

November 2015

## Race Patriots: Black Poets, Transnational Identity, and Diasporic Versification in the United States Before the New Negro

Jason T. Hendrickson  
*University of Massachusetts Amherst*

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### Recommended Citation

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<https://doi.org/10.7275/7540179.0> [https://scholarworks.umass.edu/dissertations\\_2/542](https://scholarworks.umass.edu/dissertations_2/542)

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RACE PATRIOTS:  
BLACK POETS, TRANSNATIONAL IDENTITY, AND DIASPORIC  
VERSIFICATION IN THE UNITED STATES BEFORE THE NEW NEGRO

A Dissertation Presented

by

JASON T. HENDRICKSON

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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Approved as to style and content by:

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Steven Tracy, Chair

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James Smethurst, Member

---

Britt Rusert, Member

---

Laura Doyle, Member

---

John Bracey, Department Chair  
W.E.B. Du Bois Department of Afro-  
American Studies

## DEDICATION

For Gale and James Hendrickson, Cory, Niccole,  
and especially Michael, who introduced me to my first bards.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I must preface my gratitude by stating that the shortcomings of this work are my errors of translation from the indispensable advice and tutelage I have received from this collection of dear friends and colleagues.

Firstly, I must thank the W.E.B. Du Bois Department of Afro-American Studies at UMass Amherst and its superior faculty. I am immensely fortunate to have learned under the most thorough, knowledgeable and able scholars around. In particular I would like to acknowledge Ekwueme Michael Thelwell, who has – in a style all his own – influenced the scope of this project. Thank you for your interventions.

Additionally, my committee has offered me nothing but support. I am thankful for Laura Doyle's helpful critiques and commentary, which helped me ground my work conceptually, especially as I started (and ultimately reshaped) the dissertation. Britt Rusert has been amazingly supportive and generous with her time, offering a wealth of detailed insight and practical advice for the dissertation and beyond. James Smethurst has been remarkable in combining important critiques with a good-natured spirit, which ultimately led to several important changes in my work. Finally, my chair, Steve Tracy, has been incomparable in his patience, meticulousness, encouragement, and enthusiasm for the project. I am beyond fortunate to have worked with this elite collection of scholars.

I am blessed to have had support and mentorship that extends to those on a similar path. Many thanks go to Lia Bascomb, who has earned the right to list my name under “dissertations directed” in her CV for her extensive feedback. For her ears, eyes, and

mind, I am ever grateful. Jon Fenderson heard this idea in its earliest phases; unbeknownst to him (until now, I suppose), he has been a mentor and a model of what good scholarship should be. Allia Matta has been a consummate colleague and friend during the process; the same is to be said for McKinley Melton, whose footsteps I have continued to follow for quite some time now. Alex Carter promises to be a force to be reckoned with, and I am fortunate to have observed and gleaned some of his discipline and remarkable commitment. Markeysha Davis, Savannah Carroll, Zarah Caldwell, Vanessa Fabien, Cruz Bueno, Crystal Donkor, Johanna Ortner, Leslie Upton, Cyrene Crooms, Kabria Baumgartner, Julia Charles, Ernest Gibson III, Emahunn Campbell, Kelli Morgan, Armanthia Duncan, Thomas Edge, Taj Smith: thank you for the inspiration you provide through the important work that you do. Unsurpassed by any of the aforementioned is Jacqueline Jones, who has truly embodied the spirit of community, collegiality, friendship, and family since first meeting in James Smethurst's poetry seminar. Jackie, I would not be in this position without you. That is no understatement.

I am also grateful to the various institutions that have provided support during the research and writing process. I cannot thank Maurice Wallace enough for his mentorship, tutelage, and example during my years as an undergraduate at Duke University and beyond. Margot Hennessy at Westfield State University offered an instructive teaching opportunity that has shaped how I view audience. Marcus Allen and Shawn Christian at Wheaton College provided an unforgettable experience with a cohort of dynamic undergraduates that helped shape this dissertation. Marcus has been especially supportive as a mentor, a valued colleague, and a friend. I am thankful to

Michele Barale and Jyl Gentzler of Amherst College, where, while working as an associate with the Writing Center, I was able to refine my organizational approach for this project. The National Urban League has also been a boon, reminding me that service is a duty, privilege, and necessity in the work we undertake. In a similar vein, I am grateful for the support of the National Council for Black Studies, particularly from Margaret Brunson, Nadielka Bishop, Brittney Cofield-Poole, Jameta Barlow, Shawn Jones, Kanton Reynolds, and Mary Hemphill. Also, the support of the English faculty of CUNY LaGuardia Community College has been incredible; I am truly proud and grateful to be among so many wonderful colleagues and brilliant students.

Finally, to my ultimate colleague, my anchor, my friend, my teammate, my partner, Nakia Lettice Alston: I am forever in your debt for your companionship over the duration of this journey, so I intend to spend the rest of my life with you to pay it off. Thank you.



## **ABSTRACT**

### **RACE PATRIOTS: BLACK POETS, TRANSNATIONAL IDENTITY, AND DIASPORIC VERSIFICATION IN THE UNITED STATES BEFORE THE NEW NEGRO**

**SEPTEMBER 2015**

**JASON T. HENDRICKSON, B.A., DUKE UNIVERSITY**

**M.A., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST**

**Ph.D., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST**

**Directed by: Professor Steven Tracy**

This dissertation explores the contributions of black poets in the United States before the New Negro / Harlem Renaissance Movement. Specifically, it focuses on their role in creating and maintaining a tradition of regional transnationalism in their verses that celebrates their African ancestry. I contend that these poets are best understood as “race patriots”; that is, they at once sought inclusion within the nation-state in the form of full citizenship, yet recognized allegiances beyond the nation-state on account of race through a recognition of shared African ancestry across borders. Their verses point to a shared kinship – be it through common condition, culture, or politics – present within black literary thought, and thus within black communities, long before the New Negro. By extension, I advocate for a reimagining of the significance of nineteenth and eighteenth century poets within African American literature.

The dissertation challenges the accusation that black poetry in the United States was wholly assimilative or parroting, instead positing the strategic mimicry of

neoclassicism and romanticism as subversive and in direct conversation (and contention) with racist Enlightenment discourses. The dissertation considers a range of poets of varying repute: George Moses Horton, Phillis Wheatley, James Madison Bell, Joshua McCarter Simpson, George Boyer Vashon, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, James Monroe Whitfield, T. Thomas Fortune, Henrietta Cordelia Ray, George Clinton Rowe, and Paul Laurence Dunbar. The poets considered challenge traditional notions of patriotism and allegiance by championing rights for those of like ancestry within and across national boundaries. In turn, the study is indicative of how a patriotic nationalism can coexist with a Pan-African sensibility through a sustained critique of (global) white hegemony.

The study explores how these poets evince their race patriotism through a variety of means, including Ethiopianism, salvation-liberation ideology, and usage of tribute poems to honor figures, events, and places within the diaspora (e.g. Haiti, Jamaican Emancipation, Joseph Cinqué, Vincent Ogé). Through their content, I argue that the poets engage in a project of historical reclamation and history building that demonstrates their awareness of their distinct identities within and beyond the nation-state.

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## INTRODUCTION

The geocultural displacements significant in the descriptor, “NEGROES, imported from Africa” encode overlapping narratives of race and culture whose underlying tensions are neither immediately comprehended nor easily resolved. That is, an analysis based solely on “race” as it is currently used in literary study – defined, deconstructed, and de-essentialized as a dialectic of biology / trope, body / language, skin color / social positioning – often masks the ways in which black women and men are equally victims of cultural theft and misappropriation, a violation signaled by “NEGROES” as a misnaming of African peoples.<sup>1</sup>

-Katherine Clay Bassard, commenting on the language used in the *Boston Evening Post*'s ad for the slave auction in which Phillis Wheatley was ultimately purchased (Bassard 11)

The contention that blacks in the United States before the twentieth century “tended to avoid the subject of modern Africa and their African ancestry” (Painter 10) is a fairly accurate generalization when compared to the sustained inquiry of heritage, homeland, and ancestry that was such an overwhelming preoccupation of the writers of the New Negro / Harlem Renaissance Movement. One would only need to peruse Alain Locke’s seminal anthology, *The New Negro* (1925), to recognize the intentionality behind the inquiry of diaspora, kinship, and heritage. However, this contention is somewhat misleading, for it invites amnesia or even outright dismissal of those instances in which ancestry, heritage and subjectivity are indeed a subtlety or even a prominent subject within the literature of black writers preceding this era. Undeniably, as a moment and movement, the New Negro / Harlem Renaissance significantly contributed to a growing discourse that sought to critically engage the question of African heritage and the significance of the African diaspora. This reality notwithstanding, attention to its antecedents is equally important. Thus, a consideration of how blacks in the United States

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<sup>1</sup> Bassard is directly critiquing the language used in the auction notice from the *Boston Evening Post* in which Phillis Wheatley, incidentally, was one of the slaves to be sold. See Bassard 10-11.

have negotiated the question of place, ancestry, diaspora, and home prior to the oft-celebrated arrival of the New Negro is both necessary and overdue.

Though it is true that the subject material of many early black poets in the United States did not exhaustively countenance the topic at length until the New Negro Movement, it is also true that writers preceding it unmistakably (and sometimes strategically) noted their subjectivities as Africans, or as being of African descent. I argue that, despite their rootedness in the United States, their poetry evinces a marked sense of a transnational identity, with a keen sense of self as othered, marginalized, and racialized within a larger diaspora. The image of Africa, the condition of its descendants, and the notion of a linked fate between its descendants informed the verses, poetics, and politics of these early black poets. These elements influenced how writers would see themselves and their relationship to their counterparts within the diaspora. In short, they served as reflective impetuses for critical inquiries of positionalities as space, both within the United States and beyond its borders. Overlooking the writers preceding the Harlem Renaissance, then, is nothing short of omitting one-hundred and fifty years of a rich, important, and evolving narrative of identity politics. To the detriment of the historical record, it omits testimonials of resistance, cultural (dis-)placement, and, at times, direct political critique. I seek to push against this omission (or amnesia) by focusing specifically on verse, a relatively unexplored or and underexplored realm realm.

The focus on poetry in this study is not arbitrary; rather, it is intentional, given its broader significance. If the historical writing on a particular period is its skeleton, its literature is its flesh; that is, the literary production by writers offers a unique portrait of

everyday life and sentiment offering a wide range of insight and interpretive possibilities. Poetry is of particular significance for people of African descent due to its place in the Western imagination, a point explored at length in the first chapter. And, simply put, poetry was and is a popular medium, accessible to audiences much differently than novels or the short story by virtue of its form. By noting the instances where these poets acknowledge their direct or indirect lineage and / or heritage with the African continent, the African diaspora, an African past, and their identification with the struggle of other Africans, we better understand the intricacies of geo-cultural displacement mentioned at the outset; that is, these mentions of displacement are *self*-acknowledgements of being physically, spatially, and culturally an “other” in the United States, a country whose citizens and politicians constantly reminded them of their status. Whereas much discourse exists on the proliferation of diaspora and displacement within a modernist context, these “pre-modern” writers only provide their own testimony of their displacement and disenfranchisement. Moreover, they include a negotiation of said displacement within the unique historical context of the birth and expansion of the United States during key moments in its history during which the problem of race was paramount, if not central: the Revolutionary War, the Haitian Revolution, the abolitionist movement, the advent of the American Colonization Society, subsequent emigration and repatriation / colonization movements, the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the codification of Jim Crow. These mentions of displacement, voicings of allegiance with struggles occurring within the African diaspora, and identifications with figures within it

thus challenge physical boundary, nationhood, and restrictive conceptions of pre-Harlem Renaissance writers as provincial, domestic, or “American.”

The ways in which poets before the twentieth century invoked their identities – as African, American, or otherwise – are quite complex and far reaching, both in variety and implication. To that end, I introduce the term *race patriotism* as a guiding framework for understanding the positionality of these writers. Black poets prior to the New Negro did indeed wrestle with issues of identity and displacement, both of which come as a result of being Africans (or of African descent) in the United States. Few advocated leaving the United States – though some, like James Monroe Whitfield, did so actively and vociferously. Yet, in voicing their American identities these writers also laid the foundation of a tradition of Africans in the United States expressing their entitlement to exist on equal grounds while also acknowledging their difference, sometimes eschewing national allegiance for racial unity, and other times looking abroad as a political tool to advocate for their rights within the U.S. In short, they were *patriots of the race*, championing the cause of liberty, freedom, and selfhood for people of African descent within predefined national spaces as a birthright. That said, their thoughts were not limited to the provincial or territorial; as I argue, their writing serves as the bedrock to a tradition of diasporic awareness and two-ness – for Africans and other displaced or dislocated groups – in the United States. (By emphasizing “two-ness,” I do not mean to be restrictive in the binary sense of one or the other; rather, I mean to allude to the multiplicity of realities possible as being both within and without, self *and* other.) The very mention of their racialized subjectivities then becomes a meditation or reflection on

their African-ness, particularly within the context of being not as readily accepted as U.S. citizens. (Or, as with the case of George Moses Horton, for example, not being a citizen at all.) The poets considered challenge traditional notions of patriotism and allegiance by championing these rights for those of like ancestry within *and* across national boundaries. In turn, the study is indicative of how a patriotic nationalism can coexist with a Pan-African sensibility through a sustained critique of (global) white hegemony.

With that said, the following chapters demonstrate that finality or conclusiveness as it relates to these poets' conception of self, of homeland, and of nationhood is not necessarily the most fruitful area of focus; it is instead the process of reconciling the contradiction of "black" and "American" experienced by these writers where this work locates its importance. Through this lens, we find the complexities of an evolving diasporic voice within the literary tradition, seemingly in contradictory fashion. Seen from afar, it contains subtle or overt critiques along with declarations of allegiance to the the United States. Taken more closely, these musings are a result of what Bassard calls "geocultural displacement" (11). Using this context, the instances in which African American poets highlight lineage, reference their distanced homeland, express their connectivity to those of African descent elsewhere, or critique or identify with their present "home" become valuable and noteworthy; they highlight how embracing these seemingly conflicting identities served as a tool for advocacy within their writings. This, I argue, is not unique to the New Negro / Harlem Renaissance Movement; instead, it has been present since the beginnings of the black literary tradition in the United States. Thus, the meditation upon ancestry often ascribed to the New Negro is not as "new" as it



appears, inviting an anachronistic irony: are we to believe that the bards and griots of the nineteenth century – those who either endured or witnessed the scourge of slavery, who were that much *less* removed from their ancestral homeland than their Harlem Renaissance successors – had nothing to say about the significance of Africa or the notion of a black diaspora or homeland during a time when their very existence upon U.S. soil was being questioned, if not threatened?

Alain Locke himself made mention of the “new internationalism” of blacks in the Americas as “an effort to recapture contact with the scattered peoples of African derivation” (Locke 14-15) in his introduction to *The New Negro*.<sup>2</sup> However, Locke’s “new internationalism,” at least in its attempt to stray away from the provincial. Suggested in the acceptance of Locke’s “new” internationalism is a provincializing of the “Old” Negro’s consciousness in favor of the New Negro. This project takes focuses on the poetic tradition of the preceding the Harlem Renaissance and makes the case that the transnationalist impulses and diasporic versification of its predecessors, as seen primarily through their poetry, is not so easily dismissed.

Naturally, the focus begins with Phillis Wheatley, the progenitor of this literary tradition, and continues into the nineteenth century, exploring a swath of poets of varying repute. My study seeks to excavate lesser-known poets in addition to analyzing more canonized ones and view them as subjects within a diasporic context. Additionally, it seeks to offer lenses through which the significance of these writers might be appreciated

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<sup>2</sup> Locke was actively engaged in the conceptualizing of black internationalism and meditated specifically on the Harlem Renaissance as a critical moment for self-definition. Indeed he was not alone on either side of the Atlantic. See Brent Hayes Edwards’s *The Practice of Diaspora* (2003), especially 16-25.

in further study. These writers range in notoriety, including Phillis Wheatley, James Monroe Whitfield, George Boyer Vashon, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, George Clinton Rowe, James Madison Bell, Joshua McCarter Simpson, Henrietta Cordelia Ray, and Paul Laurence Dunbar. Taken together, the writers show an evolving narrative that predates the New Negro / Harlem Renaissance, one that begins firmly within a salvation-liberation ideology, progresses to a staunch advocacy of Ethiopianist poetics, and becomes increasingly worldly in its scope, looking beyond the U.S. at the conditions of people of African descent (both before and after slavery) to craft critiques of domestic and global hegemony. I seek to add to a growing corpus of works reconsidering the legacy of Phillis Wheatley, as well as to an increasingly rich conversation of nineteenth century poetics. Only relatively recently has attention been paid to the diasporic dimensions of these works predating the twentieth century.

The nineteenth century presents a lacuna in the scholarship directly addressing or recognizing the contributions of black poets within the larger political discourse of racial identity and ancestry for blacks in the U.S. Additionally, attention to the literary tradition's figures of the period has generally been overlooked when compared to literary predecessors (e.g. Jupiter Hammon, Lucy Terry and Phillis Wheatley) and twentieth century successors (e.g. Cullen, Hughes, Jessie Fauset, Gwendolyn Brooks, Nikki Giovanni, Amiri Baraka), save for references to Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and Paul Laurence Dunbar. Yet even these have generally avoided investigating questions of ancestry or diaspora within this corpus of poetry. By comparison, a bevy of scholarship

focuses on the Harlem Renaissance / New Negro Movement of the early twentieth century, often treating this period as a beginning point to a sustained inquiry on ancestry.

Whereas a great deal of attention has deservedly been directed toward pioneering poets of the black poetic tradition in the United States, attention to the likes of Joshua McCarter Simpson, George Clinton Rowe, George Boyer Vashon, and other nineteenth century black poets in the United States has been relatively scant. This has been true within scholarship historically, especially as it relates to the question of home, identity, and diaspora. Few inquiries regarding the significance of the diaspora and African American poets were made until recently, with several notable exceptions, including anthropologist Marion Berghahn's chapter on early depictions of Africa in her study, *Images of Africa in Black American Literature* (1977); Joan Sherman's collection of nineteenth century poets, *African-American Poetry of the Nineteenth Century* (1992), or her aptly titled study, *Invisible Poets: Afro-Americans of the Nineteenth Century* (1974); and, at times,<sup>3</sup> a handful of comprehensive anthologies and reference texts. Recently, Monique-Adele Callahan's *Between the Lines: Literary Transnationalism and African American Poetics* (2011) broke important ground in considering black poetry as "extending beyond predefined national boundaries," providing "an alternative to a nation-based understanding of literature and history as an alternative way of theorizing literary texts" (Callahan 6). This study situates itself in continuing this conversation by investigating the collective presence and diasporic musings of pre-twentieth century

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<sup>3</sup> For example, Riverside's *Call and Response* (1998), a comprehensive chronological and subject-based anthology, only includes Horton, Whitfield, Bell and Harper under the somewhat limiting heading, "Abolitionist Orator-Poets"- a certainly accurate title, but one that simultaneously obscures the full breadth of their content and import.

black poets in the United States, particularly outside of the framework of abolition or topical biography.

Even outside of the purview of these specific inquiries of U.S. black poets' worldview and conception of self within a diaspora, general attention to pre-twentieth century black poets in the United States pales in comparison. This is most evident in how the New Negro is often viewed as the first cohesive collection of black writers in U.S. history, with little to no attention to the networks present in the century preceding it. For one, understanding the extensive political / literary networks of these writers – something also regarded as a New Negro first – speaks to the literary establishment predating the modern publishing industry as an organized site of critique and resistance. In reflecting upon the collective impact of these writers, Joan Sherman astutely points out a critical and underappreciated facet of the collection of poets in and of itself: "Like white poets of the [nineteenth] century, many of the black knew one another and also maintained close ties with other Afro-American men of letters" (*Invisible Poets* xix). Sherman expounds upon these ties:

[Joseph Seamon] Cotter and [George Marion] McClellan were colleagues in the Louisville, Kentucky, schools, as were [Charles Lewis] Reason and [Henrietta Cordelia] Ray in New York City. James [Madison] Bell and [James Monroe] Whitfield and the editor Philip A. Bell were friends in San Francisco...[George Boyer] Vashon was a friend of the historian William C. Nell and of J. Sella Martin, a poet, activist, and editor of [the black periodical] *New Era*. Cotter, [James David] Corrothers, [Daniel Webster] Davis, and James Campbell corresponded with Dunbar (and [T. Thomas] Fortune drank with him), while John E Bruce, the New York journalist, was an intimate of Fortune and knew Davis, Corrothers, Ray, [Frances Ellen Watkins] Harper, and many more. (xix)

Our understanding of these poets as within a collective (as opposed to singular and isolated writers) impacts how we understand black literary history in the United States holistically. Thinking of the Harlem Renaissance as the first organized establishment of writers for a cultural or political purpose is thus not only inaccurate, but further perpetuates the mechanisms of omission that have obscured nineteenth century poets for far too long. Gates and McKay rightly note that the 1850s might rightly be called “the first renaissance in African American letters” (Gates and McKay 160) with the rise of the freedom narrative and the publication of several works of fiction – including poet and novelist William Wells Brown’s *Clotel; or, the President’s Daughter* (1853) and Martin Delany’s *Blake; or the Huts of America* (1859). Freedom narratives and novels (especially Douglass’s bestselling narrative in 1845 and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in 1852) were certainly the most popular literary depictions of black life in the United States, as were black newspapers. *The National Era*, *Frederick Douglass’s Paper*, *The Colored American*, and *The Christian Recorder* all carried a section entitled “Literary Notices.” Some, like George Boyer Vashon and Joshua McCarter Simpson, had their poetry published through black newspapers. Literature, in fact, was a significant part of the uplift regime in these newspapers, a point elaborated upon in chapter one. These literary notices would promote popular literary works of black and white poets, famous and obscure. Indeed, the means of publication may not have been conventional by today’s standards, but these writers were indeed aware of each other; and, as this study aims to show, these writers sought to make the world aware of their presence.

It is worth noting, however, that an increasing amount of publications have addressed the general presence and importance of black poets preceding the twentieth century. For one, the efflorescence of online resources has made primary sources accessible, including Chadwyck-Healey's online database of nineteenth century poetry, and the Schomburg's digital repository, *African American Women Writers of the Nineteenth Century*. Additionally, several online databases have enabled easier access to black periodicals, often a place where these poets shared their work. With regard to full-length texts, Callahan's aforementioned work, Keith D. Leonard's fresh perspective of George Moses Horton, *Fettered Genius* (2006), Levine and Wilson's useful research in the introduction to *The Works of James M. Whitfield* (2011), and Wilson's *At the Dusk of Dawn* (2009), which brings together the works of Albery Allson Whitman, point toward a rising tide of critical works examining the lives of specific figures of the nineteenth century. Recent research, including Tyler Grant Mabry's dissertation, *Seizing the Laurels: Nineteenth-Century African American Poetic Performance* (2011), represent an effort to move beyond the groundbreaking (or ground-making) works of Sherman (1974, 1991), James Weldon Johnson's *American Negro Poetry* (1922, 1931), J. Saunders Redding's *To Make a Poet Black* (1939), Bontemps and Hughes's *The Poetry of the Negro, 1749-1949* (1949), Benjamin Brawley's *Early Black American Writers* (1935) and other works which have sought to comprehensively include a sampling of the corpus of black U.S. poets.

The publication of several full-length studies further indicates increased interest in this area. John Shields's *New Essays on Phillis Wheatley* (2011), Lena Hill's *Visualizing*

*Blackness and the Creation of the African American Literary Tradition* (2014), and John Cullen Gruesser's *The Empire Abroad and the Empire at Home: African American Literature and the Era of Overseas Expansion* (2012), among others, are welcome additions. As this is still a relatively unexplored realm, my work seeks to continue to fill in this gap by drawing from Callahan's conception of the transnational to understand the complex leanings that African American poets of the nineteenth century possessed as it relates to the African diaspora – i.e. how one could be both U.S. patriot and Toussaint L'Ouverture enthusiast; how one, like Douglass, could be an anti-emigrationist while also serving as Consul General to Haiti; how a poet like Frances Ellen Watkins Harper can imagine a South American chieftain of African descent or valorize Ethiopia while never traveling abroad.

Prior to the emergence of diasporic scholarship as a mode of analysis within Africana Studies, established frameworks for understanding the poetry of blacks in the U.S. during the nineteenth century were limiting. Marion Berghahn characterizes the depiction of Africa in nineteenth century literature as falling within one of three different categories: "The Strange Country"; "The Land of Hope"; and "The Land of Promise." The first, Africa as a "Strange Country," briefly considers the political sentiment (and neither the poetry nor literary works) of anti-emigration blacks. By comparison, the seemingly indistinct remaining categories (Africa as a land of "Hope" versus a land of "Promise") consider the views of pro-emigration free blacks on the one hand and, usefully, captures the views of black slaves in the other. Heavily drawing upon the Douglassian perspective often found in the *Liberator* and Douglass's own writings, the

perspective of Africa as “The Strange Country” refers to the many free blacks who, in Berghahn’s words, “looked at Africa through the eyes of Western civilization by which they had been so profoundly influenced” (40). While the observation of distance is generally true, there is a wealth of middle ground in between.

Berghahn does accurately assert and demonstrate that “there existed a number of Afro-Americans who felt rooted in the United States” (40), most famously and vociferously Frederick Douglass. Not surprisingly, Alexander Crummell and Martin Delany – notoriously at odds with Douglass on the question of emigration, are treated as representative contrasts to the notion of a U.S.-based identity in their (albeit Westernized) championing of emigration and African uplift. While these perspectives do exist within black poetics before the New Negro era, they omit the unique perspective that a Frederick Douglass, Martin Delany, or Alexander Crummell would have had relative to white Americans in the United States, or throughout the West for that matter. To suggest that this perspective was akin to white abolitionists would be to ignore their subjectivities as blacks within the United States, and the experiences and insights that this subjectivity created. To add, while this framework serves as a conceptual predecessor, the focus on Africa creates a binary between the “home” and “homeland,” one which suffocates the still-vibrant connections between people of African descent throughout the Americas, a point explored in depth chapter four. Additionally, in asserting a “rooted”-ness in the United States, Berghahn inherently obfuscates more dynamic possibilities for the notion of allegiance vis-à-vis the transnational, blurred lines that recent scholarship has begun to complicate.



Specifically, the usage of a pro- / anti-colonization, insider / outsider, or Western / non-Western framework as the basis for understanding black relationships to Africa forestalls the possibility of exploring those writers and poets who identified and sympathized with a larger diaspora and African-descended identity, despite their political decision to consider themselves “Americans.” That is, such an either / or binary precludes the range of possibilities encompassed within these identities. Berghahn’s analysis thoughtfully identifies the various camps of thought present within the century’s course as found in public luminaries and in the masses alike; yet, by virtue of advances made in the discipline subsequent to this important contribution, a wider consideration of the poets of the era and significance of their treatment of diaspora within their work is long overdue.

While the inherent value and contribution of Berghahn’s lens need not be elucidated, I extend this analysis by considering how a transnational diasporic lens situates these poets’ contributions as outwardly resistant, inwardly reflective and conscious on a personal, social and political level, creating a vibrant discourse and historical record in the process. (One might say that they were consciously tradition-building, a point elaborated upon further in the final chapter of this study.) Adding context to these already absent (or omitted) voices creates a rich and nuanced narrative about the progression of black identity in the United States; it permits us to understand how this pivotal era in U.S. history influenced and reflected the cultural views of black selfhood in popular discourse, and thus within literary expression, thereby also demanding a look into the unique perspective of black poets during the time.

Fortunately, scholarship in the late twentieth century has recovered and uncovered vital information about the poets and their creative works. Joan Sherman's work has excavated many of these "Invisible Poets," as she refers to them, making them available for study. Sherman contends that, broadly speaking, "African-American poetry from 1829 through 1900 is *American poetry* in subject, versification, and attitudes" (*African-American Poetry* 3); indeed, these poets often tapped into "Christian piety and morality" as well as "didacticism," all of which were reflections of the Romantic period. Stylistically, their verses "[are] influenced not by other black poets but by such white American contemporaries as Longfellow, Whittier, and Riley, or by the British writers Shelley, Goldsmith, Scott, Byron and Tennyson" (4-5); yet it is sociological context that makes their work distinct and unique from their white counterparts (*Invisible Poets* xxi). Clearing up any potential confusion, she aptly notes that "black voices do speak from the unique perspective of an alien race in white society" (*African-American Poetry* 4); thus, the claim that black poetry is "*American*" in subject is less of a declaration of allegiance or a mitigation of their African ancestry and more of an invocation of their adherence to stylistic convention. Taking this further, however, I argue that these poets fit into a larger tradition of resistance specific to the subjectivity of being black in the United States. This tradition at once utilizes the self as a document of refutation against African inferiority while also crisply articulating the unique critiques of oppression and hegemony in its writing. Their sometimes caustic, indemnifying reporting of their subjectivity makes the poetics of blacks preceding the New Negro an important platform for the Harlem Renaissance and Black Arts and Aesthetics Movement of the twentieth

century. It also carves out a unique space within the narrative of U.S. poetry writ large. In understanding this, we first must dismiss the notion of the eighteenth and nineteenth century poet of African descent as one purely of idle imitative fancy, which is also a focus of this study throughout.

