen as work. A survey of American and English poets would reveal the attention paid to “work.” Anne Bradstreet’s “The Author to Her Book” (where she casts poetic labor as a mother’s labor), Susanna Wright’s “On the Benefit of Labour,” George Ogilvie’s “Carolina; or, The Planter,” Mather Byles’ “Written in Paradise Lost” along with the poems of Stephen Duck, Mary Collier, and the georgic poems of Robert Dodsley, would reveal a thriving “discourse on work”:

The discourse on work [was] defined by the circular logic of work, writing, and writing about work that characterized the lives of ...plebeian poets in various ways. Hard work, oppressive working conditions, and lousy pay often [produced] the desire to write in these poets, and writing thus [became] a new form of productive labor that [depended] upon the depiction of, or the cultural capital of, the earlier manual occupation. In its most overt incarnation, this poetic discourse [formed] the basis of an extended, occupation-specific poem about a poet’s particular labors (qtd. in Andrews 108).

The poetic “discourse on work” that emerged in the eighteenth-century visible-ized the work featured and performed by *white* laboring poets but there was one group of people transformed by law into laborers who also featured and performed their “work” in their poems – Black slave-poets. Enter Phillis Wheatley.

In order to ascend to the privileged status of poet, Phillis Wheatley had to first shape-shift herself away from the post of “slave.” She would do this not only through cunning assimilation of the literary master’s texts, but by locating her poems as sites of refined labor to move beyond the brand of “crude” laborer that had come to mark all slaves. The re-marking of Black-authored poems as sites of refined labor would be

inaugurated through Wheatley's texts. This practice would find itself seamed into the lines of Black-authored poems for the next two hundred and fifty years.⁹

By the beginning of the eighteenth-century, slavery had redefined not only the African as "laborer" but the laboring African as well. Because of the preponderance of slaves involved in agricultural work, a representative image emerged of the laboring slave. That image was of the slave as a crude laborer. Because plantation labor relied almost exclusively on the manual labor of slaves, manual labor came to be seen as the distinct province of slaves. In *The Cotton Kingdom*, Frederick Law Olmsted gave a telling description of the manual labor performed by slaves: "They are constantly and steadily driven up to their work, and the stupid, plodding, machine-manner in which they labour, is painful to witness" (Olmstead 202). Though deemed "stupid" and "plodding," the labor demanded of the majority of slaves required a vast set of skills to move the machine that was the institution of slavery:

Although [the institution of slavery] accorded more rank and status to tradesman than to field workers, there was also a significant overlap in their daily work routines and porous boundaries between the two categories of workers. Distinctions between skilled and unskilled workers were as much a cultural and social construction as they were a product of the kinds of labor undertaken each day. The division between skilled and unskilled slaves was based not just on the intrinsic nature of their daily labors or the kinds of training and expertise required for the job but also on [masters'] gendered assumptions about who was eligible to be a skilled worker, as well as other cultural attitudes...held about the nature of [the] work [of slaves] (Roberts 204).

⁹ Nineteenth-century Black poets in particular, such as George Moses Horton, James Monroe Whitfield, Joseph Seamon Cotter, Jr., and Paul Laurence Dunbar, would feature this practice distinctly in their works.

Because slavery “was not always and everywhere [or everyday] the same,” slaves were expected to perform all kinds of labor (Foner 76).¹⁰ Slaves were agricultural workers, cooks, carpenters, shoemakers, dairymaids, nurses, tanners, sawyers, and seamstresses. Slaves also worked in industry –be it maritime industry or in “ironworks and tobacco factories in the Upper South” (Foner 76-77). In both Northern and Southern cities “[slaves] were often employed as skilled craftsmen and artisans” (Foner 77). Even the “unskilled” labor of field slaves was important. In fact, it was the most important labor of all. Those field hands whose labor was dismissed as “stupid” and “plodding,” whose black bodies were seen as nothing more than “good tools that had to be kept efficient for toil,” who came to be seen as representative of all slaves, “went from making no cotton to speak of in 1790 to making 2 billion pounds of it in 1860” (Wright 25; Baptist xxiii). It was on the backs of those “unskilled” workers that American and Western capitalism was raised. Although the labor demanded of slaves necessitated an array of skills, slaves themselves were not always or necessarily seen as skilled laborers. The imputation of slave laborers as unskilled, which resulted partly from their overrepresentation as field hands, was clearly not a product of reality but a product of the “schizophrenia which ... characterized [white Americans’] view” of slaves (Collier 4).¹¹ This “schizophrenia” was informed by the racial ideology of white supremacy that worked to advance the notion of the crude, laboring slave.