Of course, poetic production before the nineteenth century within the United States has not been wholly ignored. There is no doubt that some of these poets have become “en vogue,” Harper, Dunbar, Wheatley, and others have been the subjects of several recent studies.<sup>4</sup> To add, Levine and Wilson’s excavation of abolitionist and once-highly revered “poetic genius” (1-2) James Monroe Whitfield is not only a welcome revival of his work, but a useful recontextualization of Whitfield as both a poet and an activist who helped shaped the conversation on emigration and Black Nationalism immediately before the Civil War (21). Wilson has done similar work in bringing together the works of Albery Allson Whitman. Yet still, even these figures have not yet received attention for their inquiries into issues of diaspora, with rare exception<sup>5</sup>; others have received little attention at all beyond biographical treatment.

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<sup>4</sup> Recent studies of Harper include Michael Stancliff’s *Frances Ellen Watkins Harper: African American Reform Rhetoric and the Rise of a Modern Nation State* (2010), Alison Parker’s *Articulating Rights: Nineteenth-century American Women on Race, Reform, and the State* (2010); Martha S. Jones’s *All Bound Up Together: The Woman Question in African American Public Culture, 1830-1900* (2007), and C.C. Brian’s “‘The White Women All Go for Sex’: Frances Harper on Suffrage, Citizenship, and the Reconstruction South” (2009). Recent Studies considering Dunbar include Nadia Nurhussein’s *Rhetorics of Literacy: the Cultivation of American Dialect Poetry* (2013), Thomas Morgan’s “Black Naturalism, White Determinism: Paul Laurence Dunbar’s Naturalist Strategies” (2012); Martin, Premeau, and Jarrett’s *The Collected Novels of Paul Laurence Dunbar* (2012), Willie J. Harrell’s *We Wear the Mask: Paul Laurence Dunbar and the Politics of Representative Reality* (2012), Gates, Primeau and Martin’s anthology, *In His Own Voice: Dramatic & Other Uncollected Works of Paul Laurence Dunbar* (2002); and Willie Harrell’s *We Wear the Mask: Paul Laurence Dunbar and the Politics of Representative Reality* (2010).

On a broader level, scholarship of uplift and identity offers useful contexts for understanding the motifs present and politics espoused within the work of these poets. Still, more work is needed to conceptualize the complex ways in which black poets have reflected upon their political condition and racial identity on a national and global scale. This study ultimately hopes to reveal the uniqueness and importance of black diasporic versification, offering perspectives and frameworks to better appreciate the contributions of writers before the New Negro as challenges to the Western intellectual landscape. In doing so, the study opens by offering the literary and historical contexts that affected the writers and themes subsequently considered.

Chapter one establishes the historical and literary contexts for the project. While the chapters that follow are primarily concerned with analyzing the literary production of selected writers, this chapter contextualizes the analyses that will follow in considering historical, literary, and intellectual trends and concerns between the late eighteenth and late nineteenth centuries. Specifically, the chapter considers the evolution of the image of people of African descent in the West and in the United States, thus framing the literary production of the poets considered as a challenge to hegemonic discourses of African inferiority in Western thought. The significance of poetry in particular as it relates to the Western imagination, and as a vehicle of resistance for writers of African descent, is a central focus. The question of boundless and transnational identities (using George Moses Horton as an example) is introduced as an instrumental lens for

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<sup>5</sup> For a fine example of conceptualizing nineteenth century activism and womanism within an Africana framework, see LaRese Hubbard's "Frances Ellen Watkins Harper: A Proto-Africana Feminist" and the Monique-Adelle Callahan's abovementioned *Between the Lines : Literary Transnationalism and African American Poetics* (2011)

understanding how black poets positioned themselves within the United States and the Western hemisphere. Thus, given the onset of colonization, the chapter considers the question of identity as expressed in the realm of recorded black public discourse, specifically countenancing the question of “African” versus “American” identity. Finally, the chapter considers the evolution of the literary terrain, situating the poets considered as moving beyond the limiting boundaries of the traditions of neoclassicism, romanticism, and realism.

Chapter two frames Phillis Wheatley as progenitor of a tradition of Christianity-based pre-Ethiopianist resistance. The chapter follows in the recent discourse within Wheatley scholarship that demands her poetry be read beyond its didactic and moralistic overtones. (Given the framework established in chapter one, Wheatley’s moralism and adherence to form is read as an act of defiance, not an act of passivity and submission.) Using a combination of historicism and literary analysis that draws upon her poetry, letters, and biographical detail, the chapter argues that Wheatley ultimately charts a path that would be followed by poets after her in her use of a “salvation-liberation ideology.” She is, I argue, aware of her African inheritance in coyly subversive ways. Her Christian teachings ultimately inform her racialized subjectivity and consciousness, allowing her to critique white hegemony under the guise of biblical principle. She is both African and American, yet in some ways is neither given her distance from homeland and her status in the land she finds herself a slave.

Chapter three primarily focuses on Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and Paul Laurence Dunbar as emblems of a pronounced shift into Ethiopianism. Moving into the

nineteenth century, the chapter treats Ethiopianism as one of the primary modalities for understanding how black poets in the U.S. conceptualized their racialized subjectivity. By analyzing relevant works in Harper and Dunbar's corpuses, the chapter makes the case that their poetry challenges a strict allegiance to a purely "American" consciousness, instead positing Ethiopianism as a conduit for a more diasporic worldview. Both poets exhibit a resistance toward a purely patriotic, nation-based conception of self. The chapter explores how they embrace their racialized subjectivities to critique white hegemony on a global scale and, to varying degrees, recognize their identities within a black diasporic context rooted in Africa as a cornerstone.

Chapter four explores how black poets in the U.S. embarked on a project of history building through usage of tribute poems on black figures beyond U.S. borders. Drawing on the poetry of Joshua McCarter Simpson, T. Thomas Fortune, James Madison Bell, Henry Cordelia Ray, George Boyer Vashon, George Clinton Rowe, and James Monroe Whitfield, I argue that the Haitian Revolution, the emancipation of the British West Indies, and the mutiny on *The Amistad* call forth a race patriotism that challenges traditional notions of allegiance. Instead, these poets evince a strong, racially-centered form of what Britt Rusert calls *speculative kinship*, "those forms of kinship and community that are not restricted by the norms of biological kinship and the imperatives of reproduction" (Rusert). Through the recognition and veneration of figures and historical events beyond within the African diaspora (e.g. Toussaint L'Ouverture, the Haitian Revolution, West Indian Emancipation), poets move beyond a romanticizing of Africa (vis-à-vis Ethiopia) and espouse an "internationalism" that predates the Harlem

Renaissance in its concerns. That these poets identify with these struggles as a call to resistance and equality within the U.S. is also significant; their awareness of black struggle against white hegemony abroad informs their domestic struggles with white hegemony in the U.S.

Finally, a quick note on terminology. My usage of transnationalism within this study borrows from Callahan's deployment of the term in her thoughtful analysis of *Afrodescendente* writers. She notes,

Transnationalism is the phenomenon of reaching across or extending beyond predefined national boundaries. Transnationalism offers an alternative to a nation-based understanding of literature and history and an alternative way of theorizing literary texts. (6)

This definition also recognizes the precarious positionality of the writers considered, who, despite being nominally free (with Wheatley and Horton as exceptions), were occupied bodies in the nation they inhabited. Transnationalism is the means through which the poets exercised their identities as race patriots. Though the vast majority of them view themselves within a collective, that collective is defined just as much by race as it is by geographic location, if not more. Thus, their allegiance to the United States is not unconditional; it sees equality and recognition of the humanity of blacks as a contingency.

Additionally, usage of transnationalism as an interpretive lens within this study are more specifically deployments of what Laura Doyle describes as "regional transnationalism," a formulation that "invites us to think about the global economy in relation to particular regions and their transnational economic and discursive formations,

*across borders and yet within a certain circumference*” (Doyle). All of the poets considered are based in the United States and are primarily concerned with the Caribbean and Africa in their transnational musings, which is not a reflection of the entirety of the African diaspora, but rather a “globally localized” region of interest created by a combination of factors.

Lastly, following this regionalized transnationalism, the term “blacks in the United States,” however cumbersome, is intentionally used in lieu of “African American” (unless quoting from another text) for geographic specificity. This is to resist conflation between people of African descent in the United States with people of African descent throughout the Americas (which, technically, the term “African American” would also describe). It also resists terminological violence and eschews the imposition of “America” as synonymous with the United States in an effort to acknowledge the United States as *a* site of unique racial discourses, not *the* site or the standard. Imperfect as it may be, my usage of black

does not reference a particular group, with fixed characteristics, whose social being or artistic imagination is *determined* by skin colour, genetic make-up or biological inheritance. [...] “Black,” as deployed here, is a politically, historically and culturally constructed category; a contested idea, whose ultimate destination remains unsettled. (Hall and Sealy qtd. in Gates, *Tradition and the Black Atlantic* ix)

“Black” is a reference to the shared inherited markers on the body that have led to the categorization those of African descent into an amalgamated group. It acknowledges the specific political and social confines permeated through Western discourse that have defined that group in the United States and other spaces shaped by white hegemony. The



term also assumes the speciousness of biological determinism while acknowledging its palpable manifestations as enacted through law, science, and literature. It also references the coalescence of experiences ossified by the syncretism of “African” cultures through geocultural displacement. When used without geographical markers, the term broadly refers to those of African descent throughout the diaspora, except where geography is contextually implied.

## CHAPTER 1

### BLACK POETICS IN THE UNITED STATES BEFORE THE NEW NEGRO: CONTEXTS, CONTOURS, AND CONSIDERATIONS

*The eighteenth century stole the black man from his country; the nineteenth steals his country from the black man.”*

– Edward Wilmot Blyden, *Christianity, Islam, and the Negro Race*, 1888 (383)<sup>6</sup>

This study contends that the understudied, underappreciated writing of black poets in the United States before the New Negro adds value to our understanding by complicating the narrative of assimilation with respect to the nation-state through its musings upon a broader diaspora. To that end, this chapter contextualizes the shifting demographics present before the twentieth century that had a significant impact in the content and attitudes of these poets. It also broadly outlines and considers significant developments that affected the literary output of writers during the late eighteenth and nineteenth century. The very notion of collective identity, however, is a result of historical processes, both externally imposed and internally driven, that would ultimately come together to create an “African” identity (in name). In the main, black writers of African descent did look at the United States and not Africa as “home.” However, as argued in this chapter, that did not preclude these writers from identifying with issues abroad, or seeing themselves as a racialized subjectivity within the United States. These poets defied assimilative norms in their writing, a point which this chapter contextualizes

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<sup>6</sup> Blyden misquotes the original, which reads: “The eighteenth century stole the black man from his country; the nineteenth steals his country alike from black, brown, and yellow.” The author is anonymous. See *McMillan’s Magazine* 82 (July 1885), 199.

by delineating how their verses are a challenge to scientific racism and the literary landscape predating the New Negro / Harlem Renaissance. Understanding these points offers a context that grounds the analysis of the rest of the study. Before considering how these poets negotiate their individual and subjectivity within and beyond their borders, it is necessary to trace the contexts that shaped their lives.

## DEMOGRAPHICS & BACKGROUND

At the turn of the nineteenth century, the stage was set for a significant shift in the demographics of the black population in the United States. A well-documented fact, the eighteenth century bore witness to hitherto unprecedented levels of slavery. The world Phillis Wheatley inhabited was one of tremendous transformation with regard to the displacement and redistribution of cultures and bodies. Philip Curtin, whose groundbreaking research in the Atlantic slave trade laid the foundation for much of the supporting (or, at times, contesting) data that would follow in subsequent studies, estimates that upward of 6.5 million slaves were transported between 1700 and 1810 (Curtin 265), with approximately five percent of them destined for British North America (Curtin 265, Painter 33). (Wheatley, from the Senegambia region, was one of those five percent, yet another example of the exceptionality that would mark her life.) Whereas African-born slaves were much more prevalent in the Caribbean, the demographics in the United States were markedly different. Fogel points out that

...native born blacks made up the majority of the slave population in the U.S. colonies as early as 1680. By the end of the American Revolution, the African-born component of the black population had shrunk to 20 percent. It hovered at this share from 1780 to 1810 and then rapidly headed toward zero. By 1860 all

but one percent of U.S. slaves were native-born, and most of them were second, third, fourth, or fifth generation Americans. (Fogel 23-24)

To add, even in the latter portion of the eighteenth century, an increasing proportion of slaves in the North came from the Caribbean rather than directly from the once-typical sites of departure on Africa's western coast.<sup>7</sup> Thus, while the black U.S. population grew exponentially during the eighteenth century, the percentage of those who were born on African soil significantly decreased, making the vast majority of blacks in the United States anywhere from one to several generations removed from Africa, their ancestral homeland. In turn, they were part of a diaspora which, to varying degrees, was undergoing a similar transformation. This reality was critical to the identity politics of people of African descent in the United States and, to a significant extent, the outlook of black leadership from Wheatley's time through the nineteenth century.

While the numbers make it tempting to conclude that blacks in the U.S. inevitably erased Africa from their cultural memories and sought to be purely assimilative due to the these population dynamics in the early years of the United States, it is also essential to emphasize how the vibrancy of black cultural communities and the segregated nature of the United States during that time period (and well afterward) worked to resist this erasure. Michael Gomez, in his seminal study, *Exchanging Our Country Marks* (2000), emphasizes the importance of "adopting a premise of proximity" (22) when considering demographic data. Rather than let the holistic data tell the entire story (i.e., in this case, that the relevance of Africa diminished as increasing proportions blacks were born in the

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<sup>7</sup> See "Expansion of Creole Society in the North" in Ira Berlin's *Exchanging Our Country Marks* (1998).

United States), Gomez notes that, despite the relatively small size of the average plantation, the slaves in the U.S. South would find occasion to meet with slaves from neighboring plantations, thereby creating folk communities (25).

A similar case could be made for blacks in the U.S. North. Citing William Piersen's study of black New Englanders, *Black Yankees* (1988), Gomez argues that "clustering" and proximity allowed blacks to congregate and therefore preserve various folk traditions (Gomez 26-27). "In the pursuit of an African-derived way of life," he states, "...black New Englanders proved that plantations boasting of thousands were not always necessary" (27). Some of this was aided by a pervasive fear of integration on the part of whites. A slew of laws were codified to penalize interracial marriage (Horton and Horton 49),<sup>8</sup> among other statutes that "othered" people of African descent, thereby keeping black communities intact and somewhat homogenous. Major cities became hubs for a small yet burgeoning free black presence. In the last decade of the eighteenth century, Boston's black population increased fifty-three percent; New York's increased eighty-four percent; Philadelphia's increased a staggering two-hundred and ten percent (83). (Not surprisingly, black-led organizations, from lodges and freemasons took root during this period.) By the second decade of the nineteenth century, Boston's black population more than doubled in number since 1790; New York's ballooned two-hundred and fourteen percent; Philadelphia saw an increase of more than four-hundred percent (83). Thus, while it is true that the passage across the Atlantic certainly *changed* the lives and cultures of those Africans who had to endure it, it certainly did not eradicate it. This

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<sup>8</sup> Obviously, with limited degrees of success.

is furthered by the strengthening of independent family units and fortification of independent black communities (84-85). Indeed, what else could explain the regular observance of such holidays and traditions as Pinkster, Paas, Negro Election Day, July 5 Independence Day celebrations, and, later in the nineteenth century, West Indian Emancipation celebrations and Juneteenth celebrations?<sup>9</sup>

Despite what the numbers might suggest about the spatial and temporal “distance” from homeland, the significance of African ancestry as a fulcrum for an intra-racial acculturation process in the Americas was undeniable. While some might contend that blacks in the United States were decreasingly “African” with each passing generation, they were not necessarily more “American.” Much of the notion that blacks in the United States were assimilative comes from a faulty framework, one which stresses what was taken from those who suffered the ills of the Middle Passage rather than what was retained through it, or created independently. Such conceptions hearken back to how those of African descent have been perceived historically. Jan Nederveen Pieterse points out that “[t]he icon of the nineteenth-century savage is determined by *absences*: the absence, or scarcity, of clothing, possessions, attributes of civilization” (35). This thinking might be attributed to lasting remnants of scientific racism (examined in depth later in the chapter), which labeled Africans as inferior on the grounds of an absence of civility, religion, and creative art. Under this deleterious logic, the bond of black identity forged by blacks in the United States is mistakenly attributed to a commonality of voids, namely, a lack of culture, intelligence, and ability. As the later chapters will demonstrate,

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<sup>9</sup> See Horton and Horton, *In Hope of Liberty* 31-38. Also see Robert Farris Thompson’s *Flash of the Spirit* (1983).

black poets instead *actively* reflected upon common condition (within and across national boundaries), referenced a common history, asserted their humanity and intelligence, and intentionally engaged in history-building by recognizing each other's accomplishments. Employing a deficit-based model of analysis in conceptualizing Africans in the "New World" during the eighteenth and nineteenth century (or any other century, for that matter), then, is tantamount to utilizing the same vapid and vacuous perspective utilized by the white Europeans and Americans who oppressed them.

That said, though many blacks in the United States, generations removed, did refer to the United States as "home," they likely did not conceive of themselves as "American" in the same sense that their white counterparts did. Rather, their conception of self-hood was mediated through a complex reconciliation of daily realities, future aspirations, and the weight of their inherited cultural traditions, past and present. This negotiation was complex, controversial, and always political in nature. Thus, before considering black poets, we must first consider the formulation of black identity, which, in the United States, demands an examination of historical processes and events that perpetually modified how people of African descent saw themselves and each other.

#### WHITE HEGEMONY AND THE SYNCRETISM OF "AFRICAN" IDENTITY IN THE UNITED STATES

In an 1808 essay, "The Sons of Africans: An Essay on Freedom," an unnamed member of the African Society in Boston evinces a keen awareness of white global hegemony and how it left an indelible mark on the African diaspora:

*All the Africans*, at the present day, seem to be the butt of the nations over which men choose to tyrannise [sic], enslave, and oppress. The same spirit still prevails amongst the inhabitants of the earth at present day as did in the days of Pharaoh. (“The Sons of Africans, an Essay on Freedom” 17, emphasis added)

The animus expressed in this passage was not an anomaly; many black men and women in the United States during the early nineteenth century, regardless of their opinions of colonization, identified in one way or another with a transnational call for freedom from white tyranny. As the above passage illustrates, this tension became a clarion call which united people of African descent across the diaspora, invoking a common history.

The transnational nature of struggle as envisioned by blacks in the United States is illustrated poignantly in the impassioned words Robert Alexander Young’s *The Ethiopian Manifesto, Issued in Defence of the Blackman’s Rights, in the Scale of Universal Freedom* (1829):

Ethiopians! open your minds to reason; let therein weigh the effects of truth, wisdom, and justice...and the spirit of these our words, we know full well, cannot but produce the effect for which they are by us here from intended. Know, then, in your present state or standing, *in your sphere of government in any nation within which you reside*, we hold and contend you enjoy but few of your rights of government within them. *We here speak of the whole of the Ethiopian people* (Young 60, emphasis added)

Young, a century before Marcus Garvey and George Padmore, and decades before Martin Delany and Henry McNeil Turner, espouses a sophisticated awareness of diasporic political struggle and global hegemony that speaks to a political need for race patriotism.<sup>10</sup> The full rights of the nation-state were indeed an entitlement to be fought for, yet the fight could not be won until those *of the race* – be it in the United States or

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<sup>10</sup> This is to say that such an awareness has always been present as a tradition and was not an invention of the New Negro movement.



elsewhere, could say the same. Falling short of a call for a return to Africa, a la Garvey or Paul Cuffe, Young instead emphasizes the need for race patriotism by referencing “your sphere of government *in any nation within which you reside.*” Already claiming a collectivist spirit (“We here”), Young claims his identity within the context of a larger diaspora *while* recognizing his existence within a nation, with his larger mission to address “the whole of the Ethiopian people.” Thus, at the very outset of the nineteenth century, Africans in the United States not only had a clear understanding of their plight, but of the broader ways in which white hegemony acted upon those of like ancestry. Ubiquitous within this protest rhetoric is a call for transnational unity against a common oppressor.

Additionally, in both addresses one sees an invocation of the role that Christianity would play within black uplift narratives, a theme also present in the writings of Wheatley, Fortune, and many in between. Young continues in this vein: “But learn, slaveholder, thine will rests not in thine hand: *God* decrees to thy slave his rights as a man” (93, emphasis mine). Whether making reference to the tribulations of slaves within biblical texts, or speaking of God’s destiny, the bible and transnational uplift went hand in hand. The bedrock of this uplift, however, was the syncretism of an “African” descended identity through a reappropriation of biblical narratives.

As the nature of the oppression of Africans in the Atlantic slave trade was predicated upon an ever-evolving and expanding conception of “whiteness” on the part of white colonizers, it was met naturally met with a furthering of a collective notion of “blackness” within African-descended peoples. Going against the tide of burgeoning

racist pseudoscience, which aggressively posited African inferiority, blacks in the U.S. sought literacy and inevitably fashioned counter narratives using their awareness of the written word, as well as aforementioned cultural celebrations and cultural retentions. Consequently, narratives of freedom became a source of inspiration and unity for descendants of Africa, based upon an understanding of a common cause, condition, history, culture, and, of course, oppressor. The abovementioned address to the African Society by an unnamed member underscores these commonalities:

When Joseph speaks of himself as coming down to Egypt, he saith, *I was stolen and brought down here and sold*. So, many Africans may use the same language, or similar expressions – I was brought to America and sold. (“The Sons of Africans, an Essay on Freedom” 17, emphasis in original)

The speaker calls attention to a transferability of identity, using the cultural nexus of language and idiom as a transnational adhesive. In addition to cultural retentions, this shared sense of experience – a call to recognize the very forces that created the African diaspora and the subsequent dismemberment that came with it – became a building block of a border-defying unity that would be a staple in expressions of black uplift and resistance, including poetry.

That the speaker makes use of the most widely read literary text of the era within Western culture (The Bible) in doing so is just as significant. (It might be said then that the Bible, for the purpose of the study, is best understood as a diasporic text.) As seen above, it offered a platform of empowerment, even creating black identity within a diasporic context. Considering the backdrop of various movements to end slavery in different parts of the African diaspora, this doctrine offered a fitting foundation for race

pride, unity, uplift, common agony, and common destiny. Though Ethiopianism is discussed at length in the following chapters, I mention Christianity here as a common thread to understand the writing, poetry and indeed the lives of people of African descent in the Americas. As it was an integral part of identity building for many,<sup>11</sup> faith helped to solidify the bond of African-descended identity that was the basis of much of the resistance to white hegemony in the U.S. and all of the Americas. In the United States, however, the unique demographics and circumstances of the eighteenth century would culminate in a crescendo in the nineteenth; that crescendo would come in the form of a simple inquiry, which, I argue, is a false binary: were the black slaves and freepersons in this young country to be defined as *Africans*, or *Americans*?

#### A CHIMERIC BINARY: AFRICAN OR AMERICAN?

Perhaps no event polarized the black population in the United States on the question of African identity than the establishment of the American Colonization Society in 1816 and the subsequent establishment of Sierra Leone less than a decade later. (This was especially true for the free black population.) The prospect of relocation and emigration that would dominate discourse in the following decades brought to the forefront an inescapable tension: where did the allegiance of blacks in the United States lie? And, by extension, what was the value of claiming allegiance to an entity that would not acknowledge nor reciprocate that allegiance? Serving as a pivot point to a question that would affect black identity in the United States for the duration of the century,

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<sup>11</sup> But, as Gomez points out, not for all. In some regions frequented by slave traders, up to a quarter of Africans may have been Muslim. See Chapter four, “Prayin’ on Duh Bead: Islam in Early America” in *Exchanging Our Country Marks* for an in-depth discussion of the impact of Islam in the early United States.

colonization loomed large in the question of “African or American?” While several blacks had been at the forefront of efforts exploring the possibility of relocating to Africa, the movement to relocate blacks in the U.S. to Africa was generally seen as yet another attempt to displace them. As a result, the general sentiment, and the one most agreed upon by scholars and supported by the historical record, was that the colonization question was met with a resounding response of allegiance to the U.S. by black leaders. This response was both genuine and strategic. Yet, though most (certainly not all) rejected the possibility of relocating to Africa, this did not equate to a purely assimilative perspective. That is, even as blacks distanced themselves from moving back to their ancestral homeland, they did not abandon its memory.

Some of the aversion to relocating to Africa was more specifically about aversion to white control than it was aversion to Africa itself. This view gained considerable traction as a result of the views espoused by Democratic Republican senator Henry Clay in his articulation of the “American” motives and benefits of colonization. He asks:

Can there be a nobler cause than that which, whilst it proposed to rid our country of a useless and pernicious, if not dangerous portion of its population, contemplates the spreading of the arts of civilized life, and the possible redemption from ignorance and barbarism of a benighted quarter of the globe? (Qtd. in Campbell 44)

The “useless and pernicious” population is a reference to free blacks, who numbered approximately 1.2 million at the time of the founding of the American Colonization Society. The sentiment hearkens back to a fear expressed by Thomas Jefferson more than three decades prior, when he famously declared that retention of free blacks in the United States would “produce convulsions which will never end but in the extermination

of the one or the other race” (Jefferson).<sup>12</sup> Thus, Clay saw the “problem” of free blacks as a potential boon to African society, as messengers “of the arts and civilized life” (that is, white American culture) who, by virtue of being black, would save Africa from “ignorance and barbarism” in a way that whites could not. Reacting to this thinly veiled manipulation and blatant insult, many (though not all) blacks in the United States rejected the idea of relocation. That is, blacks did not necessarily repudiate the idea of Africa, or African culture.

Despite the decline of African-born blacks in the U.S. at the outset of the nineteenth century, Horton and Horton point out that “[t]here is ample evidence that substantial numbers of American black people saw themselves as *Africans* in America through the first decade of the nineteenth century” (178, emphasis mine). Indeed, the founding of a number of organizations bearing the name “African” dedicated to uplift, education, aid, worship, and fraternity speaks to directly to this point: Richard Allen’s Free African Society (1787), which later led to the founding of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (1794); the African Society in Boston (1796); the Friendly Society of St. Thomas’s African Church (1797); the African Benevolent Society (1808); the New York African Society for Monetary Relief (1810); the African Marine Fund (1810); the New-York African Clarkson Association (1825); and the Pittsburgh African Education

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<sup>12</sup> In its totality:

Why not retain and incorporate the blacks into the state, and thus save the expence of supplying, by importation of white settlers, the vacancies they will leave? Deep rooted prejudices entertained by the whites; ten thousand recollections, by the blacks, of the injuries they have sustained; new provocations; the real distinctions which nature has made; and many other circumstances, will divide us into parties, and produce convulsions which will probably never end but in the extermination of the one or the other race. (Jefferson)

Society (1832), amongst a host of others.<sup>13</sup> Wheatley, of course, openly refers to herself as an “Ethiop” in “To the University of Cambridge, in New England.” And, emblematic of the simultaneous distance from and allegiance to an African past, the term “Afric’s sons and daughters” became commonplace in poetry and other print written by blacks in the U.S. during the nineteenth century. Two distinct periods – the 1830s and the Civil War years – would significantly shift these self-referential politics.

For this discussion, the relationship and differences between the cultural and political implications of self-identification and self-definition that operated during the nineteenth century for blacks in the United States is of paramount importance. Whereas “African” as a cultural descriptor refers to the practices, beliefs, ideals and ideas of people of the Africa and the African diaspora, “African” in the political sense was both an enumeration of physical bodies readily identifiable as “black” and a conscious statement of difference. Patrick Rael argues that blacks “identified the race with Africa not because they had retained the cultural qualities of the people of that continent but because they sought the public acknowledgment and recognition accorded to those who could claim a legitimate national affiliation” (90). Though perhaps narrowing in his scope, Rael importantly notes the assertion of difference that blacks in the United States embraced, so as to not be wholly assimilative and retain a sense of cultural kinship. Alexander observes that, although they sought to “distance themselves from explicit expressions of African culture,” blacks “were not yet ready...[for] complete assimilation

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<sup>13</sup> See Horton and Horton, 178-179. Also, Dorothy Porter’s *Early Negro Writing: 1760-1837* (1971) provides a useful selection of the founding documents and early writings from several black organizations in the North and the South.

into American society” (83). One could look at this liminal space as a declaration of difference, or, as Alexander contends, an “early commitment to Black Nationalism” (83). In either case, as the fate of people of African descent raged on in the United States, blacks did not sit idly by.

Indeed, prominent spokespersons of black uplift organizations – by and large representing the free black population – directed their approaches, politics, and even names accordingly to reflect a desire to be recognized as U.S. citizens. In particular, the Negro Convention movement in the 1830s furthered the “American” aspect of black identity in the United States. Given the intensification of the struggle fought by blacks for full citizenship and enfranchisement within the United States, the term “African” as a statement of difference worked against the cause of full inclusion (Rael 91). Bishop Richard Allen captures this duality: he was, at once, founder of the *African* Methodist Episcopal Church (which retained its name far beyond the heyday of colonization) while also serving as president of the first convention of the strategically named “*American Society of Free Persons of Colour*.” In 1830, one year before his death, he wrote in the convention’s “Address to the Free People of Colour in the United States”:

However great the debt which these United States may owe to injured Africa, and however unjustly her sons have been made to bleed, and her daughters to drink of the cup of affliction, still we who have been born and nurtured on this soil, we whose habits, manners, and customs are the same in common with other Americans, can never...be the bearers of the redress offered by [the African Colonization] Society to [Liberia]. (Allen 10)<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Note: the pagination in the collection, *Proceedings of the National Negro Conventions, 1830-1861* (Arno Press, 1969) is not continuous. The pagination resets for each convention; thus, the year is included in each reference to the minutes for easier discovery.

Allen clearly displays his awareness of white hegemony, yet acknowledges the reality that Africa was *not* home to those who had been several generations removed.

(Interestingly and fittingly, this duality is captured in the same breath.) Allen's almost palpable reticence in making the statement points to a nuance in the African or American false duality: the race patriotics of Africa's (kidnapped) sons and daughters pledged allegiance to the nation-state *only insofar as* it would live up to fully recognizing African humanity. After all, if the participants of the National Negro Convention were completely wed to living in the United States, what would explain the delivering of various reports investigating the possibility of relocating to Canada, Haiti, Central America, South America, or Mexico during their gatherings?

The political chess of self-definition continued, though history shows that the display belies the reality. In 1835, black institutions were requested to change any "African" references in their names to "Negro" in a stand against colonization and a show of solidarity and entitlement to full U.S. citizenship and freedom (Campbell 64). But while these developments clearly demonstrate a shift in how people of African descent in the United States chose to be named, one must be careful not to conflate the shift away from "Africa" by name for political purposes with a cultural repudiation of Africa or other Africans. As Campbell argues:

Removing "African" from Church cornerstones was one thing; removing the continent from the imaginations of black Americans was quite another. In a nation ruled by descendants of Europe, Africa has long been and remains the touchstone of black difference, the point of departure for any discussion of African American history, identity, and destiny. Even as the generations of men and women born in Africa passed away and direct memories of the continent faded, Africa remained a



palpable presence in African American life, a subject of allegiance and anxiety, of theological speculation and political debate. (Campbell 67)

Important to emphasize is that even the most “anti-African” of blacks in the U.S. – that is, those who sought to “civilize” through missionary efforts, those who openly referred to Africans as barbarians – still recognized their African descent, saw themselves as different from white, and saw themselves within a larger group under the umbrella of global hegemony. In the same address that Richard Allen repudiates colonization efforts to Liberia, he also advocates relocation. “[T]he formation of a settlement in the British Province of Upper Canada,” he observes, “would be a great advantage to the people of color” (Allen 10). Solidarity between people of African descent, and thus acknowledgement of like ancestry, was crucial within black uplift in the United States, even in the face of the conflict brought by the threat of the American Colonization Society. To this end, Samuel Cornish, leading minister and journalist, became incensed at the very idea of removing racial modifiers from the public lexicon (Alexander 83). Yet, “African” by name or not, the culture and everyday life tells a different story.

While the vibrancy and resilience of African culture that blacks in the United States (and, indeed, all across the Americas) carried with them cannot be denied, the notion of an “African” culture or identity – and, by extension, consciousness – must also be understood as a creation that in many ways grew outside of the confines of geographic region it purports to refer to. It was “[u]ltimately the mixing of African nations – not the perceptions of European slave traders or American slave owners – [that] made the many people of Africa into Africans” (Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone* 51). For one, Ira Berlin

reminds us, “Africa housed hundreds, perhaps thousands, of different ‘nations,’ whether defined by the languages they spoke, the religions they practiced, or the chieftains to whom they gave allegiance” (103). To be precise, these characteristics – the “language, religion, domestic organization, aesthetics, political sensibilities, and military traditions that Africans carried from the interior to the plantations” are an amalgam that “cannot be understood in their generality but only in their particulars, for the enslaved peoples were not Africans but Akan, Bambara, Fon, Ibo, or Mande” (*Many Thousands Gone* 103), among other groups. Moreover, the lived experiences of those who survived and / or descended from the forced migration so central in creating the African diaspora would subsequently add their own regionalized distinctions to what it meant to be “African.”<sup>15</sup>

If blacks in the United States did not engage in the same cultural practices as their African counterparts, they were at least undoubtedly expanding the definitions of African culture throughout the world as they reconciled their displacement in their new land(s); after all, by virtue of their efforts to obtain their liberty, they were also developing a global or diasporic worldview in the process. The retention of cultural practices, especially by the non-literate slave population, and the abundant concern voiced by free blacks in the United States over African affairs challenges the notion that Africans saw no connection between themselves and their African ancestors. Berlin notes that

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<sup>15</sup> In speaking of the so-called “African”-ness of blacks within the diaspora, then, one must be careful not to fall prey to a perilously simplistic – indeed, deficit-based – essentialism in employing what can so easily be misused as a mitigating term. The confluence of cultures brought together by the experiences endured by blacks in the United States and elsewhere created the common bonds (through bondage) that would create what might be termed by some the “black experience” in the United States. Thus, any references to “African” identity or consciousness included herein carry with them an understanding of the diversity of cultures, the complicated processes of cultural entwinement, and the racialized labeling that ultimately make up the “African” in so-called “*African American*” culture.

“[d]ifferences between African-born and American-born black men and women mattered less as the number of Africans entering mainland North America dwindled” (*Many Thousands Gone* 226-227), a natural consequence of the welding and morphing of culture and custom. Similarly, as a result of this phenomenon, descriptors such as “people of color,” were able to become popular and applicable for the entire black population for political purposes. One might say then that the reconciliation of differences also *created* a new synthesis of culture(s).<sup>16</sup> On the point of the diasporic significance of naming with regard to black women and men’s usage of “people of color” as a descriptor, Rael astutely observes:

Far from abandoning a self-conscious affinity with Africa, the choice of “people of color” constituted an impulse toward racial unity throughout the diaspora...The transition from “African” to “colored” did not sacrifice racial unity on the altar of national loyalty. To the contrary, advocates of a singular name for the race responded to the perceived need for racial solidarity throughout the diaspora...The use of a single name for the race would undermine forces that elsewhere had pulled apart a single identity for African-descended people. (107)

The coalescence of African-descended people in the United States into one<sup>17</sup> political bloc (and, arguably, cultural group<sup>18</sup>) represented an important stage in diasporic syncretism. As will be seen in the verses of the poets considered, the embrace of a racial

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<sup>16</sup> Indeed, it might also be argued that the politics of the time created or even stratified cultures, as the politics affecting the free and enslaved populations ultimately led to “separate worlds of freedom and slavery” (Rael 227)

<sup>17</sup> My use of “one” does not imply a ubiquity of belief, practice, or thought in either instance; rather, the “oneness” is that solely denoted by the racial umbrella that blacks simultaneously were identified by and were self-identified with.

<sup>18</sup> An important historiographical note: is also difficult to make an overarching claim about the black U.S. population – North or South – as it relates to culture in that the views recorded in the history are by and large from written documents, therefore reflecting a literate (i.e. relatively elite) segment of the population, and less of that of the “folk,” as Du Bois would say, where many cultural traditions are survived.

identity while pursuing acceptance within the nation opened up transnational possibilities. Specifically, in the process of reconciling the various cultures and identities present in the African and African-descended population during the early nineteenth century, blacks in the United States embraced the U.S. as a nationality while solidifying a larger connection and diasporic bond with Africa and other regions where people of African descent existed. This diasporic syncretism led to Africa manifesting itself in a number of ways in the consciousness of black people: as a site of biblical prophecy; as a viable space for emigration; as a cornerstone of heritage; as a historical source of inspiration; and as a nexus for critique of global hegemony. Thus, while the issue of naming suggests that blacks distanced themselves from an African label, it is important to differentiate between moving away from an African label and abandoning an African identity or culture, even if blacks in the United States saw themselves as rightful citizens of that country. Hence, viewing the subjects considered as *race patriots* provides a lens that acknowledges simultaneous allegiance to the race and to the nation while recognizing the inherent conflicts between those two entities.

Perhaps the clearest articulation of this nuanced race patriotism came from Buffalo activist, schoolteacher, and Chairman pro tempore of the 1843 convention Samuel Davis. Delivering the address at the convention, he declared:

This is the land where we all drew our first breath; where we have grown up to strength and manhood; “here is deposited the ashes of our fathers;” here we have contracted the most sacred engagements, the dearest relations of life; here we have found the companions of our childhood, the friends of our youth, the gentle partners of our lives [...] – in a word, this is our own native land. I repeat it, then, we love our country, we love our fellow citizens, - but *we love liberty more*. (Davis 5, emphasis in original.)

Davis's boundless, spatially ambiguous plea (combined with previous and future efforts to relocate somewhere – anywhere – for “people of color”) underscores a simultaneous distancing from Africa with a closing of ranks between people of African descent within the United States. That is to say, through syncretization, a black identity within the U.S. ossified into a distinct reality. Liberty, as emphasized by Davis, became of utmost importance. Davis then challenges the notion of unconditional allegiance to a physical space, instead suggesting an unwavering devotion to a principle, one not bound by place but by promise, premise and principle. Race patriotism, then, blurs or even rejects the permanence of national confines in its essence. This notion of liberty as a foundation for racial identity, and, metaphorically, as a space to inhabit in and of itself, would be eloquently voiced by the poet George Moses Horton, a man already outside the margins of the U.S. citizenry due to his social status as a slave.

#### LIBERTY AND LIMINALITY: GEORGE MOSES HORTON AND FREEDOM BEYOND THE BOUNDS OF PHYSICAL SPACE

Within the conversation about national identity and race rests an assumption that warrants interrogation. Indeed, black activists, slaves, journalists, and poets were questioning the nation in obvious and variegated ways, all with the same motivation: to demand and receive what was rightfully theirs as inhabitants of that nation. Yet hidden in this inquiry rests a seductive and enticing fallacy: that the nation itself is a static, natural, physical reality. Callahan refers to Homi Bhabha in positing that the very essence of nation, vis-à-vis freedom, is nothing but a “narrative construction”; it is, at heart, “a

concept” (Callahan 6), which is to say it is a theoretical space just as much as (or more than) it is a physical one. What, or rather, who constitutes a nation is not exclusive to what is defined by the letter of law; it extends to dominant narratives, written or otherwise, that create patriotism and in so doing, create “others.” It is this reality that makes blacks poets in the United States (and, as Callahan’s study illuminates, the blacks in the Americas writ large) such unique contributors to the national conversation. What ostensibly appears to be a one-dimensional pledging of allegiance on one hand<sup>19</sup> is actually a challenge to the nation to live up to its ideals. Upon deeper examination, these challenges point to the inadequacy of concrete conceptions of national allegiance itself. George Moses Horton, occupying the ultimate liminal space as a subject of a nation, living without the prospect of citizenship as a slave, disrupts this narrative by speaking of liberty *as* a nation instead of a nation of liberties.

Horton, who stands alone in his unique contribution of being enslaved and having published before and after emancipation in the U.S., offers a perspective that goes beyond provincial allegiance. Rather, Horton’s version of a “diasporic” sensibility invokes the very politics that led to the existence of the diaspora itself: deprivation of liberty. As a slave born at the end of the eighteenth century, Horton offers a perspective that bridges the figures considered in his study, making his prescient reflections on his relationship with the state an important context. In his poetry, Horton transforms “liberty” from merely a striving into a metaphysical homespace of nativity and entitlement. Taken collectively, his poems, “My Native Home,” “Slavery,” and “Liberty” from his 1865

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<sup>19</sup> As in, for example, Joseph Holly’s “This is a Fatherland to Me” and Joshua McCarter Simpson’s “Old Liberia Is Not the Place for Me.”

collection, *Naked Genius*, transcend if not eschew the notion of physical allegiance in favor of a conceptual homespace.

Just as vociferously as some articulated their animosity toward the white-led American Colonization Society by voicing their entitlement in the United States, Horton instead identifies himself with the ideology that was his contemporaries' endpoint. He opens "My Native Home" in no uncertain terms:

Oh! liberty my native land  
From thee how can I bear to roam  
Or leave thy patriotic band,  
A stranger to my native home.

The distant isles aspire to thee,  
And plough the ocean's brackish foam,  
A land from despotism free,  
My birthright and my native home. (1-8)

Horton's first stanza not only locates liberty as a place of arrival, but as a place of origin. This is doubly significant when considering that he was still negotiating his own freedom well into his mid-sixties while his final book, *Naked Genius*, was being prepared for publication.<sup>20</sup> Using his command of iambic tetrameter, Horton first personalizes and claims proprietorship over liberty. His race patriotism is on full display as he displays his human entitlement ("liberty my native land" and "my birthright") to freedom. Horton then judiciously switches emphasis in his second stanza to locate liberty within a larger realm of contrast – "The *distant isles* aspire to thee." If indeed the speaker is referencing white hegemony, Horton might be entertaining the transnational through a diasporic bond. No doubt, Horton's personal relationship with the ever-elusive liberty complicates

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<sup>20</sup> See Joan Sherman's introduction to *The Black Bard of North Carolina: George Moses Horton and His Poetry* (2000), particularly 13-26 for a detailed delineation of Horton's attempts at securing his freedom

the tension of proximity presented between “free” and “unfree.” To round out the first two stanzas, Horton reattaches himself and reemphasizes his entitlement further in declaring liberty his “birthright and my native home.” Unlike Phillis Wheatley, who is brought from her native “pagan” land in “On Being Brought from Africa to America,” Horton is anchored in a conceptual liberty, literally privileging *birthright* over *birthplace*. Nevertheless, Horton still was keenly aware of liberty’s place within the geography of the Africa diaspora.

Horton’s poem “Liberty” still reinforces liberty and freedom as a birthright, yet positions these elements in a geopolitical sphere. Writing earlier, in 1843, his emphasis on freedom as mobile is comparable to dedication poems that speak of the emancipation of Jamaica and Haiti as a contagion (see chapter four), sweeping through the diaspora:

O, Liberty, thou dove of peace,  
 We must aspire to thee,  
 Whose wings thy pinions must release,  
 And fan Columbia free.  
 .....  
 Ye distant isles espouse the theme,  
 Far, far, beyond the sea;  
 The sun declares in every beam,  
 All nations should be free. (1-4, 9-12)

Horton creatively anchors the theme of freedom and liberty with his use of repetition, both within this poem and between poems. For one, coincidentally, “Ye distant isles” appears again, utilized this time in the context of “we” (instead of “I” in “My Native Home”). Repetition is present throughout the stanzas within “Liberty”; first, he underscores the dictum of transnational liberation through the use of imperatives at the end of each stanza; yet, subtly, through technical craftsmanship his rhyme scheme



literally relies on the word “free.” The words that reach out with “free” as epicenter are telling: “thee” (2) a referent to “Liberty” itself; “glee,” the joy endemic to the state of freedom (6), “sea,” an invocation not only of distance, but of travel, diaspora, and the conduit of the slave trade itself; and, finally, “flee” (10), which is not only the action of “distressing vapors” (10), but also is reminiscent of the notions flight and escape certainly prevalent in the 1840s for those pursuing freedom from slavery.

Horton’s rendering of liberty shifts from merely a space to an active agent; in each poem, both “we” and “distant lands” “aspire to thee”; more importantly in this instance, however, this more active liberty is part of Horton’s broader rhetoric: that “All nations should be free.” In this way, Horton situates himself in the same liberation discourse as James Madison Bell, Joshua McCarter Simpson and James Monroe Whitfield’s celebrations of Jamaican emancipation. Each makes the case that liberty should be the rule and not the exception, thereby implicitly citing an awareness of the larger diaspora. (That Horton’s last stanza begins, “Hence, let Britannia rage no more” [13] furthers the possibility that Horton is not merely talking about the thirteen colonies’ freedom from the British, but, perhaps, other slaves as well.) Though this may be neither certain nor explicit, Horton’s “Slavery” takes “Liberty” from the conceptual into the reality of the shared experience of African-descended peoples across the diaspora.

Horton offers a template for understanding a commonality present in black poetry before the New Negro through his reference to a common history and common oppressor. Despite the physical, generational, and perhaps emotional distance from Africa, the very diaspora that was created as a result of white hegemony etched a bond in its descendants

that challenged traditional notions of nationhood. Horton is much more direct in “Slavery,” at first beginning with a thinly veiled reference to an unnamed collective: “We can’t but look with frowns on [slavery] / without...the balm of birthright – liberty” (2-4). Again affirming his entitlement to liberty, Horton identifies the previously once anonymous collective as Africans while referencing a common bond across time and space:

Our fathers from their native land  
Were dragged across the brackish deep,  
Bound fast together, hand in hand,  
O! did the God of nature sleep? (13-16)

As one of the fortunate few who endured slavery and acquired the privileges to be able to write about the experience in verse, Horton echoes a message similar to that of free blacks: the emancipation of those of like descent was paramount in black politics. Considering that as much of the poetry in the corpus of black antebellum poetry comes from free blacks, Horton suggests an ideology shared across class lines. Using a common thread present in the poetry and thought of black activists of the antebellum and post-bellum period, Horton confronts white hegemony headfirst, asking “Are we not as good as they, / Born to enjoy the good of the earth...?” (21-22). So while liberty might indeed be a conceptual space, the forces that conspire to deprive him *and* the “we” he refers to, whose “fathers from their native land / Were dragged across the brackish deep,” are very real.

While Horton’s poetry may at times elevate the notion of an “African” or diasporic identity to the realm of the conceptual, he, like Wheatley before him or many

poets after him, certainly cannot be criticized for ignoring his African heritage; like those before the New Negro, he was at times preoccupied with it, as well with as the fate of others who shared his ancestry, near and far. He personally wrote William Lloyd Garrison in 1843, explaining that his inspiration to write was not merely for fundraising for his own freedom, “but, upon the whole, to spread the blaze of African genius and thus dispel the sceptic [sic] gloom, so prevalent in many parts of the country” (Horton, *The Black Bard of North Carolina* 20). Horton no doubt was all too aware of the common (mis-)conceptions of African and African-descended intellectual capacity, if not from the higher intellectual circles (considering his contact with undergraduates at what would become the University of North Carolina), then certainly from everyday experience.

Through the poetry of George Moses Horton, several important contexts are established. The emphasis on shared experience, shared history, and shared concerns demonstrates the speculative kinship shared between people within the African diaspora, slave and free. Horton’s boldness in unapologetically asserting freedom as birthright also shines bright as a theme that would dominate the verses of black poets in the United States before the New Negro. His adherence to established forms and manipulation of form is typical of his predecessors and successors, a point of significance in and of itself. Additionally, Horton’s privileging of birthright over birthplace serves as a useful lens to understand the ways in which poets of African descent challenged traditional notions of belonging and allegiance. Though Horton’s rendering of liberty as a space to inhabit is unique to him, other writers would play with the notion of space and allegiance to critique the nation-state as a show of their race patriotism, advocating for their own

freedom above all. Finally, Horton's letter to Garrison also reveals another crucial context in understanding the intricacies of black writing in the eighteenth and nineteenth century: the threat of intellectual violence.

#### BLACK INK, WHITE PAGES: BLACK MORALITY AND INTELLECT AS A RESPONSE TO SCIENTIFIC RACISM

The literary production of black poets in the United States within the backdrop of an increasingly hostile intellectual environment warrants mention here as an example of unique (read: not imitative) and intentional resistance. To read Phillis Wheatley or Frances Ellen Watkins Harper as assimilative to the imperatives of their time is to disregard the very act of her writing as a challenge to the foundation of white hegemony; it is to assume that there was a space for them to inhabit, which, as Jefferson's passing rebuke reminds us, was not the case.

That these writers deigned to use poetry as a vehicle of expression is significant when considering ideologies governing the larger literary and intellectual environment in which their writing appeared. Whereas Phillis Wheatley was generally relegated to anywhere between a novelty and "below the dignity of criticism" (Jefferson) because of her African ancestry, her nineteenth century successors faced an even larger force: a burgeoning pseudo-scientific discourse which rendered their intellect an impossibility. From Hume to Hegel, de Gobineau to Galton, and phrenology to eugenics, the idea of black intellectual inferiority and became increasingly entrenched in science, politics, and law as an indelible fact during the eighteenth and nineteenth century. While the development of racist ideology undoubtedly had reverberations felt in political arenas for

black people – from justifying denial of the franchise to blacks in the United States to exploratory, imperialist, neoFcolonialist forays into Africa – it also posed a unique challenge for writers of African descent. To appreciate this, we must first consider the place of writing within the Western imagination.

Besides being marked with the inability to be intellectually self-sufficient and decisive, black people contended with the paradox of having to prove their intelligence using a faculty they were presumed not to have: the ability to write. Whereas literacy in the 1700s was the domain of the elite (which likely bolstered interest in Wheatley), literacy in the nineteenth was increasingly expected of U.S. citizens (Graff 22); however, “this applied to the white masses and not to those like slaves in the American south” (22n). To understand this tension is to understand the intersection between Enlightenment-derived theories of race and intelligence, a critical point to consider to fully grasp the full import of black poetry produced during and after the Enlightenment era.

Writing in the Euro-American imagination was (and, quite arguably, still is) considered the apex of human intelligence, the endpoint in a two-dimensional progression from savage to fully developed human. In *Anthropology: An Introduction to the Study of Man and Civilization* (1881), early anthropologist Sir Edward Burnett Tylor refers to literacy and the ability to write as “the greatest mark of a civilized nation” (24). He continues:

...civilized life may be taken as the beginning with the art of writing, which by recording history, law, knowledge, and religion for the service of ages to come,

binds together the past and the future and in an unbroken chain of intellectual and moral progress (24, emphasis mine).<sup>21</sup>

Taylor's thesis, one consistent with thinking of the time (and decades after it), is grounded in his survey of cultures throughout history. It is an outgrowth of Hegel's assessment of Africa as "no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit" (93). By (il)logical extension, without a recognized form of written expression, a people are devoid of progress, excluded from intellectual potential, and are thus devoid of history. In turn, those people's descendants, in this case Africans in the Americas, are illiterate, orphaned bastards of an inherently intellectually barren motherland. Literacy, its obvious class-based implications notwithstanding, was in this way a uniquely racialized phenomenon located in the core of scientific racism. The black writer, then, faced a scrutiny unique to others of African descent given this hierarchical structure. But the black poet – purposely the focus of this study because of these contexts – was subject to an even tougher, more exclusionary standard given the positioning of poetry on a pedestal within Western thought.

The ability to write poetry was reserved for those believed to possess superior and exceptional intellect. Part of this rationale might be attributed to its reliance on formalist constructions, something which would not be challenged seriously until the twentieth century.<sup>22</sup> It thus makes the act of composition for black poets that much more emphatic

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<sup>21</sup> Recent scholarship has demonstrated the dubiousness of this claim, namely in the existence of various written languages held by the Akan, Mande, and other peoples in different geographic regions of the continent. See Saki Mafundikwa's *Afrikan Alphabets: The Story of Writing in Africa* (2004).

<sup>22</sup> The case can be made that the onset of *modernismo* in the 1880s also furthered this cause. Alejandro Mejias-Lopez makes the case that Spanish American literature became the first postcolonial literature to be

of a challenge to the beliefs of African inferiority. It also explains how and why the mastery of established forms (rather than creations of new ones) was both significant and imperative for black poets in the U.S. Yet the intellectual climate before the New Negro relegated Africans to the level of parrots and not poets. Africans and their descendants in the diaspora were indeed credited for performative ability, particularly in music, but it was at the expense of their ability to be original. Thomas Jefferson captures this culture succinctly in 1788 when he observed:

[The blacks] astonish you with strokes of the most sublime oratory; such as prove their reason and sentiment strong, their imagination glowing and elevated. But never yet could I find that a black had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration; never see even an elementary trait of painting or sculpture. In music they are more generally gifted than the whites with accurate ears for tune and time, and they have been found capable of imagining a small catch. (Jefferson)

Later going on to credit Africans for the “banjar” (banjo), Jefferson’s feigned performance of objective observation demarcated black ability. In turn, he swiftly demarcated black *inability* in one fell swoop, relegating their imagination to the acoustics and imitation. Poetry, in turn, was out of the domain of African ability, as were any generative creative arts. Jefferson, as both slaveholder and statesman, was arguably the most prominent and influential of these thinkers as it relates to the fate of free and enslaved black men and women, but black poets would have to contend with an immeasurably more entrenched ideology that preceded Wheatley’s first publication, and one that stretched as wide as the African diaspora itself.

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included in and arguably supplant European and Anglo-American literature. See *The Inverted Conquest: The Myth of Modernity and the Transatlantic Onset of Modernism* (2010).

Of note within racist pseudoscience is the depths of its carefully constructed boundaries, layers that confined people of African descent to intellectual inferiority at every turn, in every space, without exception. That is, scientific racism would meticulously countenance the question of diaspora at length, examining Africans on both sides of the Atlantic and making it unequivocally clear that the intellectual deficiencies imparted by color were an indelible mark on the black body. This had implications for the free and enslaved alike. The celebrated philosopher Immanuel Kant plainly states this reality in his exchange with David Hume:

Mr. Hume challenges anyone to cite a single example in which a Negro has shown talents, and asserts that *among the hundreds of thousands of blacks who are transported elsewhere from their countries*, although many of them have been set free, *still not a single one* was ever found who presented anything great *in art or science* or any other praiseworthy quality, even though among the whites some continually rise aloft from the lowest rabble, and through superior gifts earn respect in the world. So fundamental is the difference between these two races of man, and it appears to be as great in regard *to mental capacities as in colour*. (Kant 60, emphasis added)

While the depths of scientific racism are no stranger to contemporary scholarly study and commentary, it is worth explicating for the purpose of this study how the likes of Kant, Hume, Jefferson and others created a transnational, diachronic framework of intellectual suppression. By framing inferiority upon the black body as “fixed in nature,” to quote Jefferson, the ideology of racial inferiority became transferable through geographic location and transcendent through time; that is, it accompanied the history of the black body wherever and whenever it had existed or would exist. These elements became indispensable in handicapping black intellect. Noteworthy in Kant and Jefferson is the circuitry in logic: 1) absence of observed “civility”; 2) said absence ascribed to natural



distinctions between the races, as marked by color; 3) color as a basis of mental inferiority; 4) mental inferiority precluding the creation of (discernable)<sup>23</sup> arts and sciences; 5) (discernable) arts and sciences as the marker of civility.

Hume repeats the recipe almost mechanically, starting with the supposition of natural inferiority and following with the ethnocentric comparison to whiteness:

I am apt to suspect the negroes and in general all other species of men...to be *naturally* inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation (33, emphasis added).

After the invocation of (lack of) civility and absence of culture comes the inescapable corollary of creative ability from Hume: “No ingenious manufactures among them, no arts, no sciences” (33). Finally, in an exercise of confirmation bias, Hume examines the diaspora under his own standards as proof of his conviction, again diametrically opposed to whiteness:

Such a uniform and constant difference could not happen, in so many countries and ages if *nature had not made an original distinction between these breeds of men*. Not to mention our colonies, there are negroe [sic] slaves dispersed all over Europe, of whom none discovered any symptoms of ingenuity; though low people without education will start up amongst us and distinguish themselves in every profession. (33, emphasis added)

The self-serving theory then transforms into a bulletproof dictum; we literally see the evolution from concept to commandment within the logic of these influential luminaries.

The very diaspora which descendants of Africa inhabited was policed by intellectual limitations. For them, the transnational and transcendent belief in African inferiority would breed a transnational basis for resistance against white hegemony, given how

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<sup>23</sup> That is, from a Eurocentric point of view.

bodies were marked west of the Atlantic, as well. As if to test his theory, Hume dismissively entertains the counterargument:

In Jamaica, indeed, they talk of one negroe [sic] as a man of parts and learning; but it is likely he is admired for slender accomplishments, like a parrot who speaks a few words plainly. (33)

Thus, one sees the evolution of a discourse, which, by the time Jefferson would employ it twenty years later in his rebuke of Wheatley (examined in chapter two), would be par for the course.