¹⁰ On many plantations, some positions became fixed. For example, “there would have been a moral difficulty about sending a dignified coachman to the field to plow or ‘chop’” (Woodman 119). In Phillis Wheatley’s case, Susanna Wheatley refused to employ Phillis Wheatley in drudgery, giving her instead menial tasks to perform around the Wheatley home.

¹¹ The ableist language present in Eugenia Collier’s quote is duly noted.

Ideologies of racial difference, which flourished under the Enlightenment, attached to slaves “the substantial and permanent difference of race” (de Tocqueville 400). The foreigner, “brought by slavery into [white Americans’] midst, [was] hardly recognized as possessing the common features of humanity. His face [seemed] so hideous...his intelligence limited, and his tastes debased. [Americans were] very close to regarding him as being half-way between beast and man” (de Tocqueville 401). The presumed inferiority of the African race, which served to justify and sustain the triangle slave trade, was also used to devalue the laboring slave. Not only was white racial superiority “[used] to enforce a certain kind of labor” upon slaves but those who either performed the same labor as slaves or oversaw the labor of slaves “seized upon racial ideologies to distance themselves [and their work] from the targeted group” (Jones, *American Work* 15). These “specific, strategic uses of racial ideologies” evinced how “whites...often used blacks as a counter-reference group, defining themselves as a unified group...not just on the basis of who they [were], but also on the basis of who they [were] not – that is, black” (Jones 15). Because of the believed inferiority of the sable race, any and all labor produced by slaves was positioned as innately inferior – even when that was simply not the case:

In 1845, J. Kennard wrote in *Knickerbocker Magazine*:
‘Who are the true rulers? The Negro poets to be sure.
Do they not set the fashion, and give laws to the public
taste? Let one of them in the swamps of Carolina, compose
a new song, and it no sooner reaches the ear of a white
amateur, than it is written down, amended (that is, almost
spoilt), printed and then put upon a course of rapid
dissemination, to cease only with the utmost bounds of
Anglo-Saxon-dom, perhaps with the world. Meanwhile, the
poor author digs away with his hoe, utterly ignorant of his
greatness (qtd. in Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll* 250).

The casting of the slave laborer as inherently “un-great” would carry over into all sites where the slave labored. Be they harvesting crops on a field or cultivating poems on the page space, the labor of the enslaved would be deemed intrinsically inferior to the work of free, white laborers. Just as masters, overseers, and observers of slaves would diminish the labor of slaves on plantations, so too would the masters, overseers, and observers of the literary plantation diminish the poetic labors of the enslaved. Phillis Wheatley was not a plantation slave, but she was still a slave. Although Wheatley’s experience as a worker was qualitatively different than millions other slaves’, she would nonetheless bear the mark of “crude laborer” that had come to distinguish all slaves. It would be that mark that Wheatley would strategically work to displace in the body of her poems. By situating her poems as sites of great “strain,” Wheatley would create a discourse on work that would elevate her above and beyond the category “slave.”

In her poems, Phillis Wheatley redefined her enslavement by presenting herself as a different kind of slave – a slave to refined labor. By literally and literarily re-locating her labor into the body of her poems and away from her body as “slave,” Phillis Wheatley was able to call attention to herself as a poet in three important ways: first, by continually highlighting her “dependency” on the Muses, Wheatley inserted herself and her poetry as rightful heirs to a poetic lineage that could be traced back to the Homeric age; secondly, by discussing her poems as labor, Wheatley redefined herself as a refined laborer, shedding the brand of “crude” laborer that had come to disfigure all slaves; lastly, by glorifying her own “noble” strains, Wheatley valued her own work as worthy of poetic praise. Through these three techniques, Wheatley ordained herself a poet and eschewed her identity as a slave.