By the end of the eighteenth century, years after Wheatley would publish her work, racist essentialism had effectively destroyed the prospect of poetic creativity, replacing it with a host of more pernicious traits. The logic that was created during the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century would become a theoretical and scientific reality during the nineteenth. As the influential Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel underscores during the 1820s, the possibility of culture, cultivation, or intelligence did not exist, and, more importantly, *could not* exist:

From all these various traits we have enumerated, it can be seen that intractability is the distinguishing feature of the Negro character. The condition in which they live is incapable of any development or culture, and their *present existence is the same as it always has been*. (143, emphasis added)

Hegel, who notoriously declared “We therefore leave Africa at this point, and it need not be mentioned again,” (143) essentially suffocates the black past while silencing its present and future. The simultaneous severance of the black intellect while supplanting it with black immorality was an important development that would solidify the relegation of people of African descent to subhuman status. Morality and intellect must be

mentioned in tandem here, as the two were both markers of civility. The deficiencies of intellect were linked with deficiencies of the conscience, as captured in a 1773

*Encyclopaedia Britannica* entry for “Negro”:

Vices the most notorious seem to be the portion of this unhappy race: idleness, treachery, revenge, cruelty, impudence, stealing, lying, profanity, debauchery, nastiness and intemperance, are said to have extinguished the principles of natural law, and to have silenced the reproofs of conscience. They are strangers to every sentiment of compassion, and are an awful example of the corruption of man when left to himself. (94)

This calculus was absolutely instrumental in fortifying the mythology of black inferiority with regard to intellect. In the face of *actual objective evidence* that suggested there were no significant intellectual differences between the intellectual potential of the races (albeit through the flawed premise of phrenology), respected physicians, phrenologists, and scientists relied upon the double helix of morality and intellect to prove Negro inferiority. Consider Dr. Samuel Morton’s rationale in *Crania America* (1839) when confronted with the scientific possibility of negligible difference between blacks and whites:

[According to Professor Tiedemann], intellectually and morally, as well as anatomically, the Negro is naturally on par with the European; and he contends that the opposite and popular notion is the result of superficial observation, and is true only of certain degraded tribes on the coast of Africa.

We entertain a great respect for Prof. Tiedemann, but we cannot subscribe to his principle, that the whole brain is the measure of intellectual faculties; a proposition which assumes that the animal and moral feelings have no seat in this organ. (Morton 15, emphasis in original)

Morton is able to build upon the false premises established in the eighteenth century, namely of the “intractable” nature of people of African descent, to reject the possibility of a counterargument. This logically fallacious yet air-tight circular logic was not only

damning to the slave and to the free men and women of color across the diaspora, it was also significant within the literary realm. Be it Aesop, Antar, Terence, Wheatley, Harper, Horton, or Dunbar, the black ceiling was an immutable reality affecting how these writers would be read. Understanding the composition of the ceiling, however, opens a possibility for further appreciating the uniqueness of their creativity.

It is worth emphasizing that the very foundations of anti-black sentiment within scientific racism were also the cornerstones of the content produced by black bards in the United States before the New Negro. That is, the two abovementioned pillars of civility, morality and intelligence, also dominated the subject material of much of the nineteenth (and eighteenth) century for black writers within the Western tradition. While these were indeed conventions of the literary period when looking at the neoclassical and romantic eras in Western literature, the usage of these themes within black poetry becomes that much more significant given this context. Wheatley's "On Imagination" becomes a radical inquiry when considering the very subject she is addressing (that is, the ability to create original thought) is assumed to be foreign to her purview. Her championing of morality and Christian virtue is no longer passively assimilative but actively resistant of a suffocating intellectual discourse. Frances Harper's moral didacticism is both a testament to her ability to write as her white contemporaries did, but also a rebuttal to the circulated discourses of immoral Africans and lascivious black women that dominated the century. And the very medium that these poets chose for expressing themselves is that much more significant, given the status of poetry within the Western imagination.

When considering how the written word was (and, to an extent, still is) treated as one of the primary indicators of one's intellectual capacity, the idea of literate Africans was a challenge to the status quo. In assessing "lesser" peoples in relation to literacy, Tylor notes that "[s]avage tribes have some set form in their chants, which shows that they feel them different from common talk" (287). But, he continues, "[i]t is among nations at a higher stage of culture that there appears regular metre [sic]" (288). Thus, the manipulation in the poetry of James Monroe Whitfield or Paul Laurence Dunbar's "standard" English poems is not merely assimilative; it is resistant. One need look no further than Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry* (1821), in which he ordained the poet as "the author to others of the highest wisdom, pleasure, virtue, and glory" (59). And far before neoclassicism and the romantic period ever took root within the Western tradition, Horace postulated the notion of *utile et dulce* in describing the ultimate goal of poetry: to be pleasant and useful. Black writers within the Western tradition were not oblivious to this. In actuality, as Keith Leonard argues, these poets possessed a "fettered genius" whereupon their manipulation of formalism – and, as I contend, moralism – was a form of resistance. Though many poems considered in this study are blatant in their protest, Leonard's framework, combined with the abovementioned oppressive contexts, allow us to view *all* of the work of pre-New Negro poets outside of an assimilative paradigm, instead embracing instances of strategic and subversive mimicry as such. Leonard sums it concisely with chiasmus: "[i]nstead of protesting at the expense of artistry, these poets made artistry itself into protest" (4).

Doubtlessly, black writers poets of the time period – especially the nineteenth century - subscribed to the general belief of the Romantics that “poetry’s province is to convey truth, to teach, uplift, reform, and secondarily, to give pleasure” (Sherman, *African-American Poetry* 4). This is seen most evidently in the continued piety and attention to moral behavior found in the corpus of black poetry produced. Like Wheatley before them, black poets in the U.S. during the nineteenth century also showed awareness of the largely European tradition they were entering in their recognition of white poets.<sup>24</sup> But these poets’ pens inevitably paved a different path, one as real and indelible and the mark of “other” on their very bodies. Their conveyances were moral indeed, carving a unique and vitally necessary autobiographical space within a discourse too often remembered only through political and literary empathizers to the plight of blacks in the United States, ranging from Garrison to Longfellow.<sup>25</sup> Toward the latter part of the nineteenth century, as will be shown in subsequent chapters, black writers engaged in other fascinating projects, including history building.

This augmentation of the value of white poets by black poets in the United States, thus, does not follow in the spirit of Richard Wright’s famous critique of New Negro writers, “dressed in the knee-pants of servility” (Wright 1403), sycophantically seeking acknowledgment for the sake of dignity. Rather, their writing is both overtly and covertly racialized if not race-conscious, insisting upon humanity in its challenge of

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<sup>24</sup> For examples of these dedication poems, see Charlotte L. Forten Grimke’s poem “Wordsworth” or Joseph Cephas Holly’s “A Wreath of Holly.”

<sup>25</sup> See Longfellow’s *Poems on Slavery* (1842). For an accessible collection of poems addressing the subject of slavery (from primarily white poets, both celebrated and forgotten), see Marcus Wood’s *The Poetry of Slavery: An Anglo-American Anthology, 1764-1864* (2003).

humanity denied. It is left incomplete without attention to their racialized subjectivity and the context it demands. Sherman, even after emphasizing that “[nineteenth century] African-American poetry...is *American poetry*” (*African-American Poetry* 3),<sup>26</sup> quickly adds that “black voices do speak from the unique perspective of an alien race in white society” (4), also a common theme. The “additional sociohistorical value” (4) is therefore crucial to consider when assessing the poetry before the New Negro, especially in light of the awareness that several of these bards had of the larger contexts in which they were being read.

Here, we see the literary complexities in what Houston Baker once referred to as “the mental life of a culture” (127).<sup>27</sup> Or, as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o once put it, “Writers are surgeons of the heart and souls of a community” (Thiong'o ix). They articulated the unique position of liminality, being both within and without. These writers, poets, to be exact, were inextricably linked to their race and condition, paving an inevitable intersection between the literary and the political while also suffusing the narrative of identity and homespace from a personal perspective. Thus, we do a disservice to literary history by thinking of black poets as merely chameleons within a larger movement, whether it be within the sphere of black uplift or as imitative Romantics. If we are to consider these poets within pre-established contexts, perhaps we might best understand

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<sup>26</sup> Sherman's argument – especially given the context of when it was put forward, in 1992 – insists upon black poetry as *American* poetry in an effort to legitimize it, which was, at the time, a necessary step. Given subsequent advances in scholarship, and given the necessary step that has been taken, a space for critiquing the shortcomings of this approach (though necessary for its time and purpose) can now be entertained.

<sup>27</sup> Baker argues that “The black text is historical evidence because it is a present, palpable component of the past that formed it...The *sine qua non* that draws the linguistic and historiographical considerations together is the black person as a thinking human being who possesses the supports, values, and stays of a unique culture” (Baker 127).

these writers as within a black poetic tradition, defying expectations and resisting the confines created by a legacy of intellectual sequestering. Wheatley is at once within the tradition of neoclassicism *and* against Hume's conceptions of African inferiority that dominated the Enlightenment. George Moses Horton at once embraces the sentimentality of the Romantics in his acrostic love poems while eschewing the Romantics' aversion to reason in "On Hearing of the Intention of a Gentleman to Purchase the Poet's Freedom" or in his measured excoriations of slavery during the antebellum period. And, if we are to consider these writers within traditional Western constructs as they relate to literature, black writers and poets should be at the very core of realism in the United States.

#### BLACK POETS IN THE UNITED STATES AND REALISM WITHIN THE WESTERN LITERARY CANON

Poetry writ large had a fraught relationship with realism, particularly in the nineteenth century. As Elizabeth Renker contends, the common narrative reads that realism "developed apace in prose fiction, while poetry, stuck in a hopelessly idealistic late-Romantic mode, languished and stagnated" (135); poetry therefore becomes "the emblem of realism's opposite: a desiccated genteel tradition" (135). And though Sherman concedes that black poets in the U.S. did too fall victim to this idealism, part of their idealism lay in the pursuit of all too real, tenable, tangible outcomes, namely the acquisition of freedom and citizenship. Of course, these poets were not likely to be anthologized with their white contemporaries at the time (though William Dean Howells, treated later, was an enthusiast of Dunbar's dialect writing). But the place of these forgotten poets warrants some consideration for their unique and obscured contribution to



Western poetry and memory, offering a version of realism that many contemporaries did not (and, more importantly, could not).

This intersection is magnified in the larger context of the onset of realism in the United States. If we use William Dean Howell's conception of realism as "nothing more and nothing less than the truthful treatment of material" (966), then the verses of these poets are some of realism's most "truthful" artifacts.<sup>28</sup> Holman and Harmon's observation that "realists center their attention to a remarkable degree on the immediate, the here and now, the specific action, and the verifiable consequence" (Holman and Harmon qtd. in Hacker 145) makes one wonder how or why Frances Harper's "To a Slave Mother" or "George Clinton Rowe's "We Are Rising" are not considered within this tradition.<sup>29</sup> Though not often considered in the context of realism, poetry produced by blacks during this transformative century in U.S. history held a mirror to hypocrisies within the country, namely espoused ideals of freedom versus realities faced by its enslaved and (nominally) free persons of color. This is further reinforced by the medium of publication: not surprisingly, many poems from black nineteenth century in writers in the United States appear not only in individual books or pamphlets, but in the ultimate organ for reporting "truth": newspapers (including *The Christian Recorder*, *Frederick Douglass's Paper*, and *the New York Tribune*). Their verses not only captured community perspectives, but also

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<sup>28</sup> To be fair, some literary critics have resisted the inclusion of poetry within realism in general. According to Cheryl Walker, some argue that "realism usually involves a content and an attitude toward that content, whereas poetry is preeminently a matter of form" (25). For more, see Walker's "Nineteenth Century Women Poets and Realism."

<sup>29</sup> While one might rightfully counter that realism tended to address issues of the middle class and that blacks in the United States by and large did not occupy such a space, the status of the majority of these poets as "free" and literate presents a formidable rejoinder.

commemorated contemporary and ancestral icons across the diaspora. Additionally, through its very existence, the creative and intellectual expression of these poets offers a voice against the racially hostile intellectual climate of the period.

If we for a moment recall the conception of poetry as “the ultimate art” and highest form of intellectual expression, black poetry in the United States served dually as a mechanism for conveying and an authorial testament proving the equality of the races. Sherman notes, regarding form and style, that “poetry by blacks is influenced not by other black poets but by such white American contemporaries as Longfellow, Whittier, and Riley, or by the British writers Shelley, Goldsmith, Scott, Byron, and Tennyson,” (Sherman, *African-American Poetry* 3-4)<sup>30</sup> thereby including a wide variety of poetic forms (which would later be eschewed by later generation of black writers). Such striving for these poets was not simply a convention, nor was it parroting: it was a statement of ability, competence, and intelligence.

In this vein, Leonard again offers a useful rejoinder to the misguided idea that the stylistic conventions of early poetry from blacks in the United States were merely derivative, arguing that “the cultural assimilation of poetic mastery was the abolitionist poet’s greatest act of resistance, an act exemplified by his or her self-constitution as genius as that self-concept was validated by the slaveholding and abolitionist reading

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<sup>30</sup> Again, Sherman’s observation is in the context of style and form. Black poets in the U.S. were indeed aware of and influenced by each other. George Clinton Rowe’s tribute poem, “Mrs. Frances Ellen Harper,” clearly captures this: “With thy pen, in happy measure, / Thou hast sung the poet’s song; / Thou hast given us many a treasure - / Rich and beautiful and strong!” (17-20). Besides being connected with each other, poets sometimes appeared in the same periodicals as well.

public” (21).<sup>31</sup> For example, when we consider the titling of George Moses Horton’s final collection of poems, *Naked Genius* (1865) – aptly published in the year slavery was abolished – we must keep in mind Horton was certainly aware of his existence as a second-class citizen (if that). By comparison to its predecessors of the previous century, Horton’s title is markedly truncated yet equally telling in its candor. Transparently self-referential, the title not only consciously asserts his intellect, but aggressively confronts his reading audience with the image of his flesh and body (“*Naked*”), i.e. his blackness. To wit, Horton’s invocation of “naked” in his titular rendering is perhaps realism at its core; it is without decoration, making use of his body and intellect as veritable proof of ability in both a collective and individual sense. Within the text, his “mastery of form,” to borrow from Houston Baker’s term, not only represents a poet striving to create art, but a bold political statement beyond the realm of the individual. It represents an understanding of a collective identity, if not a common foe, in embracing an African subjectivity. Given these realities, then, we return to the question of parroting: if this conscious challenge to white hegemony within the Western literary tradition and U.S. political state is indeed imitative, then, given the contexts mentioned in this chapter, what could Horton, or his maligned black contemporaries, be imitating?

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<sup>31</sup> For clarity, Leonard’s larger argument explicitly eschews the ostensible and supposed merits of cultural assimilation. Argues that “African culture [need not] be read in terms of its relationship to mainstream culture...I am clarifying how [cultural assimilation], as manifest in the formalist poetics of conservative African American poets, has never been entirely self-defeating and in fact has been at times a use of limited cultural resources for the ongoing process of African American ethnic self-definition in resistance to cultural hegemony” (18).

Poets preceding the New Negro did indeed endure tumultuous changes, though their poetry – be it in the eighteenth or nineteenth century, ante- or post-bellum – echoed a common refrain of race patriotism. Despite a declining proportion of African-born blacks in the United States, blacks continued to see value and strength in difference, thus explaining the retention of race-bearing monikers (despite fluctuations in name choice) from the late 1700s through the years following the Civil War. Their writing demands a nuanced perspective that rejects the limiting binary of “African” or “American,” thus allowing a framework that recognizes the ways in which these poets see themselves within an overlapping narratives of ancestry. Horton’s poetry establishes a context that links this race patriotism together: a belief in linked fate grounded in the entitlement of liberty as a birthright. As the following chapters aim to show, poets from Wheatley to Whitfield exhibited their own versions of “naked genius,” consciously challenging white hegemony and scientific racism with a specialized brand of formalism to demand the rights of those within and beyond their borders. They were outwardly defiant in their strategic and subversive mimicry, resisting the suffocating proscriptions set forth by scientific racism by openly claiming their subjectivities. This thread would be present throughout the years before the New Negro, starting from the very first published writer within British North America, Phillis Wheatley.

## CHAPTER 2

### **“FROM WHENCE MY LOVE OF FREEDOM SPRUNG”: PHILLIS WHEATLEY AND THE POETICS OF SALVATION-LIBERATION IDEOLOGY AS RESISTANCE**

Logically and fittingly, Phillis Wheatley serves as the beginning point in the discussion of the complexities of black poets in the United States<sup>32</sup> negotiating their relationship to a broader diaspora. Many have applied a broad, trans-historical brush to the work of the sable muse, (mis)appropriating and then dismissing her words as a result of the imperatives and governing ideologies of a given time period. The late Amiri Baraka's assessment of Wheatley as an example of "[weak] middle-class black literature," if, in his words, it could be considered "black" literature at all (Baraka 105-106) certainly falls in this vein, though not to be outdone by his predecessor J. Saunders Redding's mordant critique of her as "negative, bloodless, unracial" and "superficial, especially to those of her own race" in *To Make a Poet Black* (11). Henry Louis Gates has pointed out that even Frederick Douglass, who was hailed for feminist sensibilities during his time, blithely dismissed Wheatley's significance. In a letter dated 26 August, 1892 to Monroe Majors regarding the inclusion of noteworthy black women writers for Majors's upcoming book, *Notable Negro Women*, Douglass bluntly stated: "I have thus far seen no book of importance written by a Negro woman and I know of no one among us who can appropriately be called famous" (Douglass qtd. in Sterling 436).<sup>33</sup> Indeed,

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<sup>32</sup> Or, in her case, the thirteen colonies.

<sup>33</sup> This point, of course, also undercuts the writings of Douglass's abolitionist contemporary, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, considered later.

those ahistorically looking to Wheatley for a militant, proto-nationalist voice that would become developed decades and centuries after her time would be sorely disappointed. Wheatley did, however, have her own revolutionary politics of a different sort, as she championed the colonies' cause of independence and the creation of a fair, just, and slave-free state.<sup>34</sup> To understand her subversiveness, consideration must be given to the subtleties of her writing.

Wheatley's embrace of what is most easily labeled as neoclassical verse is often dangerously conflated with a repudiation of all things African – that is, a binary-infused logic equates her *stylistic* conformity to a traditionally “European” form of writing to a declaration of allegiance to all things Europe, therefore distancing herself from an African identity. Though readers have readily pointed to what appears to be an inferiority complex that caused her to think herself “rescued” from “the land of errors / and Egyptian gloom,”<sup>35</sup> Wheatley has indeed been the subject of much more objective and necessary analysis in recent scholarship<sup>36</sup> – scholarship which takes that takes into account her comparatively atypical upbringing as a classically trained house slave in England.

To be sure, Wheatley does not fit neatly within restrictive notions of an ontological or essentialized blackness; she is instead may best be understood and

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<sup>34</sup> For an insightful discussion of Wheatley's resistance to colonial society, see Paula Bennett's “Phillis Wheatley's Vocation and the Paradox of the ‘Afric Muse.’” *PMLA* 113.1 (1998): 64-76.

<sup>35</sup> For a discussion of the ways in which Egypt has figured in the lore of people of African descent, see Scott Trafton's *Egypt Land: Race and Nineteenth-Century Egyptomania* (2004).

<sup>36</sup> see Shields's *New Essays on Phillis Wheatley* (2011), Carretta's *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage* (2011)

appreciated as an archetypical figure who embodies the complexities of subjects (and agents) within a diasporic space. Recent scholarship has opened up a discursive space for understanding Wheatley and her importance, embracing the very complex ways in which one identifies with, conforms to, and resists the confines of traditional geographical / geocultural demarcation. That said, Wheatley must first be understood not as an American slave, but as a diasporic subject. As Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur note, “Diasporic subjects are marked by hybridity and heterogeneity – cultural, linguistic, ethnic, national – and these subjects are defined by a traversal of the boundaries demarcating nation and diaspora” (5).<sup>37</sup> Wheatley’s poetic production exemplifies these complexities, thus making the nuances of her poetics a significant beginning point in understanding how black writers chose to negotiate and challenge these geographic boundaries and national allegiances. Already displaced during her lifetime by the slave traders who “snatch’d” Wheatley “from Afric’s fancy’d happy seat,” Wheatley arguably has been posthumously displaced within the historical narrative as a tokenized subject as a result of essentialized and antiquated notions of race and nationhood.

The attacks levied upon Wheatley the poet have been substantial, leading some to believe that she is “perhaps the least understood American author” (Shields, *Poetics of Liberation* 1). One of the earliest, most vitriolic, and most widely known of these critiques came with Thomas Jefferson’s notoriously flippant assessment in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*:

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<sup>37</sup> See John Shields’s *Phillis Wheatley’s Poetics of Liberation: Backgrounds and Contexts* for a comprehensive discussion of the varying ways in which Wheatley has been historiographically remembered within scholarship. Also see Shields’s *Phillis Wheatley’s Poetics of Liberation*, particularly chapter three, “Wheatley Intellectually Gifted – Maybe: The Last 25 Years.”

Religion indeed has produced a Phyllis Wheatley [sic]; but it could not produce a poet. The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism. The heroes of the Dunciad are to her, as Hercules to the author of that poem. (Jefferson)

Couched within the Enlightenment's larger discursive investigations of the intellectual faculties of the races – and the so-called scientific analyses “proving” the cognitive deficiencies of the African race as a whole, considered in the previous chapter – Jefferson's critique is representative. He embodies an age that denied Wheatley's humanity, one that underscores the manner by which Wheatley and her successors within the literary tradition would be displaced “below the dignity of criticism” on top of being displaced persons within the United States.

Wheatley and her contemporaries, along with those who would follow in the nineteenth and even twentieth century, were engaged in the ultimate quest for self-hood – that is, they were not simply writing with the freedom of interrogating inner complexities, but writing against the current of a tidal wave of ideological opposition that denied them the agency to exist as complex beings, or even as full humans. The underlying significance and subtext of such ideological oppression, if not haughty indifference, on the part of Jefferson may be summed up thusly: “To have acknowledged Wheatley's capacity to create poetry would have been tantamount to declaring the black race unsuited to serve white folks!”(Shields, *Poetics of Liberation* 2).

Indeed, Jefferson's blatant disregard for Wheatley along with his thinly veiled distaste for her non-white contemporaries, including African writer and composer Ignatius Sancho (Jefferson), was part of a much larger racist ideology that would buttress



the Atlantic slaveocracy. For, as Shields notes, to admit that Africans were to be considered on the same level as whites – that is, on a human level – was to syllogistically advocate for their equal treatment as American citizens. (Ironically, Wheatley would craftily utilize this very syllogism in her own poetry to make her case for the cause of African equality.) The oft-cited justification for slavery as a necessary evil for the greater good of civilizing, educating, and acculturating Africans would then fall apart at its base. It would also undoubtedly add to the already mystifying cognitive dissonance that Jefferson must have dealt with in his complex relationship with Sally Hemings.<sup>38</sup> A careful consideration of the nuances of her poetry, particularly from a non-reductionist perspective that acknowledges her agency as a writer, would not appear in a significant volume until the appearance of *Africana Studies* and *Women's Studies* in the Academy.

John Shields, who first published *The Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley* in 1989, significantly advanced the manner in which the poet was to be understood by future scholars, students, and readers. Continuing the momentum of previous scholars' works, such as William H. Robinson's *Phillis Wheatley: A Bio-Bibliography* (1981), Shields's text exposed the hidden complexities of the poet and challenged dismissive critiques of her work, particularly through his references of previously unpublished extant poems and letters. Vincent Carretta's *Complete Writings of Phillis Wheatley* (2001) added to scholarship brought forth as a result of this necessary re-examination of Wheatley in its inclusion of hitherto unpublished extant poems and letters. Recent works

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<sup>38</sup> See John Kukla's *Mr. Jefferson's Women* (2007), Mia Bay's "In Search of Sally Hemings in the Post-DNA Era" (2006), and Annette Gordon Reed's *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy* (1997).

have built on these contributions and explore Wheatley in a much less reductive way, particularly in the ways in which she serves as an important figure within the African diaspora as it relates to political critique and cultural expression.

Babacar M'Baye's *The Trickster Comes West: Pan-African Influence in Early Black Diaspora Narratives* (2009) explores the possibilities of the usage of Pan-African folklore in her poetry as a means of critique of the Atlantic slave trade. Additionally, Will Harris's insightful piece, "Phillis Wheatley, Diaspora Subjectivity, and the African American Canon" (2008) further places her work within a diasporic context, arguing for its importance in the African literary diaspora of the late eighteenth century that writers such as Olaudah Equiano, John Marrant, and Ottobah Cugoana inhabited. Additionally, Daniel J. Ennis's "Poetry and American Revolutionary Identity: The Case of Phillis Wheatley and John Paul Jones" (2002) and Betsy Erkkila's "Phillis Wheatley and the Black American Revolution" (1993) broaden the conversation beyond an assimilative / non-assimilative framework by addressing the manner in which her writing and presence fit within a resistant (read: non-acquiescent) framework of early U.S. literature. This point is particularly poignant, for one must recall that the notion of a colony free from British rule represented possibilities and potentialities of change for subjugated peoples in British North America, as well.<sup>39</sup> Collectively, these writings challenge the once popular notion that Wheatley was grateful for the institution of slavery (Baraka 184), which, upon glancing superficially at several of her poems, might appear to be the case.

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<sup>39</sup> This point is articulated at length in Simon Schama's *Rough Crossings* (2006), which details the dubious position of allegiance that blacks in the thirteen colonies felt during the Revolutionary War. (The British, after all, were offering Africans something that the future "land of the free" was not: freedom.)

In addition to important interventions made by this scholarship, I argue it is imperative to view Wheatley as a progenitor of a tradition of blacks in the United States expressing displacement within the black literary tradition, providing a lens of patriotic nationalism combined with a Pan-African sensibility and race patriotism that would typify the verses of her successors thereafter. Thus, this examination of her displacement will be looked at through the following three lenses: her mentions of difference and distance from an “American” identity juxtaposed against an “African” one; her championing of equality between the races and freedom from hegemonic oppression (particularly for the cause of her fellow Africans); and her negotiations of religiosity and black identity – two concepts which must be, in part, separately examined so as not to confound their respective significance. These negotiations of spirituality and racial identity are at the center of Wheatley’s reconciliation of her displacement, informing what I call a salvation-liberation ideology.

Through the three abovementioned cultural and political lenses, one sees how Wheatley and those who followed her are not merely assimilative; she was also remarkably aware of and deftly grappled with the ideological terrain of the literary landscape. All of this, it should be noted, was done at a remarkably young age. (One wonders how other prominent writers might hold up if the works produced during their early teenage years were scrutinized for their profundity, identity politics, and social commentary.) Wheatley wrote of the promise of the thirteen colonies as an independent state and acknowledged her misgivings with the maltreatment of Africans, pioneering a new discursive and creative space occupied by literate Africans in the process. Though

she does not evince the cultural memory or confrontational fervor of, say, an Olaudah Equiano,<sup>40</sup> Wheatley's self-identification, considering the abovementioned context of African inferiority, is a significant and bold statement in her poetry.

### **DISRUPTIVE SPACES: WHEATLEY, NEOCLASSICISM, AND THE LITERARY TRADITION**

Upon initial reading, Wheatley offers little deviation from the poetic norms of the neoclassical era. Her work – typically structured in heroic couplets and variations of iambic and trochaic pentameter – is replete with overt and subtle references to ancient or classical figures such as Ovid, Virgil, the muses, and to the importance of a virtuous existence. That the neoclassical form is often associated with a suppressing of the personal in favor of the ideal is also significant, as it offers a lens to see what Wheatley indeed consider “ideal” as well as the ways in which the personal emerges within her poetry. The manner by which Wheatley projects the ordinary in her deployment and mastery of literary conventions of the time in order to convey several critical (and notably personal) stances that make her works extraordinary, especially considering her unique perspective as a literate African slave woman in the Americas.

Wheatley, by virtue of her identity as an African, makes plain the racialized difference between herself and her contemporaries. Poets during and following Wheatley's time would dismiss their concerns with audience, sometimes abrasively.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> See chapter one of Equiano's *Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789) for his extensive first-hand reflection on Igbo culture, custom, ritual, and life.

They “put an individual voice into writing in an age many argue left little room for the personal in poetry” and were at times “hostile” toward their readership (O’Brien 81).<sup>42</sup> Whereas white poets within the neoclassical and, later, the romantic tradition faced the question of individuality within their poetry, Wheatley faced the initial impediment of being fully recognized as an individual before such a privilege might even be considered. Quite obviously, her luxuries were few. Wheatley was only one of a handful of American poets, and one of even fewer women, to have ever been published while enslaved.<sup>43</sup>

Despite the unmistakable fact that Wheatley was designated a slave, the facts of her life in the context of the times in which she lived make her exceptional. Widely thought to have been captured from Africa’s Senegambia region, she arrived in the United States after crossing the perilous Middle Passage aboard the *Phillis*, her namesake, in 1761. Her education in the classics made her not only an anomaly for Africans in what was to become the United States, but a standout within the general public as well. R.W. Herndon notes that literacy rates for all women during the latter part of the eighteenth century may have been as low as forty-five percent (Herndon 963); further, estimates for the literacy rate of black women during that time are as low as ten

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<sup>41</sup> While the Romantic era in its formal chronology does not begin until after Wheatley’s death, the years preceding it represent a stylistically (and culturally) related literary terrain. Also see Marshall Brown’s *Preromanticism* (1991).

<sup>42</sup> See Kathleen O’Brien, “Romanticism and Rhetoric: A Question of Audience” (2000) 80-85.

<sup>43</sup> See Sondra O’Neal. “A Slave’s Subtle War: Phillis Wheatley’s Use of Biblical Myth and Symbol.” *Early American Literature* 21.2 (1986): 144-65.

percent (963).<sup>44</sup> (And to be able to read, of course, is not the same as being able to write verse.) For Wheatley, whose collection of poems were published scarcely a day after advancing past her teenage years, the possession of such a level of education during that time was extraordinary to say the least. “Despite such close and consistent adherence to established literary practice,” as Joan Sherman notes, poets like Wheatley were “speak[ing] from the unique perspective of an alien race in white society” (*African-American Poetry* 4). Understanding how she accomplishes this requires a historical understanding of the boundaries that confined her just as much as it demands a literary analysis of how she negotiated these boundaries.

Here, it is useful to borrow from Will Harris’s use of the term “disruptive spaces,” which he uses in his analysis of James Eliza John Capitein, a captured African famous for his ability to write Latin verses (Harris 30). These spaces are created by a vocalized assertion of difference and a subsequent examination or interrogation of the normative space in which the writer / subject is subsumed. A sterling example of this would be the convention applied to many African writers across the diaspora during the period: the sub-titular rendering of self-hood and identity. Ukawsaw Gronniosaw’s *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince, as Related by Himself* (1774) (emphasis added)<sup>45</sup> and Equiano’s *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*

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<sup>44</sup> For more on female literacy and the efflorescence of blacks in New England, see Ira Berlin, “From Creole to African: Atlantic Creoles and the Origins of African American Society in Mainland North America,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 53.2 (1996), 251-8.

<sup>45</sup> The Countess of Huntington, to whom Wheatley’s work is dedicated, also sponsored Gronniosaw’s publication. See Carretta’s introduction to his *Complete Writings*, especially xv-xvii.

(1789) (emphasis added) operate in this vein. Here, both titles not only accept but assert their African-ness and, concomitantly, their difference from the general readership.

Whether this disruptive space is created by the writer or the publisher does not take away from the reality of the effect of these titular renderings: in either case, they both serve as introductions that displace the writer as “other” and offer alerts to the reader that disrupt the common (read: white) narrative tradition through difference. (Uniquely, Gronniosaw’s title also asserts a level of status – another level of difference from his general readership.) Both titles also carry with it a pre-Du Boisian diasporic double-consciousness in their juxtaposition of a Western name and identity along with a very intentional assertion of their African name and identities, the latter of which presumably is important to the self rather than to the general readership when considering the literate audience of the eighteenth century. These “two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body” (Du Bois 2) signal a global applicability of displacement reconciliation within the very titles that were at the genesis of the literary tradition. The usage of “or” in Equiano’s title signals an even more schismatic – though certainly not inchoate – understanding of self. While creating an ostensible space of disruption within the self, the slave-turned-shipman goes on to subsequently interrogate the normative space that he literally once occupied while in bondage:

O, ye nominal Christians! might not an African ask you, learned you this from your God, who says unto you, Do unto all men as you would men should do unto you? Is it not enough that we are torn from our country and friends to toil for your luxury and lust of gain? Must every tender feeling be likewise sacrificed to your avarice?...Surely this is a new refinement in cruelty, which, while it has no advantage to atone for it, thus aggravates distress, and adds fresh horrors even to the wretchedness of slavery. (Equiano 79)

While Wheatley did not overtly announce a disruptive space in the title of her collection of poems, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773), she did follow a similar model, as I will show, in her identification as African, her assertion of an African (and “American”) self, her Christian identity, and her subsequent interrogation of the institution of slavery. The latter is particularly significant, for it signals her awareness beyond the realm of the self into the larger collective of Africans displaced and enslaved throughout the diaspora. A casual observer might conclude that Wheatley’s title is, by comparison, a mollified version of the more outspoken proclamations made by Equiano and others and therefore would explain the tempered tone of her poetry. This is an instructive assumption, for it invites us to examine how Wheatley navigated the particular challenges presented by the terrain of the literary landscape and the politics of her audience while also creating disruptive spaces within her poetry. And while her *Poems on Various Subjects* does not carry the same titular import as her contemporaries within the diaspora, there is much to be said about how she is formally introduced to the Western literate community.

### **SPEAKING WHILE SPOKEN FOR: THE RENDERING AND RECLAMATION OF PHILLIS WHEATLEY**

As a result of being an African, a woman, and a slave, Wheatley’s subjectivity (or the combination of them) is arguably placed on her before she can assert it. (She does, in fact, go on to assert them explicitly in her poetry, taking away credence to the notion that she was a docile, passive, wholly assimilative subject.) In anticipation of her book’s



publication, advertisements printed in *The London Chronicle* and *The Morning Post and Daily Advertiser* in the late summer of 1773 described Wheatley as having come from “that dark part of the habitable system” (qtd. in Carretta, *Complete Writings* xvii), referring to Africa. Her writing was composed in a form “to have been expected from those who...have had the happiness of a liberal education, [rather] than from one born in the wilds of Africa” (xvii). Thus, her individuality is preemptively limited; even with the seemingly positive review, she is contextually framed by how *un*-African (in the sense of what the descriptor embodied in the eighteenth century) she was.

Perhaps just as complex as the print of Phillis Wheatley is the presentation and production of Phillis Wheatley. Her master John Wheatley, who served as the gatekeeper between her and her audience, opens her book’s preface with the statement: “The following poems were written originally for the Amusement of the Author, as they were the Products of her leisure Moments” (5). The palpably apologetic tone masks another significant and overlooked aspect of this moment in which we encounter Phillis Wheatley: John Wheatley introduces himself as the primary personal subject, with Phillis taking a secondary role. Even in the book’s title page, Phillis Wheatley’s name is immediately subjugated and claimed – “Phillis Wheatley, NEGRO SERVANT to Mr. John Wheatley.”<sup>46</sup> The use of the word “Negro” as a “geocultural displacement,” as noted by Bassard at the outset, in conjunction with the title “servant,” renders her a Jeffersonian object “beneath the dignity of [serious] criticism.” Moreover, this naming, as

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<sup>46</sup> The version of Wheatley’s *Collected Works* in Shields’s text follows closest to the typeface and form of the original version, including the order and visual representation frontispiece and preface. Though it is not paginated, the title page can be found after page xl of Shields’s preface.

Bassard states, makes her a “[victim] of *cultural* theft and misappropriation, a violation signaled by ‘NEGROES’ as a misnaming of *African* peoples,” (Bassard 11, emphasis in original) or, in this case, Gambian peoples. To the reader, she is even not a subject of study; she is a specimen.

Further investigation into the politics of Wheatley’s publication uncovers just how much Wheatley’s race and gender played into her literary production and output. Like her white predecessor Anne Bradstreet, the first published woman writer in the United States, literary (and indeed societal) conventions with regard to gender may very well have compromised her expression (Bradstreet xvi); unlike Bradstreet, Wheatley’s publication “was supported, both financially and intellectually, almost exclusively by other women” (272) and includes personal references that shed important insight into her experience as an African in New England. That Wheatley was not able to find enough support in Boston to have her work published, ultimately having to seek support from overseas, is telling. Henry Louis Gates describes the significance of Wheatley’s procurement of an attestation certifying her ability in *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley* (2003), having had to pass through the gates of the literary world through eighteen powerful white men – financial contributions of her women benefactors notwithstanding.<sup>47</sup> However, as Joanna Brooks has convincingly argued, the existence of

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<sup>47</sup> Joanna Brooks argues that Wheatley accomplished her success not by securing a single endorsement by powerful men, but by cultivating an intricate network of relationships among white women. She used elegies that mobilized her own grief and utilized her own canny understanding of the inner lives of white women to build a network of white female supporters; white women, for their part, used Wheatley to perform the emotional labor of condolence and sympathy for them. Their participation in this transactional, sentimental culture of mourning enabled them to indulge feelings of self-consciousness, self-regard, and willful passivity imbricated with their increasingly privileged merchant class status. It also allowed white women

conclusive evidence that the oft-cited face-to-face examination occurred as Gates portrays it is dubious at best.

Additionally, as Kathryn Seidler Engberg has pointed out, the support she did receive came not from outspoken abolitionists, but, in part, from slaveholders (49). She astutely notes the ironic advantage that this served, noting that her book quite easily might have been dismissed as “radical” propaganda (50). Instead, Wheatley – or at least the literary production that represented her – necessarily acquiesced to a silent social contract that tokenized her intelligence and solidified her subjecthood, creating quite a sensation. Between 1765 and 1774, at least forty-two magazines or newspapers – twenty-seven of them in the British American colonies, fifteen of them in Great Britain – contained notices regarding Phillis Wheatley (Isani, “Contemporaneous Reception” 266). Comparatively speaking, the American publications tended to be brief, both expressing an “[i]nterest in the unusual” and “a measure of national pride” (266). The British publications, as Mukhtar Ali Isani points out, tended to give more attention to her literary production, which comes less as a surprise when considering the anti-slavery momentum of the 1772 Somerset case which, in effect, ended slavery in Britain (266).<sup>48</sup> While this undoubtedly led to the more nuanced complexities of her poetry going under the radar of observation and criticism in favor of more generalized praise for her writing ability as an

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to evade taking responsibility for their economic privilege—which capitalized on the unfreedom of enslaved men and women like Wheatley—and ultimately to evade their responsibility to the poet herself” (7-8).

<sup>48</sup> Isani’s “The Contemporaneous Reception of Phillis Wheatley: Newspaper and Magazine Notices during the Years of Fame, 1765-1774” (2000) contains a useful and informative delineation of Wheatley’s critical reception.

African woman, it also augments the ways in which her voice faced a unique level of societal censorship theretofore unprecedented given Wheatley's notoriety as the first published African in the United States. Understanding these circumstances, as well as the centrality of her race in producing them, is essential in contextualizing Wheatley's writing. Certainly, her African identity and being was simultaneously a source of obfuscation and opportunity.

The circumstances surrounding the publishing of Wheatley then are a gift and curse; they are arguably responsible for the (mis)interpretation of her writing and her very existence of within the black literary tradition. To wit, Wheatley is described in the now infamous attestation as "an uncultivated Barbarian from *Africa*" (*Complete Writings* 8) According to "some of the best Judges" in Massachusetts, she was "under the Disadvantage of serving as a Slave" (8). Wheatley's fate was inevitable; her publisher, Archibald Bell, would only publish her work under the condition that it be accompanied by such a written endorsement.<sup>49</sup> Inevitably, she was adjectivally displaced and (mis)identified before speaking as the author to her own writings. In effect, she begins her writing from outside the margins rather than within them. (Interestingly, this specific nuance is not as prevalent in the texts of Equiano, Gronniosaw, and Capitein). Perhaps, then, it is somewhat of a misnomer to describe the attestation provided in Wheatley's text and myriad similar documents from the texts of other African writers as "authenticating"

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<sup>49</sup> According to Carretta,

Bell agreed to publish Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* in 1773, on the condition that the volume be prefaced by a document signed by Boston worthies certifying the authenticity of the poems for an English audience. Through Bell, Wheatley gained the patronage of the Countess of Huntingdon, who agreed to allow Phillis to dedicate the book to her" (xvi).

documents that establish the credibility of the subject. In the same sense that they lend credibility to the author, they dialectically handicap the author's presumed ability, thereby rendering her as imitative, amateurish, abecedarian, and ultimately an African "guest" in a European tradition. Through Wheatley we see that such documents arguably did just as much to displace true authorship (in the sense of self-autonomy) as they did to authenticate it. Still, despite such renderings, Wheatley's subjectivity as an African was also a blessing, albeit an underappreciated one.

Wheatley is an important progenitor, not only to a diasporic tradition, but to a tradition of African writing in neoclassical literature. Making such a claim is indeed a complicated terrain to tread, for the interpretation of black writers within such a tradition invites two opposing trains of thought: firstly, a critique of the writer's identity politics based on his or her conformity to established literary practice, usually as an accusation of eschewing a (oftentimes nebulous) black or African communal / folk identity for acceptance from European standards or literary traditions<sup>50</sup>; and secondly, on the other hand, a championing of the ways in which writing within the European literary tradition makes use of a subversive "mastery of form" whereby the writers appropriate the conventions of the genre to voice a perspective (or critiques) unique to their position in society.<sup>51</sup> As mentioned previously, "poetry by blacks is influenced not by other black

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<sup>50</sup> Marsha Watson notes, "from the perspective of a black aesthetic...Wheatley's absorption of a neoclassic, Anglo-European tradition seems a betrayal of her potential status as a representative African American artist" (Watson 105). See Watson, Marsha. "A Classic Case: Phillis Wheatley and Her Poetry." *Early American Literature* 31.2 (1996): 103-132.

<sup>51</sup> See Baker, Houston. *The Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* for a discussion of the tradition of "mastery of form" on the part of black writers.

poets but by such white American contemporaries as Longfellow, Whittier, and Riley, or by the British writers Shelley, Goldsmith, Scott, Byron, and Tennyson” (Sherman, *African-American Poetry* 4). For Wheatley, that list would most certainly include Alexander Pope, whose influence can be seen in her abundant usage of the heroic couplet. While poems such as Jupiter Hammon’s “An Address to Miss Phillis Wheatly [sic], Ethiopian Poetess” (1778) challenge the absolute certitude of such an assertion, it is noteworthy that early black writers in the Americas, including Wheatley, were pioneers injecting their own subjectivities and perspectives within the conventions of the genre as opposed to being the “bloodless, unracial” parrots as some have argued. Even the provocateur, Shields suggests that this may not have been as one-sided an exchange as may have been conceived, arguing in *Phillis Wheatley and the Romantics* (2010) that neoclassical writers may have been influenced by Wheatley in their writing, not simply the other way around.<sup>52</sup> Nevertheless, an undeniable fact remains for Wheatley and her successors within the black poetic tradition: their inheritance of African ancestry, be it through cultural norms or phenotypical appearance, imbued the observations, musings, and experiences expressed in their literary output.

### **THE SUBTLETIES OF SELF-HOOD: PHILLIS WHEATLEY’S RECONCILIATION OF DISPLACEMENT**

Wheatley “was also most concerned to revise and improve her poems...she sometimes altered her texts (i.e., composed alternative versions of certain poems) so as not to ruffle the feathers of her overwhelmingly white and, at first, often British

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<sup>52</sup> See Shields, *Phillis Wheatley and the Romantics*, especially the third chapter.

audience” (Shields in Wheatley, *Collected Works* 195). Indeed, one of her several important and noticeable revisions occurs in variant versions of the poem, “On the Death of the Rev. George Whitefield,” also published as a broadside. Whitefield, the itinerant evangelical preacher whose name was known throughout Britain and its North American colonies, was undoubtedly a source of interest and inspiration to the devout Wheatley. In her elegiac poem, she deftly combines her piety and morality with a hint of her politics, a point not initially clear when examining the version of the poem most widely read in the widely published *Poems on Various Subjects*. Investigating this specific poem is of particular importance; as Patricia C. Willis contends, Wheatley’s elegy “did far more for her publicity than did her book,” and was also crucial in securing the support she needed to ultimately have the book published (Willis 174). Shields and most recently Willis have extensively examined the stylistic and lyrical variations in the poem’s appearances in print from its initial appearance in New England newspapers and broadsides in Britain to its publication in her first and only collection of poetry in 1773.<sup>53</sup> That many of the revisions likely were not her own is also significant (174). These are important in this present context when considering the manner by which these edits augment revealing censorship concerns, further underscoring Wheatley’s displacement and how her consciousness was, in effect, silenced.

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<sup>53</sup> See Shields, *Collected Works* 195-227 as well as Willis, Patricia. “Phillis Wheatley, George Whitefield, and the Countess of Huntington in the Beinecke Library” (2006) Willis’s article is exceptionally useful in its generous inclusion of images clearly illustrating these variations, as they provide a detailed account of the context of the printing history. Willis’s history contends that the broadsides of the poem published in London omitted lines concerning Wheatley’s call for freedom for African people; Shields, in his earlier work, contends that these were included in the London Broadside. See Shields’s *Complete Works* 195 and Willis 170-172.

Within the silencing of Wheatley are the subtleties of a subversive poet. One of most significant variants between the poem's first versions in New England and in London as compared to the 1773 version concerns the following lines (as they appear in *Poems on Various Subjects*):

"Take HIM, my dear AMERICANS, he said  
Be your complaints in his kind bosom laid:  
Take HIM, ye *Africans*, he longs for you;  
Impartial SAVIOUR, is his title due;  
If you will chuse [sic] to walk in grace's road,  
You shall be sons, and kings, and priests to God." (28-37, quotations and emphasis in original)

These lines are consistent with an eight-page booklet, *A Poem, by Phillis, a Negro Girl, in Boston. On the death of the Reverend George Whitefield*. Likely predating her collection of poems, the small booklet was first distributed in Boston and Newport in commemoration of the esteemed Reverend. The broadside version, printed in London, reads differently. Rather than ending with "you shall be sons, and kings, and priests to God," the final couplet above stanza in the London stanza reads: If you will chuse to walk in grace's road / *He'll make you free*, and Kings, and Priests to God" (Willis 172, emphasis added). In the New England version, then, Wheatley's words in the stanza directly addressing "ye Africans" are altered to suggest that her African brethren might only aspire to live as better Christian "sons" by "walk[ing] in grace's road" as opposed to her original words, suggesting they might obtain *freedom*. It is very possible, as Willis convincingly argues, that Wheatley in this instance may have submitted the revisions to include "free" under her own volition (Willis 172). It is also telling that this was not present in her collection of poems distributed throughout the thirteen colonies. Just as is



the case with John Wheatley's abovementioned introduction of Phillis, we may yet again be getting a displaced version of the artist, one that is spoken for before and even as she speaks. Censorship may have hidden a more overt politics in the young poet. It did not, however, preclude her from offering subtle and complex fashioning of her national and cultural identity.

Revisions aside, Wheatley's usage of binary opposition is yet another example of her awareness of the inequality between Whites and blacks, and, possibly, her awareness of her African and "American" self. She exhorts "my dear *Americans*" (32, emphasis in original) to lay their complaints "on [Christ's] kind bosom" (34); by comparison, to "ye *Africans*," she declares not only that they might be free (in the London version), but that Christ's "title due" is that of "*impartial savior*" (35). Wheatley, after subtly positing a measure of difference between *African* and *American* through her use of the binary, keenly describes Whitefield as *impartial* savior to Africans,<sup>54</sup> strongly suggesting her awareness of the prevalence and ubiquity of racialized injustice against them.

Interestingly, immediately in the following stanza, Wheatley declares, "we *Americans* revere / Thy name..." (38-40) in reference to the recently deceased Whitefield. This is consistent with the previous stanza, where she uses the possessive to proclaim a sense of allegiance ("my dear Americans"). Here, Wheatley's identification of herself, not only as "American" but as one amongst the masses ("we Americans"),

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<sup>54</sup> Whitefield's actual stance toward slavery was dubious if not contradictory. See Stein, Stephen J. "George Whitefield on Slavery: Some New Evidence," *Church History* 42, 243-256; also see Mechal Sobel's *The World They Made Together: Black and White Values in Eighteenth Century Virginia*, 182. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987.

ostensibly might suggest she has chosen sides, falling in line with the previous trend in scholarship to ultimately acknowledge her as assimilative. However, it would be unfair to accuse Wheatley of distancing herself from an African identity for reasons readily observable in her writing and in her surrounding condition. For one, as James Campbell points out in *Middle Passage: African American Journeys to Africa, 1787-2005*: “the notion of a captive returning to Africa was...an utter novelty” during Wheatley’s lifetime, and certainly was so at the time she composed her poems (Campbell 15).<sup>55</sup> Despite being of African descent – which Wheatley never denies – Africa, or at least relocating to it for purposes other than missionary work, was a distant reality. Thus, it should come as no surprise that Wheatley would consider what would become the United States as “home.” Such a proclamation on her part is not necessarily a distancing of herself from African heritage as much as it serves as an indicator of her awareness of her present reality. She, in effect, suggests that Africans are indeed rightful “Americans,” herself included.

Wheatley does, after all, readily reveal her African identity either directly or indirectly in several instances. (That is, whether or not Wheatley’s writing is accompanied by an extensive introduction or not, she herself insists on injecting her racialized subjectivity into her work.) By doing so, she effectively takes authorial ownership of the disruptive space, using her own subjectivity as an African in the U.S. to

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<sup>55</sup> A number of important events relating to African recolonization and expatriation would take place in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, including the establishment of Sierra Leone (1787) and Liberia (1820). Four Bostonian blacks petitioned to obtain the right to leave the U.S. and return to Africa in 1773. See Campbell, 15-56 for a detailed discussion of individual and collective movements to return to Africa.

reconcile her displacement. Most directly, in “To the University of Cambridge,” she defies convention by inserting herself in her didactic address to the prestigious students, noting “an *Ethiop* tells you [sic] ‘tis your greatest foe.”<sup>56</sup> Her decision to insert not only her *self*, but her race and origin into the language is a perfect example of her claiming this disruptive space. Wheatley’s “On Recollection” begins with the couplet, “Mneme, begin; inspire, ye sacred Nine! Your vent’rous *Afric* in the deep design” (1-2, emphasis in original). Not only does Wheatley reclaim her displacement by claiming her identity as African, but, in referring to herself as “vent’rous,” points to a sense of bravery in her undertaking of summoning the muses, “ye sacred Nine.” She is not only the first published person of African descent in the United States – she is the first to claim African ancestry. It is not at all farfetched that Wheatley saw herself as a pioneer in uncharted territory, an idea strongly supported in her poetry.

As it has often been observed, it is Wheatley’s own footnote that points out that Terence was “an African by birth” in “To Maecenas,” the book’s opening poem (Shields in Wheatley’s *Collected Works* 11).<sup>57</sup> The parallel Wheatley draws in identifying with Terence, the second century Roman poet, underscores her understanding of a relation to those within a diaspora regardless of physical or chronological boundary. She skillfully and covertly employs Terence as her amanuensis, telling her story under the guise of his own. This in mind, her ownership of an African identity is therefore not only in direct

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<sup>56</sup> This, interestingly enough, is one of approximately four lines – depending on how one reads contractions – in the poem that does not fit comfortably within the poem’s iambic pentameter scheme.

<sup>57</sup> “To Maecenas” was not in the original proposal of Wheatley’s volume of poetry and was likely written between April 1772 and September 1773. See Carretta, *Complete Writings* 165, 173n.

conversation with, but is a counter to John Wheatley's shortchanging of her ability and creativity. Moreover, she realizes her unique space in being one of the first to do so.

Wheatley is quite literally (and radically) performing a simultaneous double-insertion of Africa within a European tradition. Her invocation of Terence within a tour de force of her mastery of the classics draws parallels to her own precarious presence, subsumed within the literary confines of her own day. Asking "...why this partial grace / to one alone of Afric's race?" (39-40), Wheatley again creates a disruptive space as she squarely confronts the muses *and* the reader with a question that, on its surface, is concerned with Terence, but is actually concerned with the omission, suppression, and censorship of those like him – that is, her.

The second half of this double-insertion comes in the form of Wheatley as author, in the very act of writing and claiming her subjectivity within a space normally reserved (legally, traditionally, and ideologically) for Europeans. In fact, four of the first seven poems of Wheatley's publication mention Africa explicitly, either as a subject or through Wheatley's self-identification.<sup>58</sup> Withstanding her authorial displacement at the very introduction of her own text, as well as editorial censorship, Wheatley rebukes the idea that she was wholly assimilative or reticent to acknowledge her African-ness. Rather, her poetry becomes a space in which we see how this displacement is reconciled, a complicated mediation on being brought from Africa to America (as she might put it). The reader cannot help but to be confronted with Wheatley's mentions of difference, one

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<sup>58</sup> Specifically, these poems are: "To MAECENAS," "To the University of Cambridge, in NEW-ENGLAND," "On being brought from AFRICA to AMERICA," and "On the Death of the Rev. Mr. GEORGE WHITEFIELD."

that she accepts as a reality from which she offers her own unique perspective. She is in this way a true trailblazer of a tradition, at once recognizing herself as African while also campaigning for the equal and fair treatment of other Africans. That she also declares her entitlement to existing on equal terms with her captors (“we Americans”) is just as significant. Yet, an important question still looms: how can Wheatley be both an advocate of “the happier Terence” and proud of her own African identity while also referring to her “native shore” (3) as “dark abodes” (6) as “the land of errors, and Egyptian gloom” (4)?

#### WHEATLEY AND SALVATION-LIBERATION IDEOLOGY

While her view on her homeland was indeed a complex one, it is first important to understand the centrality of Christianity as a lens through which she imagines herself, Africa, and the plight of fellow Africans. She is less like the embattled Countee Cullen in this regard; whereas religion acts as a source of vexation in his understanding of self and of heritage, Wheatley is resolute in her faith. In fact, it is the primary lens through which she sees the world. She is unwavering in her belief that Africans on either side of the Atlantic must be free; she is similarly unwavering in her belief that they might only find true freedom through Christ. If anything, Wheatley does not see Africans as inferior; rather, she sees non-Christians as in need of salvation.

A telling example of Wheatley's disposition regarding race, religion, and freedom is found in her highly publicized letter to the Mohegan preacher Samson Occom,<sup>59</sup> dated 11 February 1774, quoted below at length:

[I] *am greatly satisfied* with your Reasons respecting the Negroes, and think *highly reasonable* what you offer in Vindication of their *natural Rights*: Those that invade them cannot be insensible that the divine Light is chasing away the thick Darkness which broods over the Land of Africa; and the Chaos which has reigned so long, is converting into beautiful Order, and reveals more and more clearly, *the glorious Dispensation of civil and religious Liberty, which are so inseparably united, that there is little or no Enjoyment of one without the other...*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 same Principle lives in us.* (qtd in Shields, *Collected Works* 176-177, emphasis added.)

The intricacies of language in Wheatley's letter warrant scrutiny here. She almost indifferently notes that "Those who invade them" as a part of their missionary work "chas[e] away the thick Darkness that broods over the Land of Africa," thereby "reveal[ing]...the glorious Dispensation of civil and religious Liberty." On the surface, Wheatley's use of the word "Darkness" might be interpreted as a distancing from or condescension toward Africans given our contemporary sensibilities. And while such a critique may very well be valid, it is important to underscore that darkness also – particularly at that time – referred to "the want of spiritual or intellectual light" (Oxford English Dictionary). Wheatley's choice of words that surround her use of "darkness" shed light on her perspective, as she demonstrates her simultaneous awareness of the transgression of space on the part of the missionaries ("invade") while also evincing a

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<sup>59</sup> Occom, one of the first indigenous Christian preachers, regularly preached about the virtues of Christianity and the hypocrisy of Christian slaveholders. See Occom, Samuel. *The Collected Writings of Samson Occom, Mohegan*. Ed. Joanna Brooks. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

complicated understanding of freedom. She invokes a Lockean consciousness of the concept of “natural rights”<sup>60</sup> and not only extends them to “Negroes,” but ardently supports Occom’s promotion of them. What is at the heart of the matter is Wheatley’s understanding of liberty.

Whereas for Wheatley “civil” liberty is “impatient of Oppression,” “religious Liberty” is the emancipation that only Christ can bring. (This is, of course, contrary to the notion of religious liberty and freedom as the right to practice the religion of one’s choosing.) The ostensible cognitive dissonance here highlights the centrality of religion to Wheatley, one that allows for her to believe in the political freedom and emancipation of Africans while also advocating for that freedom through a Christian lens. This was at all not atypical of the time period. Even in John Locke’s influential *Two Treatises of Government* (1690), which informed the many Enlightenment thinkers and politicians in the eighteenth century (including Thomas Jefferson), the individual endowments known as “natural rights” still were bestowed upon all people through God; that is, these rights were conditionally granted to all those who believed in and subscribed to Christian beliefs.

Hence, Wheatley’s poem, “On Being Brought from Africa to America” simultaneously extols the virtue of her conversion to Christianity while also excoriating those “who view our sable race with scornful eye” (7). Such a complicated

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<sup>60</sup> In *Two Treatises of Government* (1690), John Locke writes, then man has a *natural freedom*...since all that share in the same common nature, faculties and powers, are in nature equal, and ought to partake in the same common rights and privileges, till the manifest appointment of God, who is *Lord over all, blessed for ever*, can be produced to shew any particular person’s supremacy; or a man’s own consent subjects him to a superior (44). Locke also believed in the separation of church and state.

understanding of self was not uncommon during Wheatley's lifetime, especially considering the rise of missionaries sent across the Atlantic for the very purpose of "civilizing" Africans. (One is reminded of Wheatley's closing lines to the aforementioned poem, as she writes: "Remember, Christians, Negroes, black as Cain / may be refin'd, and join th'angelic train," which will be explored at length later in this chapter). In this curious model of displacement reconciliation, Wheatley simultaneously identifies with a missionary tradition of Western civility vis-à-vis a Christian identity while also sympathizing with and advocating for the cause of recognizing the ways in which Africans were oppressed,<sup>61</sup> ergo a salvation-liberation ideology. In the literary sense, her poetics of identity serve as the beginning of the variegated trope of "Christ as Freedom" which would take on several forms and manifest itself in numerous ways in the form of missionary work, spirituals, and revolutionary rhetoric in the United States and throughout the diaspora. This would be a recurrent source of tension that would be faced by countless people of African descent after her, from the slave to the freeman / freewoman, the peasant to the poet.