With an incredible body of work, there is still much left to be said about how Phillis Wheatley conscientiously created herself a poet, inaugurating practices that would be seen in the poems of Black poets for the next two hundred years. Though focused on the charge of imitation, this study was an attempt to explore how Wheatley, at every stage in her poems, carefully and thoughtfully executed her “work,” making her poems into a geography of her own.

Every Goodbye Ain’t Gone

In e.e. cummings “Three Statements,” cummings intimated a question critical to the spirit of this work – how did Phillis Wheatley, a young, enslaved woman poet, write so that she could be nobody but herself in her poems?

To be nobody-but-yourself—in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else—means to fight; and never stop fighting. As for expressing nobody-but-yourself in words, that means working just a little harder than anybody who isn’t a poet can possibly imagine. Why? Because nothing is quite as easy as using words like somebody else. We all of us do exactly this nearly all of the time—and whenever we do it, we are not poets (258).

In the introduction to *Resistance and Reformation in Nineteenth-Century African American Literature*, John Ernest established his “criteria” for reading nineteenth-century texts that would prove useful to reading Wheatley’s most anthologized poem: “I have tried to avoid bringing to task assumptions about what literature should be and how it should work, looking for ways to understand what *this* literature [was] and how it [*did*] work” (x). This study was an attempt to understand what “On Being Brought from Africa to America” *was* and how it *did* work.

Because scholars have searched the past with present eyes, much of Wheatley's import as a poet has been lost. This dissertation was an attempt to restore Phillis Wheatley's rightful place at the table of Black and American literary culture.

Post Script

I was seventeen years old when I first read Phillis Wheatley. I found "On Being Brought from Africa to America" in the anthology for my freshman-year English class while thumbing through the pages. That day in class, we had been assigned Emily Dickinson. Again. I read Phillis Wheatley instead. After reading the poem, I closed the book, and felt enraged. "Mercy." She said it was "mercy" that had turned her into a slave. I moved through my entire career as an undergraduate English major never reading her again.

I hadn't thought about Phillis Wheatley – or for that matter –many Black writers as an undergraduate English major. Curriculums are designed that way. But I remembered Wheatley distinctly when I read Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. I was 22 and in graduate school then. Like Pecola Breedlove, Phillis Wheatley was also just a little girl bombarded by the "beauty" of whiteness, the "ugliness" of blackness, and all those assaultive stares. How did the Anglophilia that killed Pecola's psyche not kill Phillis's? Why didn't Phillis, like Pecola, split into two crumpled masses of pain under the heaviness of whiteness and all that it came to represent? What saved Phillis Wheatley from becoming like that "little black girl who wanted [nothing more than] to rise up out the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes [?]" (Morrison 174).

Unless you're around children often, you forget. You forget what a seven-year-old child looks like, speaks like, thinks like, or how she asks for help. You simply forget. Phillis Wheatley was about seven-years-old when she was seized from her father's breast never to see her parents or her home again. How she did not split in two, like Pecola Breedlove, is a miracle onto itself. How she managed to create in the midst of an institution committed to her destruction is beyond anything that I can comprehend. How she managed to talk back, to seek her own temporary emancipation through words, to forge her own freedom papers, is a testament to her Self.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Claudia and Frieda thought back to the broken girl-child that was their friend:

We tried to see her without looking at her, and never never went near her...All of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed. And all of our beauty, which was hers first and which she gave to us. All of us—all who knew her—felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. Her simplicity decorated us, her guilt sanctified us, her pain made us glow with health... Her inarticulateness made us believe we were eloquent. ...We honed our egos on her, padded our characters with her frailty, and yawned in the fantasy of our strength...(205).

I wonder how long we have been guilty of the same.

For Phillis.

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