To understand Wheatley's seemingly contradictory racial politics, it is important to emphasize how, above all, her Christian identity was such that the word of Christ was paramount to the salvation of any and all peoples. In an unpublished poem, "An Address to the Atheist," a fourteen year-old Wheatley voices her view of a Christian spirituality thusly: "Methinks I see the consequence thou art blind / Thy unbelief disturbs the peaceful mind" (Wheatley, *Complete Writings* 69). It comes as no surprise then that her

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<sup>61</sup> Also worth noting is that Wheatley's passionate letter to Occom concerning the freedom of Africans is written after her own emancipation.



poetry and letters are replete with references to the need of Africans to come to Christ. In a letter dated 6 May 1774, she writes to the Reverend Samuel Hopkins of Newport of the necessity of missionary work, “this work of wonder,” in turning the Africans “‘*from darkness to light*’” (Wheatley, *Complete Writings* 157, emphasis in original), not unlike Wheatley’s abovementioned writings to Occom that “divine Light is chasing away the thick Darkness which broods over the Land of Africa.” (Here again, darkness functions in the realm of the spiritual, not the racial.) Her passion was such that she was approached with the idea of traveling to Africa to spread the Word herself. Her response to Occom is worth examining here, as it offers insight into the manner in which she conceptualizes herself as a Christianized African in what would become the United States.

Initially objecting to traveling across the Atlantic (“So long a voyage”) on account of being an inconvenience to her company, she also curiously notes, “Upon my arrival, how like a Barbarian Shoud [sic] 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 Anamaboe”<sup>62</sup> (159). This, I argue, is a significant interpolation on Wheatley’s part of the notions of Barbarity and civilization prevalent in the eighteenth century. Here, she places herself as the Barbarian outsider, subtly suggesting the civility of the African as through her recognition of the autonomous space of “the Natives” who are “invaded” by the missionary’s word. (Recall also that it is Wheatley who is described as “an uncultivated Barbarian” by the dignitaries who sign the attestation accompanying her book.) Those

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<sup>62</sup> The homeland of John Quamine, who was to accompany Wheatley on the missionary trip.

who argue Wheatley to be a “bloodless” or “unracial” would have a difficult time inveighing such a critique in light of her demonstrated awareness of cultural space, something that her European and American contemporaries surely did not grant non-whites.

Wheatley grants a level of cultural autonomy to the Africans in question even as she distances herself from them as an “other.” She still identifies herself *as* African, made clear in her previous letter to Thornton as well as in her poetry, yet recognizes the cultural distance and difference between her African past and her African / American self. She adds as a caveat, “...This undertaking appears too hazardous, and not sufficiently Eligible, to go – *and leave my British & American Friends...*” (159, emphasis added). Here, Wheatley is at once cognizant of the cultural nuances of her relation to (and distance from) her fellow Africans, a theme that would permeate the writing of blacks in the U.S. up to and through Langston Hughes’s famous “Afro-American Fragment.” On one hand, she culturally identifies with her “British & American Friends.” Yet, the fact that she possesses the prescience to recognize cultural difference between her and her African counterpart (as a teenager!) is also significant, as she, amidst a racially hostile ideological and political climate, *recognizes* an African culture in the very first place. Also worth noting is that she sees herself as African while existing within this very real ideological construct. Thus, she is able to at once be a part of and apart from an African past, all while recognizing herself as within a diaspora, distinct both from the land of her birth and the land of her being. While Africa may not be immediate to her, she certainly recognizes a connection she has with the land of her

childhood, yet also connects with the environment in which she was raised afterward. She evinces a sophisticated fashioning of selfhood in the midst of her captivity, one that arguably is possible only through a conduit familiar to so many people of African descent both then and subsequently: Christianity.

To understand Wheatley's reconciliation of her internal duality, one must understand how central Christianity is to her worldview. Before much of the necessary recent scholarship repositioning Wheatley as non-assimilative would appear, Mukhtar Ali Isani shrewdly posited that "Phillis Wheatley's deprecating remarks about Africa must be seen in the light of her New England religious background. She mourns not an African origin but a non-Christian origin" ("Gambia on My Soul" 65). To add to Isani's important observation, Wheatley's Christian identity not only explains what appears to be a sympathizing and even pitying predisposition toward non-Christian Africans, but also explains her relatively radical belief in equality between Europeans and Africans. In a letter to London lawyer John Thornton, she refers to Christ as "no respecter of Persons: being equally the great Maker of all" (*Complete Writings* 150) and continues that He "disdain[s] not to be called the Father of Humble Africans and Indians" (150). Most telling is her closing: "though despisd [sic] on earth on account of our colour, we have this Consolation, if he enables us to deserve it [:] 'That God dwells in the humble & contrite heart.'" (150) Here, Wheatley makes plain her awareness that she was "despis[e]d" – and one amongst a larger marginalized African diaspora "*on account of our color.*" Moreover, the "consolation" in existing in this marginalized space is through

Christ; that is, it is through a Christian identity that one – whether “African” or “Indian” – must move forward.

This is not to say that this lens is the sole determinant of how Wheatley sees the world, or herself for the matter. Wheatley’s oft-quoted stanza in “To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth” makes plain how her identity as an African also informs her worldview. After passionately writing about the “wanton tyranny” faced by the thirteen colonies under British rule, she writes:

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, 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. And can I then but pray  
Others may never feel tyrannic sway? (20-32, emphasis in original)

These lines have rightfully been recognized as Wheatley’s most transparent and vociferous critique of slavery. She reduces the slave trader who captured her to unhuman (“Steel’d was that soul”) while referring to her removal from her home as “cruel.” Wheatley also provides the first poetic testimonial of black family and kinship, infinitely important within the larger context of an enterprise that so wantonly dismissed the importance or even relevance of family for Africans in the first place. And Wheatley goes beyond merely recording the act; she places emphasis on a loving bond between mother and daughter in saying that “from a father” the person who captured her “seized

his babe belov'd." She also offers a revision to her oft-cited description of Africa as a "land of errors" in "On Being Brought," instead referring to its "fancy'd happy seat." And, of course, the entire verse is dedicated to explaining "from whence my love of Freedom sprung," so as to explain to the Earl of Dartmouth (or perhaps the curious reader) how and why she, an African, is so opposed to British tyranny of the colonies.

Wheatley carefully blankets her racial politics within this larger discourse of universal freedom from oppression. This poem again highlights Wheatley's implicit statement of placing Africans on an equal plane with the colonists, or blacks as *equal to* whites in their endowment of natural rights. Taken in tandem with the aforementioned "On the Death of the Rev. George Whitefield," where a similar tactic is utilized, the poems show how one can see Wheatley's adroit manipulation of vocabulary. She creates an ostensibly broad yet intricately multi-layered rhetoric of "freedom" and "slavery" that circumvents the politics of censorship while also positing a(n African-centered) sensibility of liberty and justice. The words preceding this critically important stanza in "To the Earl of Dartmouth" highlight how this effect is carefully achieved.

Wheatley introduces the notion of a regionalized freedom within the poem's first couplet: "Hail, happy day, when, smiling like the morn, / Fair *Freedom* rose *New-England* to adorn" (1-2). Within the space of the five lines that compose the poem's second stanza, she invokes America by name (in silent juxtaposition to its then-mother country), stating,

No longer shalt thou dread *the iron chain*,  
Which wanton *Tyranny* with lawless hand  
Had made, and with it meant *t'enslave* the land (17-19)

Her references to “*America*” become quite curious, as Wheatley unhesitatingly characterizes its plight and triumph with imagery evoking that of the condition of the African slave (“iron chain,” “enslave the land.”). This effect is doubly enhanced by Wheatley yet again inserting the self as witness, authorially *claiming* her experience as both a testimonial and protest, ultimately making her understanding of “freedom” as an enslaved African paramount within the poem.

Her deeply personal and reflective stanza, then, becomes her clearest articulation of Africa’s significance to Wheatley. Whereas Christ is the lens through which humanity may find salvation and find true freedom, it is her birthplace, Africa – and her displacement from it – that serves as the cornerstone of her sympathy and passion that informs her advocacy for the enslaved. Said another way, Wheatley certainly believes that devotion to Christian principles will result in freedom and liberation, but her consciousness of her African identity and ancestry along with her recognition of the racial landscape that feeds her strong belief in emancipation from “lawless hand” for those who are unjustly oppressed.

Wheatley’s pointed language in this poem makes it difficult to argue she was wholly complacent with her own displacement and separation from her past. She is not merely moved but “snatch’d” from “Afric’s fancy’d happy seat,” underscoring the aspect of forced migration that marks her displacement. Moreover, Wheatley chooses not to utilize herself as the main focus of her unjust displacement; instead, she chooses to invoke kinship ties, literally connecting with an African past by pointing out the

“excruciating pangs” of separation felt “in my parent’s breast.” The stanza microcosmically encapsulates how Wheatley reconciles her displacement in her larger body of poetry and her life in its conclusion as she points to the plight of Africans to make a larger plea for freedom for the Americans under the British: “Such, such my case. And can I then but pray / Others may never feel tyrannic sway?” Wheatley subtly posits herself as part of lineage, claiming ownership of an experience that informs her ideas of justice. She skillfully appropriates African lineage and inheritance – all within the confines of neoclassical convention – to challenge the widely held assumptions of the Enlightenment that the African was devoid of a worthy or memorable past, was barbarous, without a concept of family, and was intellectually handicapped. Wheatley is particularly equipped to comment on the latter, as the neoclassical era sought to reclaim the virtue of intellectual pursuit. Most consistent in her style is the subtlety with she makes her arguments under the guise of romanticizing upon a universal ideal, as is the case with Wheatley’s often overlooked poem, “To. S.M., An African Painter, upon seeing his Works.” Understanding the significance of “To S.M.,” however, takes much more of a contextual lens.

The racial significance of “To. S.M.” is not readily apparent by anything within its text other than its title; rather, it is significant in its focus and purpose. The larger significance is excavated upon further review of its inclusion amongst her book’s other poems. Phillis Wheatley’s *Poems on Various Subjects* contains twenty-three poems that

are dedicated to individuals.<sup>63</sup> While Wheatley's extensive focus on Death has received critical attention (fifteen of the dedication poems directly deal with death or a close encounter with it),<sup>64</sup> there is something to be made about the "who" and "what" of these dedication poems. Thirteen are dedicated to either extolling the deeds, work, and legacies of dignitaries and public luminaries (e.g. reverends, politicians, militiamen) or elegizing them. Of the remaining ten dedication poems to non-luminaries, *all* deal with death or ailment (directly or indirectly) except for one, which stands apart from all of the dedication poems: "To S.M. a young *African* Painter, on seeing his Works." That is, "To S.M." is the only of Wheatley's dedication poems praising and extolling the life of a seemingly ordinary individual, Scipio Moorhead.

The verses of Wheatley's poem to the young painter do not mention race directly, yet the poem speaks volumes in its singularity and uniqueness. Whereas all of

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<sup>63</sup> These poems are: "To the KING's Most Excellent Majesty"; "On the Death of the Rev. Dr. SEWELL"; "On the Death of the Rev. Mr. GEORGE WHITEFIELD"; "On the Death of a young Lady of Five Years of Age"; "On the Death of a young Gentleman"; "To a Lady on the Death of her Husband"; "To a Lady on the Death of Three Relations"; "To a Clergyman on the Death of his Lady"; "A Funeral POEM on the Death of C.E. an Infant of Twelve Months"; "To Captain H—D, of the 65<sup>th</sup> Regiment"; "To the Right Honourable WILLIAM, Earl of DARTMOUTH"; "To a LADY on her coming to North-American with her Son, for the Recovery of her Health"; "To a LADY on her remarkable Preservation in an Hurricane in *North-Carolina*"; "To a LADY and her Children, on the Death of her Son and their Brother"; "To a GENTLEMAN and LADY on the Death of the Lady's Brother and Sister, and a Child of the Name *Avis*, aged one Year"; "A HYMN to HUMANITY. To S.P.G. Esq"; "On the Death of Dr. SAMUEL MARSHALL"; "To a GENTLEMAN on his Voyage to *Great-Britain* for the Recovery of his Health"; "To the Rev. Dr. THOMAS AMORY on reading his Sermons on DAILY DEVOTION"; "On the Death of J.C. an Infant"; "To the Honourable T.H. Esq; on the Death of his Daughter"; "To S.M. a young *African* Painter, on seeing his works"; and "To His Honour the Lieutenant-Governor, on the Death of his Lady." While "A Farewel to AMERICA [sic]. To Mrs. S.W." is a dedication by name, the text of the poem does not address S.W. (Susanna Wheatley) as a personal subject, but rather addresses the journey from New England to London.

<sup>64</sup> E.g. Ali Isani's "Phillis Wheatley and the Elegiac Mode," Gordon Thompson's "Methodism and the Consolidation of Heavenly Bliss in Phillis Wheatley's Funeral Elegies" 48.1 (2004): 34-50; Jennifer Thorn's "Phillis Wheatley's Ghosts: The Racial Melancholy of New England Protestants" *Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation*, 50.1 (2009): 73-99; most recently, it has been discovered that Wheatley's first work (written in 1765) was an elegy. See Vincent Carretta's "Phillis Wheatley's First Effort," *PMLA* 125.3 (2010): 795-797.



Wheatley's dedication poems to non-luminaries treat the notion of Death, her poem to Moorhead – an *African*, as she identifies in the title –, by contrast, treats *life* and human imagination. That is, Wheatley is celebrating *African* imagination. Within the context established in the previous chapter, where cognitive originality and creativity were “scientifically” proven to be alien to blacks, Wheatley's praises of Moorhead's creativity and ability is significant, as she implores him to “fix thine ardent view” on “*deathless* glories” (8, emphasis mine). Moorhead, scarcely regarded by white society with the same reverence as, say, the William Legge (the Earl of Dartmouth) or the Rev. George Whitefield, is treated as a creative subject worthy of both critical attention and praise. In effect, Wheatley lifts the painter to the status of a luminary in her decision to dedicate a poem to him, as the only poems of praise that do not focus on death or ailment in her collection are those dedicated to the likes of George Washington, the Earl of Dartmouth, and the King of England. Additionally, just as in the abovementioned discussion of “disruptive spaces,” Wheatley's inclusion of the descriptor “young *African* painter” as a titular rendering confronts the reader with the identity *and* ability of the subject. Here, Wheatley deftly positions S.M. as a mimetic extension of herself, as it is Wheatley who confronts the reader with her African identity and ability in through her own collection of poems. She allies herself with S.M. on the basis of creativity and African lineage much like she does with the poet Terence, a point also highlighted in her own musings on imagination.

Wheatley toys with the reader in her playful conversation with imagination itself, concomitantly making a statement about her own cognitive and poetic abilities in the

process. She again detracts attention from herself, this time using allusion and collective personal pronoun to do so. In “On Imagination,” she writes:

*Imagination!* Who can sing thy force?  
Or describe the swiftness of thy course?  
Soaring through air to find the bright above,  
Th’ empyreal palace of the thund’ring God,  
We on thy pinions can surpass the wind,  
And leave the rolling universe behind:  
From star to star the mental optics rove,  
Measure the skies, and range the realms above. (13-20)

Wheatley uses ironic communication to highlight her rightful place as a poet and, on a larger level, as a full human being to be taken seriously in her cognitive faculties. Under a humble guise, Wheatley uses apostrophe to ask a rhetorical question. While wondering just “who...can describe the swiftness” of imagination’s course, Wheatley *does just that* in the stanza immediately preceding the one above:

Now here, now there, the roving *Fancy* flies,  
Till some lov’d object strikes her wand’ring eyes,  
Whose silken fetters all the senses bind,  
And soft captivity involves the mind.” (9-12)

Here, it is important to note the multiplicity of meanings of “fancy,” particularly the notion of “phantasm,” “fantasy,” and “the process, and the faculty, of forming mental representations of things not present to the senses” (Oxford English Dictionary),<sup>65</sup> a meaning Wheatley certainly would have had access to given her extensive training in the classics. “Fancy” also was synonymous with “thought” (Shields, *Phillis Wheatley and the Romantics* 3). Thus, Wheatley uses “fancy” to describe not only imagination’s course

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<sup>65</sup> While earlier definitions indicate “imagination” and “fancy” to be synonymous, “imagination” was beginning to be used denote the ability to imbue consistency to idealized concepts, while “fancy” was given more toward the inventive creative faculties, particularly for visual aesthetics.

("now here, now there"), but also positions herself as "some lov'd object" struck by "her wand'ring eyes," ultimately able to "surpass the wind" on "thy pinions." She, an African, makes an argument for her own ability and mental faculty as both a poet and a human being. And, as has been argued previously, Christianity once again surfaces as an important lens through which we understand Wheatley's politics of identity. Given this lens of Wheatley's understanding of her own abilities, her own identity, and of her fellow Africans – both in the thirteen colonies and in Africa – we can now venture to synthesize what may be her most direct commentary on her subjectivity, "On Being Brought From Africa to America."

#### SALVATION-LIBERATION IDEOLOGY IN "ON BEING BROUGHT FROM AFRICA TO AMERICA"

"On Being Brought" has easily become one of if not the most famous of Wheatley's poems. Given the way in which she is introduced to the public by John Wheatley as a "barbarian" who "was brought from Africa to America" at the age of approximately seven years, the reader is wont to expect Wheatley's direct reflection on (and resentment of) her journey. Certainly, the rise of cultural studies in the past half-century adds to the already well-established interest that scholars of the black literary tradition have had in this particular poem of Wheatley's; it explicitly advertises itself through its titular referents as making a statement on being a colonial subject, being a displaced member within a diaspora, and being an authentic speaker. Yet, not surprisingly, Wheatley defies expectation from the outset. The reader is not greeted with the voice of rebellion, of vitriol, or of resentment; rather, in the very first line, Wheatley

cites “mercy” as the entity that brought her across the Atlantic, not nefarious and unrelenting slave traders that one might expect to be featured in such a narrative. But we soon find that this poem is not what it purports to be after all; it is not a recounting of her physical journey across the Atlantic so much as it is the description of a spiritual journey. (As mentioned above, this is reserved for “To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth.”) What complicates the clarity of Wheatley’s poem to the contemporary reader has much to do with language and our evolved consciousness of race and its signifiers.

Keeping in mind the abovementioned need to understand Wheatley’s understanding of her Christian identity distinct (yet not unrelated) from her understanding of her African identity, we can read Wheatley’s poem as not repudiating Africans as savages, but as advocating on their behalf. Wheatley’s first four lines feature an inward consideration, a reflection on her personal journey toward salvation:

Twas mercy brought me from my pagan land  
Taught my beknighted soul to understand  
That there’s a God, that there’s a Savior, too,  
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew (1-4)

The very first line in Wheatley’s piece might not be so troublesome but for its proximity to the suggestive title, “On Being Brought from Africa to America.” Upon reading such a title, the reader frames the spatial boundaries of Wheatley’s poem to physical locales – namely, Africa and America – rather than conceptual, or, in this case, ethereal and celestial ones. If one reads the first line within the confines of physical boundary, the place to which Wheatley is “brought” to is America; the individuals who “brought” her,

in our historical memory, are slave traders and slave owners; and, most troubling, the act of “bringing” in this context becomes an act of “mercy.” Upon reading the lines that follow, however, it becomes apparent that this geophysical framework is not altogether adequate.

We find that the unspoken land to which Wheatley has been taken is solely imbued with characteristics reflecting her spirituality. Besides the first line, the only other mention of the “land” (or, better, space) that she is “brought” from comes in the line, “*Once I redemption* neither sought nor knew.” The “once” refers, of course, to an earlier time when she was in a previous state – sans (religious) redemption. That is, the “place” that she has been brought to is not a physical one; it is salvation by Christ. This theme, of course, is not original in the least, as it is present throughout Wheatley’s collection of poems and is to be expected of her as a student of the Bible writing in the eighteenth century. The second half of the poem is the critical turning point, bringing together what is to this point a confusing if not problematic depiction of a scene.

Wheatley’s use of chromatic and biblical language toward the end of her poem invites ambiguity and the potential of a subversive critique that takes the poem away from a purely religious poem to a political one. Shifting from a personal and internally reflective voice, Wheatley becomes suggestive, critical, and provocative in her final lines:

Some view our sable race with scornful eye:  
“Their colour is a diabolic die”  
Remember, *Christians, Negros*, black as *Cain*  
May be refin’d and join th’angelic train. (5-8, emphasis in original)

Here, Wheatley plays with the notion of blackness, traversing the boundaries between “black” as a color, “black” as a race, and “black” “as a sign of a depraved spiritual condition” (Cook and Tatum 10). Perhaps Wheatley purposely intended these usages of black imagery so as not to refer to one particular meaning, but to several at once. In any case, this chromatic confluence of meaning in the language used in the poem is what allows her religious zeal to coexist with her racial politics within the same poem. With all of its implicit complexity and perceptible overlap, Wheatley’s multidimensional manipulation of the chromatic embodies her own “black” worldview.

Wheatley’s usage of the external voice within her critique creates a safe distance between herself and the controversial point she voices – strategically so, as she is dealing with contentious subject matter. The outsider voice that views “*our* race with scornful eye” (emphasis mine) is perhaps the second-most important piece of the poem, aside from the final couplet. Separating herself from that voice, Wheatley is careful with the words she chooses, or, rather, whom she chooses to “say” them. Where there once was ambiguity there is now clarity, as Wheatley injects “colour” and all of its meanings into what once only was a religious tract. The notion of color referring to a spiritual condition and as a perception of a race comes together in the line, “Their colour is a diabolic die.” The word “diabolic” finds its etymological roots in French (“diabolique”), preceded by Latin (“diabolocus”) and Greek (*διαβολικός*), all of which refer to “devil.” (Take this in comparison to our contemporary and more secular understanding of diabolic as “evil.”) Here, interjecting with an outside (that is, not autobiographical) voice, she makes an example of the speaker to ridicule the very idea of racial essentialism implied in the

linkage between color and behavior (i.e. “colour” necessarily being “diabolic” or devilish). The caesura presented by the outsider voice is immediately met with Wheatley’s own rejoinder, which reconciles the tension in the poem and ultimately underscores her true conception of “blackness.”

The poem’s final lines, in this context, are not so much the words of a brainwashed subject as they are a plea to recognize the African’s humanity. William J. Cook and James Tatum in *African American Writers & Classical Tradition* (2010) rightly point out that “Wheatley rejects the argument of many of her contemporaries that Africans were soulless, that redemption was not intended to include them” (10). The last couplet speaks directly to this. Beginning the with the cautionary imperative “Remember,” Wheatley suggests that the idea of “*Negros*, black as *Cain*” being “refin’d” is a forgotten, doubted, or neglected thought. (It was, during that time period, certainly a controversial one<sup>66</sup>). Again, Wheatley’s usage of “black” is not a racial label for Abel’s brother Cain, but instead is a marker of his ungodliness. She is suggesting that Africans are indeed fully human, placing them once again on the same level of Christian whites, as done elsewhere in her work. Thus, it is not that Wheatley sees Africa as hell or Africans as hellish; rather, it is that through her Christian lens, she is deeply troubled by what she

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<sup>66</sup> As it has been extensively documented, the eighteenth century saw a tremendous rise in the importation of slaves and dependency on slavery as a system throughout the Western hemisphere. The 1772 *Somerset* case, as well as several publications by Enlightenment thinkers, including Locke and Montesquieu, brought slavery and its moral justification vis-à-vis religion under close scrutiny. For a detailed discussion, see David Brion Davis’s *In the Image of God: Religion, Moral Values, and Our Heritage of Slavery* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), particularly 123-137.

sees as spiritual depravity of *her own* people. While it might be problematical that Wheatley's vision of religious liberty is restricted to freedom through Christ (which pales in comparison to her much broader view of civil liberty), this much is present in her writings as they relate to Africans: they are not inferior human beings; they are not without merit (e.g. Scipio Moorhead); and, equally as important, not without a culture to be acknowledged (as indicated in her positioning of *herself* as a Barbarian "to the Natives" of Anamaboe). Whereas Wheatley has been portrayed as a victim of Christianity's trance, she instead sees Christianity as a means of uplift.

Wheatley so desperately pleads for their religious salvation because it is through this lens and only through this lens that she can envision their ultimate liberation. Wheatley's salvation-liberation ideology that ultimately guides the reconciliation of her displacement is reflexively operative: it is the mode through which the reader encounters her Christian morality just as it is her medium for expressing her belief in freedom; simultaneously, it operates as the mode through which Wheatley achieves her own freedom and (albeit paltry) means of living as a published poet. This very same salvation-liberation ideology dictates her critique of slavery and informs her consciousness as it relates to whites, for she insists that a true Christian would undoubtedly see the sin in racial inequality. Yet while it allows Wheatley to advocate for political freedom and equality for all, it also ironically precludes the possibility of religious freedom, as Christ is essentially the only means through which such equality can be achieved. Still, this is an important point to underscore, as it augments how the source of much of the tensions in Wheatley's writing are deeply rooted in her religious



identity. It is not that she sees Africans (and thus herself) as inherently inferior, as literature and popular thought of the day maintained; rather, she sees Africans, Europeans – blacks and whites – as full human beings who must find Christ in order to coexist. And while she also claims ownership of her personal distance from Africa, she unhesitatingly invokes her ties to it as a part of her past and present when advocating for the cause of equality and freedom.

Thus, Wheatley, in recognizing the significance of her own displacement, begins a tradition of poets who recognize their unique space within the margins of the American narrative. In this way, she embodies the heterogeneity and hybridity so common within subject-agents in the diaspora. The themes present in her work would continue to be present, with important modifications, in the poets who sought to make sense of their geocultural displacement within the African diaspora in the eventful century that was to follow.

### CHAPTER 3

#### **“FROM BARDS WHO FROM THY ROOT SHALL SPRING”: ETHIOPIANISM, ANTI-IMPERIALISM AND UPLIFT IN THE POETRY OF PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR AND FRANCES ELLEN WATKINS HARPER**

Though several parts of the Bible have historically been used to offer hope and explanation of Africa's fate,<sup>67</sup> Ethiopianism is a concept which derives its roots from Psalm 68:31. Though there are several versions, perhaps the most oft-cited reads, “Princes shall come out of Egypt, Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God” (King James Version, Psalms 68:31). William Scott posits that Ethiopianism “may be defined as a religious-political concept of race revival” (44). He aptly points out that the theory is often misconstrued and conflated with more contemporary iterations which coincide with Ras Tafari culture and Emperor Haile Salassie (44), which further obscures its nineteenth and eighteenth century historical foundations as a response to white hegemony. Scott details three different strains of Ethiopianist thought: a “militant” Ethiopianism – calls to action and awakening of which Young's *Manifesto* and David Walker's *Appeal* are exemplars; cultural Ethiopianism – artistic romanticizing and paradisiacal reflecting which includes the contributions of writers such as Dunbar, W.E.B. Du Bois, and playwright J.A. Shipp at the turn of the twentieth century; and millennial Ethiopianism, also a late nineteenth century creation, which focuses on “a future black golden age” (Scott 48-49). While Scott's general definition is useful, I argue that these three categories are actually more indistinguishable, interlocking, and blurred.

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<sup>67</sup> See: Zephaniah 3:10; Isaiah 18:7; 45:14; Acts 8:27; Psalm 87:4, for example.

John Cullen Gruesser argues that this “tradition of Ethiopianist biblical exegesis”<sup>68</sup> became a significant component of thought within U.S. blacks before the Civil War (8).<sup>69</sup> Not until after the Civil War would a significant influx of black missionaries descend upon Africa to spread the word of Christ – thus lending credence to Scott’s insistence on the late nineteenth century as a seminal moment in Ethiopianist thought. Gruesser suggests that this Christian-centered mantra of a promised liberation of Ethiopia’s children (i.e. “millennial Ethiopianism”) integrated with the prevailing political thought amongst blacks in the United States much earlier in the emancipation struggle (8), citing Walker’s *Appeal* (1829) and Young’s *Ethiopian Manifesto* (1829). Centering on Psalm 68:31, Ethiopianism was not only important in creating a narrative of destiny and a *modus operandi* for uplift; it was also essential in reconciling the displacement of blacks in the US by way of providing a sense of unity as a people. Said differently, the ability of the primarily West and Central African-descended peoples of the “New World” to see themselves within Ethiopia in eastern Africa offered a fluid conception of peoples necessary to champion the notion of an “African race,” an

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<sup>68</sup> Gruesser identifies Ethiopianism as follows;

First, it asserts a common heritage shared by African Americans and Africans...Second, [it] adopts the biblical notion of a Supreme Being who raises and punishes nations, leading to a belief in a cyclical view of history in which the fortunes of people rise and fall...Third, it predicts a bright future for peoples of African descent...Fourth... [Ethiopianism] exhibits monumentalism, which Wilson Moses defines, in an essay entitled “More Stately Mansions,” as “an expression of the desire to associate black Americans with symbols of wealth, intelligence, stability, and power” such as those of ancient Egypt and Ethiopia (42)” (*Black on Black* 4)

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, Gruesser identifies a fifth component, “African American exceptionalism – the belief that because of their experiences in the West and adoption of Christianity black Americans were the people best qualified to lead Africans and members of the diaspora to the bright future foretold for them.” (6)

<sup>69</sup> Also see William Scott’s “The Ethiopian Ethos in African American Thought”

amalgam of distinct cultures united under what would become an important political bloc in the midst of battles against slavery and deportation. Babatunde Lawal points out that in adopting the Greco-Roman signifier of “Ethiopian” as the more inclusive “black African,” U.S. blacks connected a racialized identity in order to “deliver them from the tribulations of slavery and social injustice” (Lawal 418-419). Mattias Gardell elucidates how biblical Ethiopianism offered a framework for U.S. blacks to reconcile their displacement, their history, and also look forward to a prosperous future:

Ethiopia symbolized Africa, which was envisioned as the cradle of mankind and identified with the Promised Land. As a necessary divine lesson, God put the originators of civilization to “sleep” and world hegemony was transferred to other races. God allowed foreigners to conquer Africa and His Chosen People were scattered throughout the Diaspora, but white supremacy was only temporary. Pharaoh would be forced to free the enslaved and God would bring home the exiled. (22)

No longer firmly tied to their original and distinct nations of their ancestors, U.S. blacks, by virtue of the prevailing politics of the day and the cultural intertwining that took place after being taken over the Atlantic, were able to conceptualize themselves as an African people – “Afric’s sons,” as was written in the literature of the day – thus fitting them within the narrative of Psalm 68:31. Ethiopianism provide a framework for U.S. blacks to see themselves collectively within the biblical narratives of struggle in their homeland and abroad, whether in speeches such as the one delivered to the African Society in 1808, or in the poetry of the likes of Harper or Dunbar later in the century. Ethiopianism, then, became a central unifying concept of a diasporic syncretism, bringing together lands and peoples wide and far under a common cause and condition: challenging White hegemony and obtaining black equality and citizenship. Summarily,

“God’s will” for the African people became the manner through which many U.S. blacks saw their conditions domestically and abroad, a theme reflected in nineteenth century black poetics in the U.S.

Ethiopianism was not merely a basis for collective identity, but a charge for uplift. Whereas Africa hitherto had been constructed in the Western literary and intellectual imagination as “a slumbering female, under-developed when compared to Europe, America, and Asia” (Lawal 413), the Ethiopianist framework, directly or indirectly, enabled free and enslaved U.S. blacks to embrace a more redemptive, positive, and empowered vision of Africa (413). Lawal adds: “blacks in antebellum United States would deconstruct and revise the ‘slumbering’ Africa stereotype and then use it rhetorically to underscore the coma-like state into which Mother Africa / Ethiopia had fallen *in consequence of the injuries inflicted on her by the transatlantic slave trade*” (419, emphasis added). Thus, the embrace of Ethiopianist doctrine marks a reappropriation (or reclamation) of a narrative from a White justification of slavery – with Africans as Ham’s cursed descendants<sup>70</sup> – to a narrative with Africans and their descendants as agents who shall inherit the spoils after overcoming white global hegemony. This translated into conscious embrace of freedom and liberation in the politics and literature of the nineteenth century. Albert Raboteau further explains the historical significance of the Psalm to the realities of Christians of African descent during the period:

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<sup>70</sup> Though the narrative of blacks as descendants of the curse of Ham as a justification of slavery is a fairly overwrought narrative, a particularly fascinating elucidation can be found in white colonization enthusiast and Reverend Frederick Freeman’s *Africa’s Redemption, the Salvation of Our Country* (1852). The book, dedicated to Henry Clay, is in the form of imagined conversations ranging on topics including Liberia, African intelligence, and the dangers of miscegenation.

The purpose of God, revealing itself in human history, was the redemption of the African race. Slavery was his means for achieving this end – good drawn out of evil. But this was not all that Psalms 68:31 meant. The redemption of the African race included the redemption of Africa itself. The sons of Ethiopia, now enlightened by the Christian gospel, would return to Africa and rekindle the flame of religion and civilization snuffed out by idolatry so long ago. This, too, was God’s will. (Raboteau 404)

This duality enabled U.S. blacks to simultaneously embrace their connection and differences with their ancestors and brethren in the diaspora. Not surprisingly then, expositions of U.S. blacks’ attitudes with regard to uplift – be they in newspapers or literary works – were replete with Christian overtones of uplift and, at times, a brand of U.S. black exceptionalism and paternalism necessary to “return to Africa and rekindle the flame of religion and civilization.”<sup>71</sup>

Africa became part of a black American vision of freedom, a part of biblical prophecy. Yet, it should be noted, this freedom and liberation could not be achieved without salvation. Similar to how the ideology of salvation-liberation operated reflexively for Phillis Wheatley, U.S. blacks saw their freedom, history, and heritage in a diasporic context partially as a result of this biblical prophecy. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and Paul Laurence Dunbar, two of the most prominent writers of the nineteenth century, offer representative glimpses into poetic representations of this prevalent ideology. Their work points to the understanding of a shared destiny of those of African descent; that destiny, realized through Psalm 68:31, also served as an indictment of White

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<sup>71</sup> The foundation of this exceptionalism has biblical roots as well. Isaiah 43:5-6 reads, “Fear not for I am with thee: I will bring thy seed *from the east*, and *gather thee from the west*: I will say to the north, Give up, and to the south, Keep not back: bring my sons from afar, and my daughters from the ends of the world” (emphasis added).

hegemonic political occupation. For Harper and Dunbar, like ancestry serves as the hilt for the sword wielded in their Ethiopianist writings.

#### ETHIOPIANISM IN THE POETRY OF FRANCES ELLEN WATKINS HARPER

An outspoken educator, abolitionist, “conductor” in the underground railroad, temperance defender, prolific writer, and tireless advocate for the rights of women, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper amassed a spectacular record of accomplishments through nearly seven decades of activism. Born into freedom in Baltimore in 1825, Harper went on to become editor of the literary journal, the *Anglo-African Magazine*, was appointed to lead the Northern United States Temperance Union, and, as a septuagenarian, co-founded and served as the first vice president of the National Association of Colored Women. Like Phillis Wheatley before her, Harper often promoted her stances on Christian morality and humanity in her writing. More than Wheatley, however, Harper made overt forays into issues of social justice. Harper also undoubtedly maintained a sustained interest in race issues in a domestic *and* a diasporic context, though she, of course, lived more than twice as long as Wheatley. That interest goes back to the very beginning of her literary career.

Harper’s “Ethiopia” -- first published in, of all places, *Frederick Douglass’s Paper* in 1854 – is believed to be her earliest extant poem (Harper 62n). “Ethiopia” links freedom with a boundless African identity, while employing what Rabi’a Malaika Hakima refers to as “Christian Theological Feminism” to challenge dominant views of both women and all people of African descent. Harper, best known as a stalwart supporter of women’s rights, champion of morality, and staunch abolitionist, was similar

to her black and White poetic contemporaries of the nineteenth century in her attention to religious and moral themes in her poetry and prose. Though Harper did not carry the same vitriol as poets such as James Madison Bell or George Clinton Rowe (treated in the following chapters), whose focus in writing was expressly political, her musings into diasporic identity offer an update to Wheatley's salvation-liberation ideology; specifically, Harper envisions a politics fashioned out of a Christian morality that is conditioned by a transnational, racially charged allegiance to Africa, all while offering a subtle yet powerful critique on masculine dominance.

Harper characterizes Ethiopia within Lawal's aforementioned feminine framework, a suffering mother whose progress, like that of her progeny, has a destiny stifled by shackles. Yet Harper also appropriates the Cult of True Womanhood by "parlay[ing] the cult of true womanhood into the idea that God advocates for women and that all relationships between mothers and their children should be treated with reverence" (Hakima 52). These foundational principles give Harper's "Ethiopia" an immediate edge of subversiveness. Opening immediately with Psalm 68:31, Harper offers an emphatic proclamation of divine provenance for people of African descent consistent with Ethiopianist leanings:

Yes! Ethiopia yet shall stretch  
Her bleeding hands abroad;  
Her cry of agony shall reach  
The burning throne of God. (1-4)

Consistent with Psalm 68, "Ethiopia," the subject, is immediately gendered (2), an idea that Harper seeks to play with to make the larger point of African dehumanization. That



Harper seeks to humanize “Ethiopia” through personification is doubly significant: on one hand, she evokes a gendered sympathy through a use of a battered, beaten woman; at the same time, she demands that the reader consider Africa (and, by extension, Africans) *as humans*, something which racist pseudoscience of the time period refused to do.

Writing during the years of rising European interest in Africa by virtue of Livingstone’s expeditions and other economically driven explorations into the continent, Harper imagines Africa (here as Ethiopia) as abused (“bleeding hands”), writhing in pain (“cry[ing] of agony”). Her embellishment on the actual language of the original Bible verse (left) is also revealing:

Princes shall come out of Egypt;  
Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands  
unto God.

Ethiopia yet shall stretch  
Her bleeding hands abroad;  
Her cry of agony shall reach  
The burning throne of God

Harper’s verse (right) highlights what Harper seeks to emphasize in her poem: the image of suffering (“bleeding hands”), as well as the notion of a unified, transnational, black international identity (“abroad”) that is not present in the original scripture. Harper also adds immolatory imagery to further the vivid, violent, carnal imagery. Subtly, Harper inserts the gerund into her version, thus connecting the futuristic prophecy with the immediacy and suffering that marks the present moment. The fire imagery also suggests the work of Satan. Given Harper’s awareness of the hegemony present in the U.S., “God” becomes a symbol of power; that His throne is burning conjures images of threats to God’s Will, or even that God is upset. Naturally, the torturous imagery conjures images of Christ’s crucifixion, simultaneously raising Africa to a human (or divine) level

while also lifting “her” (Ethiopia) to that of “Him” (Christ). From the outset, Harper has appropriated Christian scripture into a gendered and racialized context.

For Harper, the feminized, personified Ethiopia’s bleeding hands – that of a woman, that of a human –are central to her appeal against the *inhumane* system of oppression that has beset her vision of Africa(ns), and of women. Harper’s decision to center her poem on a *mother* Africa points toward the intersectionality between her feminist politics and her diasporic vision of freedom. Her focus on a physical space as a personified character creates a space to simultaneously critique geopolitics, sexism, and racism. Here, Harper intentionally disturbs the reader’s sensibility in conjuring images of the feminine, a figure who, especially in the nineteenth century, was to be protected from molestation. She then paints a perverse reality in violation of this code. One could also argue that Harper not only is making a statement for the African’s humanity through the feminine, but is raising the black Female body to a level of visibility while advocating for the recognition of humanity of black *women* as well.<sup>72</sup> She intensifies this juxtaposition in the next stanza by introducing the male antagonist and introducing divine will:

The tyrant's yoke from off her neck,  
His fetters from her soul,  
The mighty hand of God shall break,  
And spurn the base control. (5-8)

Harper bestows a sense of righteousness on the feminine Ethiopia through binary opposition. Oppression, in the form of “The tyrant” and *his* “yoke,” is male (“*his*

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<sup>72</sup> This possibility must certainly be considered, given Harper’s focus on the voice and perspective of black women and slave women throughout her poetry. See “The Fugitive’s Wife,” “The Slave Mother” and “The Slave Mother: A Tale of the Ohio” “Eliza Harris” – immediately preceding “Ethiopia” in the order of the original publication.

fetters”); his oppression takes both a physical and metaphysical toll on the body of the oppressed (“The tyrant’s yoke from off *her neck*, / His fetters from *her soul*.”) Thus, as a woman’s voice within a largely male literary space, Harper inserts her racialized and gendered subjectivity – and in some ways herself – into a larger diasporic vision of freedom. To add to the complexity, Harper is consistent with the times in referring to God as “He,” thus creating a tension of gendered power. In essence, Harper suggests that the freedom of black women is indeed the basis of freedom itself, thus predating her black feminist successors by more than 100 years.<sup>73</sup>

Like Wheatley, Harper keeps in line with a salvation-liberation ideology, where Christ will ultimately free the enslaved African. Though the oppressed subject is indeed human, her liberation will only come through Christ’s will. Harper channels Wheatley in enforcing a Christianized liberation for Africa, echoing the popular sentiment held by black abolitionists of the day. This, of course, combines Harper’s African past (in the form of her ancestry) with her American present, a space in which she, as a (nominally) free black woman in the United States, feels compelled to offer a voice for the silenced. Just as was the case was with the larger movement of black U.S. freemen of the day, Harper speaks of a voice that “knows best” – an ironic paternalism – for her kinfolk in the diaspora.<sup>74</sup> Former slave and outspoken abolitionist Henry Highland Garnet

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<sup>73</sup> While many black feminists have articulated the notion of intersectionality between oppressions as it relates to black women, the seminal “Combahee River Collective’s Statement” (1978) states it succinctly: “If black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression.” Harper’s personifying of Ethiopia as the oppressed black woman points toward her own conceptualization of such an idea.

<sup>74</sup> See Isaiah 43:5-6.

articulated this point succinctly in an op-ed featured in *The Colored American* in 1837.

He offers a prescription for black U.S. treatment of African freedom:

The first thing that American Christians should do for Africa, is to break down all those separating walls, that shut out her sons from their civil and religious rights, in this country. Then they may come to her and her children upon level, Bible principles. This is God's way of working, and *He will sanction none other*.  
(Garnet, emphasis mine)

Interestingly, Garnet echoes a message similar to Wheatley by invoking a nation of freedom that is based upon civil entitlement and religion; yet, like Wheatley, Garnet's vision of religious rights for the "sons" of Africa (which reinforces the significance of Harper's gendering of a female Ethiopia as subject) was not the right to practice religion freely, but rather the right to abide by the virtues that a righteous Christian lifestyle would bring to its followers. And while there is no debate that blacks in the United States and abroad often saw themselves and their struggle within the Bible, it is worth emphasizing that these poetic narratives, following the aforementioned Ethiopianist liberation doctrine, also furthered a sense of diasporic unity as well.

This in mind, Harper's next verses delve into the Ethiopianist prophecy, making an explicit link between African homeland and its descendants in the diaspora:

Redeemed from dust and freed from chains,  
Her sons shall lift their eyes;  
From cloud-cap hills and verdant plains  
Shall shouts of triumph rise.

Upon her dark, despairing brow,  
Shall play a smile of peace;  
For God shall bend unto her wo,  
And bid her sorrows cease. (9-16)

Fittingly in the middle of her poem are what might be called Harper's "bridging" stanzas: here, at this critical point she reconciles the tension of gender in her previous stanza while also linking the liberation of Africa with liberation of her descendants throughout the diaspora. Tapping into the belief held by some that true freedom for African-descended peoples could not be achieved until experienced in their land of origin, Harper notes that when Ethiopia is "freed from chains," subsequently, "[h]er sons shall lift their eyes." (Here, she utilizes Lawal's Ethiopianist framework with imagery of "slumbering" and sleeping giant.) Thus, Harper's gendered critique is variegated: the gendered (male) oppression is, by implication, white, while the beneficiaries of freedom are black both female (in the form of Ethiopia) and male (her sons). Though Harper was likely well aware of the paternalistic convention in the phrase "Afric's sons," she subtly inserts "Afric's daughters" – and maternal parentage – through the figure of Ethiopia and herself as author. Her decision to emphasize a black maternal relationship also highlights the reality of the violent interruption of black family relations that were commonplace within the slave trade (Hakima 52), bringing attention to this phenomenon on a transnational level. Thus, Harper sees freedom not merely for blacks in her current homespace, but in a larger, borderless, diasporic lens.

The remainder of Harper's poem draws upon a bucolic, tropical, essentialized view of Africa consistent with the image depicted by whites and blacks alike in the middle of the nineteenth century, one which Berghahn draws attention to in the introduction. She continues:

Neath sheltering vines and stately palms  
Shall laughing children play,  
And aged sires with joyous Psalms  
Shall gladden every day. (17-21)

To Harper, Africa is a natural utopia – an Eden – which conjures images of Dunbar’s Africans in “spotless robes” in his “Ode to Ethiopia,” considered later in this chapter. Her utopian imagery is reminiscent of paradisiacal nostalgia for homeland found in early nineteenth century pro-emigration testimonies. Laden with natural imagery, Harper’s Africa features children – a symbol of innocence -- at play under “vines and sheltered palms,” laying bare her own childlike naïveté toward the dynamism and diversity of the continent. In this way, she predates and anticipates the primitivized images of Africa made famous by Countee Cullen, who would erroneously place the “cinnamon tree” (which is not native to any part of Africa) as a centerpiece of his fantasized nostalgia in his poem “Heritage.” While Harper misses the mark in offering a serious depiction of Africa as a real, physical space in her simplistic rendering, she craftily acknowledges a diasporic identity transcending national borders through use of binary opposition and personification. In doing so, she playfully toys with the notion of who indeed should and should not be considered humane, or, in this context, human.

Noteworthy in Harper’s poem is the progression of her politics. Whereas she opens the poem by drawing the reader’s attention to the subject of Ethiopia vis-à-vis gender, race, and religion, she shifts her attention toward the antagonist at the poem’s end. Here, Harper’s decision to humanize Ethiopia is significant, for, at this juncture, she chooses to *de*-humanize the antagonist. Just as Harper offers a subtle yet pointed critique

from the poem's outset in her rhetorical choice to defy racist discourse of the day by personifying Ethiopia as a living, breathing, suffering being, she provides an equally masked yet arguably much more caustic critique of the oppressive antagonist in her following stanza:

Secure by night, and blest by day,  
Shall pass her happy hours;  
Nor human tigers hunt for prey  
Within her peaceful bowers. (21-24)

Harper, active in the U.S. anti-slavery circuit, extends her imagination to the African slave trade – discontinued (by law<sup>75</sup>) in the U.S. since 1808 yet active in other parts of the world – by referencing “human tigers<sup>76</sup> hunt[ing] for prey. (She presumably is concerned with Africa in particular, of course, referring to “prey / *Within* her peaceful bowers.”) In doing so, Harper goes from humanizing Africans, often not granted full humanity, to de-humanizing European slave traders<sup>77</sup> -- with the assumed humanity – by depicting their

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<sup>75</sup> For one of the original studies documenting the continuance of the pirate slave market well beyond 1808, see W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade to the United States of America 1638 – 1870*.

<sup>76</sup> The symbol of the tiger also appears in poems by Claude McKay, coincidentally while musing upon issues similar to those addressed by Harper. In one of McKay's later poems, “The Cycle,” (ca. 1943) he states “The white man is a tiger at my throat” (36); in “America” (1921), (white) America itself takes on the form of a tiger:

Although she feeds me bread of bitterness  
And sinks into my throat her tiger's tooth  
Stealing my breath of life

I confess I love this cultured hell that tests my youth!” (1-4)

Contemporary Countee Cullen did not use the image of the tiger in his poetry, but may have been influenced by Blake's “Tyger.” See Ronald Sheasby's “Dual Reality: Echoes of Blake's Tiger in Cullen's Heritage” in Harold Bloom's *African American Poets* (2009), particularly page 270-1. Sheasby's argument opens the possibility that Harper may have been influenced by Blake, as well. To add, just as with Cullen's “cinnamon tree,” a central image in Cullen's most famous questioning of the relationship between U.S. blacks and an ancestral homeland, “tigers” are not native to Africa

predatory acts as animalistic. These predators, who engendered and enacted the violence and cruelty of slavery, no longer are the gatekeepers of fate in Harper's imagined (or God's prophesized) Ethiopia. By creating two different worlds, she is able to move beyond a sensationalized image of Ethiopia to offer a more encompassing and textured rendering of the dynamics that plague it and its people.

The foundation of Harper's subtle and multi-layered critique is created by her methodical mapping of opposing binaries: real / imagined; present / future; prey / predator; African / European; female / male; and peace / agony. Harper, in effect, creates two different interlocking visions in her poem: a fantasy and a reality. The first, a fantasy – a veritable *pax Africana* where old and young Africans (albeit only Christians) rejoice in their freedom as agents and inheritors of their prophesized destiny – is predicated upon the destruction of the second: a reality – the bloody, dark present where European predators feast on the joys, peace, and humanity of an undeserving and innocent bystanders, personified in the form of a bloodied, shackled female Ethiopia. Thus, Harper uses Ethiopianism to overtly demonstrate her relationship to Africa through a vision of emancipation for the entirety of “her sons” (and herself), yet subtly employs it to call attention to a global hegemonic force.

Harper's consistency with regard to the centrality of religion might include one to argue that “Ethiopianism in America during the nineteenth century and the first decade of

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<sup>77</sup> This does not negate that Africans were complicit in the slave trade, though, as many scholars have pointed out, they possessed a much more nuanced notion of kinship than essentialist, simplistic notions of “African” – i.e., they did not trade “their own.” In the instance of these lines, however, the undeniable fact remains for this comparison that Europeans were complicit and were, at least equally as much, playing the role of “predator” in Harper's comparison.



the twentieth was certainly more religiously than politically oriented” (Gruesser 9). Her piety is undeniable, yet her grounding in Christianity does not preclude her from illustrating a powerful politics. She creates a politics of feminist and anti-racist resistance through her Christian lens in a poem that “conceptualiz[es] ...the Christian divine as an advocate of the oppressed” (Hakima 54)

Without question, Harper’s Ethiopianist leanings exhibited in her poetry, while heavily centered in Christian beliefs, bled into her political activism and ideology. Nowhere is this clearer than in her letter to the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, published in 1859, still comparatively early in her long literary career. With debates on the question of slavery dominating public discourse – perhaps most notably in the antislavery rhetoric of William Lloyd Garrison and Thaddeus Stevens, or in the Lincoln-Douglas debates – Harper followed called out the hypocrisy of the United States in no uncertain terms:

I never saw so clearly the nature and intent of the Constitution before. Oh, was it not strangely inconsistent that men fresh, so fresh, from the baptism of the [American] Revolution should make such concessions to the foul spirit of Despotism! That, when fresh from gaining their own liberty, they could permit the African slave trade – could let *their national flag hang a sign of death on Guinea’s coast and Congo’s shore!* Twenty-one years the slave-ships of the new Republic could gorge the sea monsters *with their prey*; twenty-one years of mourning and desolation for the children of the tropics, to gratify the avarice and cupidity of men styling themselves free! (Harper 48-49, emphasis added)

Striking in Harper’s writing are the parallels between the delivery of her message in the letter and her delivery of her message in the last verses of “Ethiopia.” In this iteration, Harper goes beyond the generalized and personified “Ethiopia” and explicitly locates the scenes of the crime – “Guinea’s coast and Congo’s shore.” She couches the letter in a

Christian lens (“men fresh, so fresh, from the *baptism* of the Revolution”) and then takes the culprits to task. Harper even utilizes similar terminology, referring to the hypocritical slavers similarly to her reference in “Ethiopia” in hunting “their prey.” And again, Harper goes beyond simply condemning the slave trade as a crime for moral reasons and considers the “mourning and desolation for the children of the tropics,” just as she considers the (albeit romanticized) livelihood and humanity of the children in “Ethiopia.” Her letter affirms her politics; its conclusion affirms how her Christian lens is not necessarily a distraction to her politics, but a catalyst for them.

Harper’s activism, racial and gender politics, and diasporic sensibilities are all rooted in her Christianity. Her faith goes beyond offering hope and guidance; it compels her to speak upon and write about injustice. She concludes her letter:

Wait, my brother, awhile; the end is not yet. The Psalmist was rather puzzled when he saw the wicked in power and spreading like a Bay tree; but how soon their end! Rest assured that, as nations and individuals, God will do right by us, and we should ask not of either God or man to do less than that. In the freedom of man’s will I read the philosophy of his crimes, and the impossibility of his actions having a responsible moral character without it; and hence the continuance of slavery does not strike me as being so very mysterious. (48)

Harper’s use of “us” here is curious, particularly in the space of the official publication of the *American Anti-Slavery Society*, a periodical read not only by White sympathizers but black activists. Was Harper specifically invoking the African diaspora in calling attention to “us” both “as nations and individuals”? Is the same true for her consolation, “Wait, *my brother*, awhile; the end is not yet”? This would not be the first time that Harper would be writing for a white audience while explicitly treating black issues or speaking exclusively for black people. Whatever the case may be, one sees her

unshakable faith and its relationship to her activism. Whomever “us” may be, Harper “[r]est[s] assured that...God will do right by us.” She deftly positions herself as having a superior morality. She is not mystified by slavery’s perpetuation, because her *ability* to “*read the philosophy* of his crimes”<sup>78</sup> reveals to her the morally bankrupt nature of “our nefarious government” (48). That Harper chooses to emphasize her ability to “read” in her Christian-based activism and critique of global and domestic racial oppression is also significant in its invocation of her intellect.

Harper’s letter directly countenances the issue of black literacy and the presumed inability of blacks to comprehend abstract ideas, a belief held by Hume, Hegel, de Gobineau, and other promulgators of scientific racism of the time. She calls attention to her own intellect (one hears echoes of Wheatley’s words in “To the University of Cambridge, in New England,” “an *Ethiop tells you so*”) in proselytizing the slaveocracy, positioning intellect and comprehension of the written word as a means of resistance. This was no isolated incident; in fact, Harper’s most vociferous promotion of this idea is seen in the character, Aunt Chloe, first created in her collection of poems, *Sketches of Southern Life* (1872).

#### AUNT CHLOE, THE FOLK, AND ETHIOPIANISM BEYOND BORDERS

Harper uses the fictional character Aunt Chloe to illustrate the transformative power of literacy within Ethiopianist struggle. In doing so, Harper coyly advocates for her own brand of activism as an essayist, poet, and novelist. Aunt Chloe is a former slave who appears in the black poetic tradition as neither tragic mulatto nor ill-fated victim.

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<sup>78</sup> See Janet Sinclair Gray’s discussion of Aunt Chloe in *Race and Time: American Women's Poetics from Antislavery to Racial Modernity* (2004).

Aunt Chloe's exists in the aftermath of the Civil War and the struggle to realize freedom and equality during Reconstruction. Harper chooses to position Aunt Chloe as the knowledgeable witness and narrator, thus empowering a figure so often considered voiceless and bestowing upon her a rare mixture of agency and authority.

Through Aunt Chloe, the reader sees not only the value of the written word (and the Word), but its subversive power:

Our masters always tried to hide  
Book learning from our eyes;  
Knowledge did'nt [sic] agree with slavery –  
'Twould make us all too wise. (5-8)

Harper's decision to give the voiceless a voice (through the written word) is a marked change from her more didactic, omniscient writing (as in "Ethiopia"). Here, Aunt Chloe as an authority demonstrates her knowledge, and, by extension, the knowledge of subjugated Africans and their awareness of the larger political system and its underpinnings ("Knowledge did'nt agree with slavery – / 'Twould make us all too wise). Yet, rather than render those under slavery's hold as purely submissive, Harper points to the subversive nature of the enslaved, vying for opportunity in spite of "the tyrant's yoke":

But some of us would try to steal  
A little from the book,  
And put the words together,  
And learn by hook or crook. (9-12)

Harper adds a layer of communal and familial memory to substantiate this subversiveness, pointing to a tradition of resistance in everyday life (far before scholars would conceptualize of resistance in this fashion, it should be noted). Using black

vernacular, Aunt Chloe recalls Uncle Caldwell “[taking] pot liquor fat / And greas[ing] the pages of his book, / And hid[ing] it in his hat” (14-16). She then recalls such resistance outside of her family by recalling community resistance through the character of Ben, a former slave of Mr. Turner, “Who heard the children spell, / And picked the words right up by heart, / And learned to read ‘em well” (18-20). Thus, through Aunt Chloe, the reader is offered a culturally centered and woman-centered account of the value of literacy as resistance, again quietly advocating for Harper’s own approach in the process. Harper is consistent in her framework of resistance in her consciousness of racial struggle, and, as “Learning to Read” demonstrates, the role of religion and women within it.

As Aunt Chloe proceeds in her storytelling, Harper’s familiar themes reappear.

The poem ends:

Well, the Northern folks kept sending  
The Yankee teachers down;  
And they stood right up and helped us,  
Though Rebs did sneer and frown.

And, I longed to read my Bible,  
For precious words it said;  
But when I begun to learn it,  
Folks just shook their heads,

And said there is no use trying,  
Oh! Chloe, you’re too late;  
But as I was rising sixty,  
I had no time to wait.

So I got a pair of glasses,  
And straight to work I went,  
And never stopped till I could read  
The hymns and Testament.

Then I got a little cabin –  
A place to call my own –  
And I felt as independent  
As the queen upon her throne. (25-44)

As is the case in Harper's letter and in "Ethiopia," Harper identifies and calls out the culprit. The "Rebs" who "sneer and frown" at the Union forces' intervention to protect newly freed blacks serve as extension of the "tigers" who once hunted for "human prey" in "Ethiopia,"; they are relics of the "nefarious government" in Harper's letter to the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* (or the global hegemonic force in "Ethiopia"). In keeping with her understanding of brotherhood and sisterhood within the struggle for equality, Harper further situates Aunt Chloe within the community ("folks just shook their heads"; "Oh! Chloe; you're too late") as a center for the entire narrative. The reader must accept Aunt Chloe as narrator – along with her folksy ways – in order to understand the experience; in essence, Harper demands that the reader see the struggle through the eyes of the black community on its own terms and not as outsiders.

The poem's ending verses neatly recapitulate Harper's Ethiopianist politics. Not only is literacy placed on a pedestal, but Harper shows that she is acutely aware of its place in the struggle for freedom and autonomy. True to form, she unabashedly places blame by claiming that "the Rebs did hate" (3) when "the Yankee teachers / Came down and set up school" (1-2). And true to her Ethiopianist worldview, Aunt Chloe's embrace of independence (and indeed her very motivation to read in the first place) comes from "long[ing] to read my Bible" ("For precious words it said"). Just as Phillis Wheatley's salvation-liberation ideology comes from within, Harper, writing a century later about

freedom for U.S. blacks, Africans, and blacks abroad, imagines freedom as Christianity, and true Christianity as freedom.<sup>79</sup> For Aunt Chloe, this true empowerment comes only after her spiritual self, versed in the oral tradition, becomes literate and can understand the Word through the word. Aunt Chloe's ultimate destiny proves Harper's belief in the confluence of literacy and Ethiopianist uplift: immediately after learning to read, she "got a little cabin / *a place to call my own*" (i.e. land) and, just as significantly, "felt as *independent* / as a queen upon her throne." Aunt Chloe's freedom is arguably not granted nor protected (by the Union soldiers), but earned and achieved. Thus, we see the culmination of Harper's (racial) politics *through* religion, which, just as in "Ethiopia," depict the freedom of women-centered African communities and communities of African descent from a malevolent white hegemonic force.

#### FRANCES ELLEN WATKINS HARPER, ETHIOPIANISM, IMPERIALISM, AND CRITIQUES OF WHITE HEGEMONY IN THE POST-BELLUM PERIOD

Harper maintained her unapologetic critique of white hegemony while demonstrating her understanding of its implications for blacks in the United States and for blacks in the diaspora. Despite her focus on a domestic space, Harper maintains a focus on a global context in her poetry, be it in her historical reverence for Africa or

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<sup>79</sup> This theme is further emphasized in the very next poem of Harper's collection, "Church Building." Harper again uses Aunt Chloe and her avuncular memories to suggest a relationship between the interwoven nature of black communities, freedom, and the Church:

Uncle Jacob often told us  
*Since freedom blessed our race*  
 we ought all to *come together*  
 and build a *meeting place*. (1-4)

Thus, for Harper, the Church was more than a communal space of worship; it was a monument to recognize the struggle for freedom of African descent. This poem adds to the argument that Harper's Christian piety cannot be truly understood without attention to her racial politics.

through her diasporic sensibilities which inform her politics. This is illustrated in “A Fairer Hope” and “Proclaim a Fast,” two poems published in the latter part of Harper’s prolific writing career. But first, it would be prudent to briefly look at the evolution of Harper’s politics (and the consistencies in it) before considering these poems. In 1875, Harper said the following in her address to the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery:

The white race has yet work to do in making practical the political axiom of equal rights, and the *Christian* idea of human brotherhood; but while I lift mine *eyes to the future* I would not ungratefully ignore the past. One hundred years ago and *Africa was the privileged hunting-ground of Europe and America*, and the flag of different nations *hung a sign of death on the coast of Congo and Guinea*, and for years unbroken *silence had hung around horrors of the African slave trade*. (220, emphasis added)

Noteworthy in Harper’s comments are their consistencies: for one, she continues to identify a culprit for condition of Africans and their descendants in the U.S., and does so with intentional emphasis on race and religion; also, she stresses a link between Africa and America using the past, an exercising of *Sankofa* principles which envisions future progress through an awareness, reclamation and acknowledgment of history (which also translates into her Ethiopianist worldview). Also interesting is Harper’s observation that “for years unbroken silence had hung around horrors of the African slave trade.” For one, the play on words (“hung”) during an era with escalating vigilante violence against blacks,<sup>80</sup> whether intentional or not, adds gravity to Harper’s already damning

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<sup>80</sup> Harper most certainly was aware of the rise in lynchings and violence toward blacks in the South that coincided with the rise of Black Codes, Jim Crow, and the Ku Klux Klan. In “Appeal to My Countrywomen” (1895) she writes:

You can sigh o’er the sad-eyed Armenian  
Who weeps in her desolate home.



condemnation. To add, Harper coyly positions herself, albeit in subtle fashion, to be remembered as one of the few voices who sought to break the “unbroken silence” of the African slave trade and the horrors faced by Africans throughout the diaspora.

Harper continues the trend of indemnifying white hegemony in her later poetry while invoking ties to a boundless African heritage. In “A Fairer Hope, A Brighter Morn,” published in *Light Beyond the Darkness* (1890), Harper imagines the internal struggle of a white slaveholder coping with the prospect of black freedom. She directly addresses the slaveholder’s guilt, this time offering a more caustic tone:

The cry you thought from a Voodoo [sic] breast  
Was the echo of your soul's unrest;  
When thoughts too sad for fruitless tears  
Loomed like the ghosts of avenging years.

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You can mourn o'er the exile of Russia  
From kindred and friends doomed to roam.  
You can pity the men who have woven  
From passion and appetite chains  
To coil with a terrible tension  
Around their heartstrings and brains.  
You can sorrow o'er little children  
Disinherited from their birth,  
The wee waifs and toddlers neglected,  
Robbed of sunshine, music and mirth.  
For beasts you have gentle compassion;  
Your mercy and pity they share  
.For the wretched, outcast and fallen  
You have tenderness, love and care.  
But hark! from our Southland are floating  
Sobs of anguish, murmurs of pain,  
And women heart-stricken are weeping  
Over their tortured and their slain.  
.....  
Weep not, oh my well-sheltered sisters,  
Weep not for the Negro alone,  
But weep for your sons who must gather  
The crops for which their fathers have sown.  
(1-20, 45-48)

Also see Harper’s letter to Francis in which she offers to circulate Grimké’s sermons to larger audiences in hopes of raising awareness on lynchings in *A Brighter Coming Day*.

Oh prophet of evil, could not your voice  
In our few hopes and freedom rejoice?  
'mid the light which streams around our way  
Was there naught to see but an evil day? (33-40)

Harper has transitioned from calling the oppressive force a “tiger” hunting for prey to a “prophet of evil” incapable of the human compassion necessary to recognize the joy of being freed from bondage. Yet still, Harper, invoking the West African culture of vodun (“Voodoo breast”) goes a step further by delving into a taboo subject rarely addressed in her poetry: miscegenation.

Unlike other poems, Harper uses sexuality and a literal African-ness to confront the white slaveholder with the biggest fear of black freedom: race mixing. She delves into the minds of (former) white slaveholders, identifying their fears of what they deemed the inevitable “mixing” between black and white:

[From freed blacks you expect] Nothing but vengeance, wrath and hate,  
And the serpent coils of an evil fate-  
A fate that shall crush and drag you down;  
A doom that shall press like an iron crown?  
A fate that shall crisp and curl your hair  
And darken your faces now so fair,  
And send through your veins like a poisoned flood  
The hated stream of the Negro's blood?  
A fate to madden the heart and brain  
You've peopled with phantoms of dread and pain,  
And fancies wild of your daughter's shriek  
With Congo kisses upon her cheek? (41-52)

Harper's acerbic tone is perhaps her strongest here. She minces no words, combining interrogative language with vivid imagery to demand that the slaveholder face his or her<sup>81</sup> contrived fears of emancipation. She harps on sexual intercourse, the most intimate relationship imaginable, all while showing her keen awareness of The Cult of True Womanhood and – if the slaveholder in her is indeed male – its expectations of protective White manhood in raising the issue of “your daughter’s shriek.”

Harper's caustic tone is aided by her manipulation of racial imagery, a nod to her understanding of discourses of essentialized notions of race. She is keenly aware of the ways in the mental toll of slavery on the white psyche, noting that the evil chains of slavery “clasped my limbs, but it bound your heart / And formed of your life a fearful part” (9-10). Thus, Harper's emphasis on black features in the poem is unmistakably intentional, a psychological attack drawing upon ontological markers of difference found on black / African bodies. She devotes an entire verse to emphasizing their existence in the children of the mixed race couple (“crisp and curl your hair”) finishing with the powerful rhymed couplet, “poisoned flood / Negro’s blood.” Also noteworthy is her shift from an individual culprit to the entire slaveholding class (“darken your *faces* now so fair”). She explicitly depicts images that conjure fears of the black body and juxtaposes them against the alleged purity of whiteness. She chooses to do so not only by features, but by an African-descended identity that transcends borders. If Harper is indeed fixated on slavery of blacks in the U.S. – which is not necessarily conclusive, given the poem's

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<sup>81</sup> Though the vast majority of slaveholders were white men, the existence of women – often widows – who owned slaves cannot be discounted. Widows were often granted authority over the affairs of the house through the will of their husbands. See Kirsten Wood's *Masterful Women: Slaveholding Widows from the American Revolution through the Civil War*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006.

applicability to other places of the Western hemisphere – she certainly extends the boundaries in referencing the cry of a “Voodoo breast,” a nod to Vodun culture associated closely with both Haiti and western Africa.

Harper’s boundless conception of black identity continues in the poem’s penultimate verse, which sets the reader up for final act, the unforgivable sin: “Congo kisses upon her cheek.” Here, Harper locates blackness to its imagined root, its core, its center, its genesis, and the site of the crime: the heart of Africa. (Harper also refers to the Congo – and Guinea – in her abovementioned letter to the *Anti-Slavery Standard*.) Writing during the precipitous rise of lynchings and implementation of Black Codes, Harper suggests a bond shared by all blacks of African descent in terms of how they are seen (and inextricably linked) as sexualized objects within what Toni Morrison calls “The White gaze”<sup>82</sup> of the American South. Thus, she cannot imagine the reality of her identity or others of African descent in the United States without considering the linkages to a transnational identity.

Africa, for her, has never left; it lives on through generations, carrying with it the baggage of “phantom” fears of sexual aggression and subjugation from tigers hunting for prey, all for the protection of white womanhood. Yet, despite this, Harper is able to “see the promise of brighter years” (54). She coyly plays with double entendre, claiming that “*Through the dark* I see their golden hem” (55, emphasis mine), simultaneously referring to seeing better days beyond the nadir while also suggesting that black people will usher

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<sup>82</sup> See Martha Hodes, *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth Century South* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997) for an overview of the ways in which such relationships were threats to social order and power constructions.

in this prosperity, again reverberating a common Ethiopianist refrain.<sup>83</sup> Yet, whether domestically or abroad, Harper's piety remains consistent and informs her Ethiopianist leanings.

Harper's "Proclaim a Fast" (1898), a critique of the United States' hypocrisy and moral standing in the Spanish-American War, further suggests the usefulness of viewing her racial politics and piety as a double-helix rather than separate strands of thought. Moreover, Harper's evolution of thought from pre-emancipation "Ethiopia" to post-emancipation "Proclaim a Fast" shows a larger evolution of thought and a broader critique of White hegemony concomitant with the growth of U.S. imperialism, one that recognized the injustice of imperialism with the same acute awareness of the injustices of slavery as with slavery.

"Proclaim a Fast" adds to her Ethiopianist vision by pointing to the awakening of blacks throughout the diaspora (through their faith in Christ) as the cure for turn of the century's new hegemonic threat: imperialism and militarism. She does this methodically using comparisons between the ills of the past (slavery) to the present (occupation and imperialism). Essentially, Harper draws on the poem "Ethiopia" to indict America as the "tiger" hunting its "prey." Her poem, written in a deliberate and somber tone, begins essentially where "Ethiopia" leaves off:

Proclaim a fast, a solemn fast,

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<sup>83</sup> This is supported by her final verse:

When the Negro shall hold an honored place  
The friend and helper of every race;  
His mission to build and not destroy,  
And gladden the world with love and joy.

Fittingly, this poem appears in Harper's *Light Beyond the Darkness* (1892)

From snow clad hills to sunny hands,  
Till Ethiopia shall arise,  
And stretch to God her burning hands

Though days be dark and courage faint,  
And Justice lies distraught, o'erthrown,  
Remember that in the darkest hour,  
That God is still upon the throne. (1-8)

Using caesura and repetition in the opening line, Harper immediately marks the graveness in her tone, a shift from the optimism found in "Ethiopia." Unlike "Ethiopia," there is no mistaking the poem's focus: the reality of the "dark" present, devoid of "courage" and plagued with a "distraught" and "o'erthrown" sense of Justice. Like "A Fairer Hope," Harper offers a potential double meaning, saying here that "in *the darkest* hour, That God is still upon the throne." Given the verisimilitude of Harper's opening to Psalm 68:31, Harper's play on "in the darkest hour" (just as in "through the darkness" from "A Fairer Hope") suggests divine favor for those of African descent. She is acutely aware of the irony of the post-emancipation moment – the "nadir" period – where freedmen are a part of a new oppression:

Shall veterans of a former strife  
Who counted not their lives too dear  
Be harried, hunted from their homes  
And crouched in agony and fear? (29-32)

Her interrogative tone coincides with the acerbic and confrontational nature of the poem. Employing a didacticism consistent with nineteenth century morality, she admonishes "Ye men who rode up San Juan's hill"<sup>84</sup>:

Boast not of victories proudly won,

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<sup>84</sup> The Battle of San Juan Hill was the defining battle in the Spanish American War. Harper is referencing the American soldiers.

In distant climes, and far off shores,  
 When law lies trampled in your midst,  
 And men are murdered at your doors.  
 .....  
 Shall suffering Cuba find relief  
 From tender hearts and outstretched hands,  
 While hapless men and women slain,  
 With blood bedew our fairest lands? (25-28, 37-40)

Harper combines her Christian sensibilities with a pointed critique of American politics. She implores soldiers (the symbolic harbingers of justice, a metonymical stand-in for the military and the government) to recognize the need for freedom within one's borders before considering it outside of them. Seen within the context of the hypocrisy and mob rule that led to lynchings of blacks in the U.S.,<sup>85</sup> Harper's lines demonstrate how her understanding of her racial self, mediated through her Ethiopianist consciousness, informs her politics. Her identification with "our prostrate race in darksome days" in the poem (9) signals how her understanding of a shared history and shared destiny thereby demands an application of a politics (and a faith) that questions and challenges injustice and hegemony – in this case, imperialism in Cuba – in the same way that blacks in the United States once had to challenge their own government. One sees an international application of social justice sensibilities based on her understanding of herself as an American of African descent, existing within a diaspora that stretches far beyond the world she inhabits.

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<sup>85</sup> In a letter to Presbyterian minister and civil rights activist Francis Grimke around 1903, Harper writes: "I received your sermons on lynching for which accept my thanks for your remembrance of me. And also permit me to emphasize my gratitude for you especially for your manly refusal to accept the verdict of the mob, in the cases of lynching. I hold that...no man however guilty should be deprived of life, or liberty without due process of law" (Harper, *A Brighter Coming Day* 322)."

Though her poetry is not dominated in the main by such considerations, these poems, taken together, reveal how Ethiopianist ideology opened up a worldview that was critical for blacks in the U.S. in understanding their space within the diaspora. “Proclaim a Fast” is yet another example of this; it is through Psalm 68 that she is able to consider Cuba and the role of African descendants during the Spanish American War in the first place, underscoring the reality that nineteenth century poets indeed possessed a diasporic and not merely provincial consciousness. Her interest in the diaspora was not limited to these works; her understanding of black identity within a larger diaspora exists in “To Maceo,” “The Dying Chieftain,” and “Death of Zombi.”<sup>86</sup> Harper’s Ethiopianism, in short, allows her and her readers to identify white hegemony and recognize the value of collective black politics, be they international within the black intellectual circuit (which she was actively a part of), or as local and within “the folk,” as in Aunt Chloe.

#### PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR: ETHIOPIANIST CONTEXTS AND CONTOURS

While Harper and Dunbar are remembered as two of the most prolific writers in black literature during the nineteenth century, the two were quite different stylistically. Whereas Harper rarely deviated her versification or meter, Dunbar made a concerted effort to write in a wide variety of forms within the “standard verse” and vernacular tradition to demonstrate his poetic prowess. Both did venture into the vernacular, though Dunbar’s experimentation with vernacular language was far more invested and extensive in comparison to Harper. Also, in contrast, Harper’s style is dominated by a far more pronounced and dominant sense of didacticism than Dunbar’s. And whereas Harper’s

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<sup>86</sup> For a thorough examination of Harper’s analysis of transnational figures, see Callahan’s “Translations of Transnational Black Icons in the Poetics of Frances Harper” in *Between the Lines* (42-58).



poetry, at times, considered international subjects (inside and outside of the African diaspora, such as “Vashti,” “To Maceo,” and “The Czar of Russia”), Dunbar’s almost exclusively referenced the United States when not reaching toward universal themes which made no direct reference to geographic location whatsoever. Searching through each of his books of poetry, his unpublished works, and his fiction, one finds that Africa receives virtually no explicit attention by name. Still, Dunbar’s occasional forays out of his comfort zone, highlighted here, echo Harper’s Ethiopianist poetics through a staunch pride in race (in the U.S. and abroad), a belief in Africa’s future, and albeit rarely, a nostalgia for a paradisiacal space of unified identity. Though Dunbar does not confront the topic of diaspora by name in much of his poetry,<sup>87</sup> his racial politics are instructive in pointing toward his worldview. Like Harper, he was a champion of the uplift of people of African descent, something evident in both the focus of his writing and in his associations. With rare exception, Dunbar was interested in the fates of blacks (or, perhaps, “blackness”) in the United States, looking toward Africa within an American context and an object of the past. To understand Dunbar’s Ethiopianist bend, some consideration of relevant events in his life proves to be instructive.

In 1896, the same year that his second collection of poetry, *Lyrics of Lowly Life*, was published, Dunbar became a founding member of the American Negro Academy (ANA), an exclusive group comprised of Washington D.C.’s elite and educated (male)

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<sup>87</sup> Though it is purely speculative, one wonders how Dunbar – whose life ended months before his thirty-fourth birthday in 1906, might have contributed to the New Negro / Harlem Renaissance and its conversation on African origins. Given the reverence he received from the likes of the movement’s prominent “old guard” (e.g. Alain Locke, James Weldon Johnson) and his influence on the younger generation (e.g. Hughes, Hurston, and, in a much more complicated sense, Alice Dunbar-Nelson), he likely would have addressed the question, either in his poetry or elsewhere.

class. He was one of forty-six men to receive an invitation (Oldfield 11). The ANA was conceived of and led by Black Nationalist and lifelong activist Alexander Crummell. The young Dunbar was well-aware of Crummell's stature and importance, so much so that he captured it in his poetry.<sup>88</sup> (And, without question, the two shared a mutual respect.<sup>89</sup>) Crummell's group of African-American luminary men of letters included Dunbar, as well as other lawyers, writers, artists, and college faculty, including none other than fellow Pan-Africanist W.E.B. Du Bois (12). That Dunbar was sought for and accepted membership in such a group signals his interest in the advance of those of African descent on account of race. Yet, perhaps even more telling of Dunbar's politics is this: at Crummell's behest, the group of scholars was originally to be called the "African Academy"; Dunbar, in response, proposed the term "Negro" instead (25). This was done, according to Crummell, to proudly embrace the term "Negro" and to embrace "black Americans of all colors and backgrounds" (Crummell qtd. in Moss 25). Some contend that Dunbar and his colleagues were not at all interested in including outside of a talented tenth. To wit, Wilson Jeremiah Moses vehemently disagrees with the notion that this society was anything but a whitewashed ruse:

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<sup>88</sup> In "Alexander Crummell – Dead" he laments, "Unto a nation whose sky was as night, / Camest thou/ holily, bearing thy light" (9-10). Seemingly hopeless at the prospect of another filling Crummell's void, he wonders, "Why shall come after thee, out of the clay - / Learned one and leader to show us the way? /Who shall rise up when the world gives the test?" (19-21).

<sup>89</sup> Crummell was fond of Dunbar and believed in his ability. While Dunbar was in London, working on a novel, *The Uncalled*, Crummell allowed Dunbar to stay in his quarters to alleviate what appeared to be a perpetual ennui. While there, Crummell provided Dunbar general counsel and mentorship; he also encouraged Dunbar to pursue his passion as a writer and create an all-black literary magazine. See Moses, Wilson Jeremiah. *Alexander Crummell: A Study of Civilization and Discontent*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989, 286.

The American Negro Academy revealed just how American it was with all its talk of creating a new civilization “along Negro lines. “ Like white Americans who were constantly declaring their cultural and literary independence from the “courtly muses of Europe,” they had only the vaguest idea of what the distinguishing qualities of a new civilization might be. While Crummell and his peers paid lip service to the preservation of black folklore, their cultural values were not located either in the rural South or in the African village. They were embodied in the pseudo-epics of Tennyson, rather than the homely images of Dunbar’s dialect poems. The members of the academy were Europhiles, more specifically Anglophiles. (Moses, *Alexander Crummell* 207)

Indeed, Dunbar would not be considered a Pan-Africanist – no one would mistake him for Martin Delany or Garvey. Still, I contend Dunbar’s interest in such an organization, as well as his literary output do challenge the connotations invoked by the term “Anglophile.” Dunbar’s writing regularly challenged white hegemony and carried messages of resistance, vigilant awareness of racist power structures, community voice, and, at times, a belief in the need for black political spaces. His vernacular writing, albeit controversial, was not merely minstrel show fodder. Through an Ethiopianist lens, Dunbar’s writing can be further appreciated for its insistence on unity, collectivity, shared destiny, and a politics which at times which eschewed national identity for a racial identity.

A significant peek into Dunbar’s worldview comes from a brief moment in an exchange he had with his biographer. Lida Keck Wiggins, in what would turn out to be her last meeting with the ailing poet, recalls Dunbar speaking out passionately against the slander and libel inveighed against missionary Daniel Flickinger Wilberforce of Sierra Leone in recent news.<sup>90</sup> Wiggins recalls Dunbar’s reaction: “It is an outrage! Oh, how I

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<sup>90</sup> Wilberforce also spent time in Dayton Ohio, though it is unclear as to whether he and Dunbar were ever acquainted formally. See George Washington Williams, *History of the Negro Race in America, 1619-*

wish I were able to do something to correct those stories. They are absolutely false, and it is such an awful blow to the race!” (Wiggins 128) Dunbar was infuriated that the Wilberforce was accused of succumbing to savagery and cannibalism by several news outlets. He is furious, not only at the defamation of a luminary, but of the ways in which white hegemony has relegated *the race* to a sub-human status using common dehumanizing tropes. Immediately noteworthy is the poet’s passion, which, according to Wiggins, was heartfelt (“He spoke feelingly of the missionary who had been educated by the United Brethren Church”) (128). More importantly, that Dunbar so quickly and instinctively connects news in West Africa with news that directly affects him (via “the race”) further underscores his own sensibilities about the connection of diaspora and representation. Just as in any familial relation, that which affects his brother – one who shares the same “Mother race” – affects him. While his body of work undeniably supports the notion that he was primarily concerned with the fate of people of African descent in the U.S. in the United States, one cannot dismiss his recognition of himself as a subject within a larger diaspora. He is, as shown here, not merely consumed by a nostalgia for the past, but invested in its present. Yet while this study is primarily concerned with Dunbar’s reading of race and diaspora, it is worthwhile to consider how the diaspora was *read unto him*.

A review of William Dean Howells’s assessment of the poet captures how Dunbar’s physical self, as a symbol of *African-ness*, inevitably became a subject part of a larger conversation about black ability. On the one hand, Howells claims that race

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1880, Vol 2, 572-574; and Gareth Griffiths, “The Other Mr. Wilberforce: Role Conflict and Colonial Governance in Sierra Leone, 1878-1913”, *African Identities* 7.4 (2009).

essentially had no part in Howells's interest in Dunbar's lyrical ability: "The world is too old now...to care for the work of a poet because he is black...I must judge it irrespective of these facts, and enjoy or endure it for what is was in itself" (13). In doing so, Howells initially deflects his racialized preoccupation and fascination with Dunbar, saying that biographical details "will legitimately interest those who like to know the causes, or, if these may not be known, the sources, of things, to learn that the father and the mother of the *first poet of his race in our language were negroes without admixture of white blood*" (*Life and Works* 13, emphasis mine). In what appears to be an attempt to be objective, Howells concedes his awareness of the literary audience. He presumes that the reader will be interested not only in the lives of Dunbar's parents (13), which he also expounds upon, but in Dunbar's "pure" African being. This is made that much more significant by the seemingly objective Howells exposing his proprietorship – or his belief in Whites' proprietorship – over language and literature. In the span of a few words, "his race in our language," Howells recapitulates a system of thought that renders Dunbar and those of "his race" as outsiders to what he deems a White and European tradition of expression.<sup>91</sup> Even Howells, a genuine advocate of Dunbar, cannot but succumb to the temptation to read Dunbar's body alongside his verses, to see the U.S.-born poet and Africa (or at least the discourses that surround it) as one. Howells was not alone; Dr. Henry Tobey, who invited him to his hospital to read to his patients in Toledo, exclaimed "Thank God, he's black!" upon first meeting him. He qualified his joy by stating "Whatever genius he may

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<sup>91</sup> These are not careless words. Howells goes on to discuss Dunbar's usage of vernacular language as "those pieces of his where he studies the moods and traits of his race in its own accent *of our English*" toward the essay's conclusion (16, emphasis added).

have cannot be attributed to the white blood he may have in him” (48). If Dunbar was not principally concerned with presenting Africa to his readers, his readers were certainly invested in reading Africa unto him.

Dunbar, then, shares a burden, albeit mistakenly contrived, not unlike that of Phillis Wheatley in being considered a progenitor of a tradition. (The irony, of course, is that Wheatley *is* the “pure” form of what Howells imagines.) Ignoring Wheatley, Howells is fully aware of the “scientific” implications of Dunbar’s ancestry juxtaposed with his literary production. Dunbar, then, becomes both poet and specimen. Howells can no longer sound disinterested or impartial about Dunbar’s race as he initially professed to be; he proves this by inserting Dunbar in previously established racialized tropes: “...I had felt, that however gifted his race had proven itself in music, in oratory, in several of the other arts, here was the first instance of an American negro who had evinced innate distinction in literature” (14). Even to Howells, Dunbar cannot be assessed as merely a poet; he is of African descent and thus is to be understood within the context of the racialized science of the day. He is only comprehended within the context of musical ability (a la Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia*) and “several of the other arts.” Yet Howells goes further, highlighting not only the significance of Dunbar participating in what was considered to be work of the highest intellectual order in Western tradition, but the importance of Dunbar’s “pure” stock:

[...] I had alleged Dumas in France, and I had forgetfully failed to allege the far greater Pushkin in Russia; but these were both mulattoes, who might have been supposed to derive their qualities from white blood vastly more artistic than ours [...]. So far as I could remember, Paul Dunbar was the *only man of pure African*

*blood* and of American civilization to feel the Negro life aesthetically and express it lyrically. (14-15, emphasis added)

Interesting in Howells's remarks is his own implicit invocation of Dunbar and diaspora, citing Pushkin and Dumas as examples of the potential of "African" intelligence around the world – albeit within Western contexts. Ironically, Howells must delve deeper into racialized essentialism in order to defend Dunbar; in effect, he makes a racist argument against racists. Perhaps more widely scrutinized than any black U.S. poets of his time or before him (with Wheatley being an exception), Dunbar's blackness colors each and every one of his verses. Without any choice in the matter, he stands as a specimen of African intelligence ("the only man of pure African blood"), even in an American space. Thus, Howells underscores the reality that even if Dunbar opted to completely ignore writing about the African diaspora, the African diaspora was written unto him in the form of his body.

#### ETHIOPIANISM IN THE WRITING OF PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR: DUNBAR AND "LITTLE AFRICA"

Though short stories are outside of the scope of this study, an exception is made here in the case of Dunbar, as they are perhaps his most transparent engagement with the notion of diaspora and is in his invention of "Little Africa," which exists in no less than seven of his short stories over the span of his abbreviated literary career:<sup>92</sup> It symbolically encapsulates many of Dunbar's conceptions of "Africa" – or, more specifically, a trans-spatial, ontological "blackness." In it the locale's features, he offers

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<sup>92</sup> These stories include: "A Judgment of Paris"; "The Emancipation of Evalina Jones"; "The Finish of Patsy Barnes"; "A Mess of Pottage"; "Johnsonham, Junior"; "The Promoter"; and "The Heart of Happy Hollow";

notions of racialized subjectivity which underscores his belief in the existence of black cultural spaces, the need for collective politics, and trans-spatial bonds.

“Little Africa” features insights into Dunbar’s notions of racialized subjectivity which are ubiquitous within his poetry. Though his short stories are set in various urban and suburban settings in the United States, Dunbar sets the all-black enclave in Dalesford, Ohio, some 200 northwest miles from his birthplace, Dayton. The space is not quite urban and not quite suburban – perhaps not unlike Hurston’s Eatonville. To that end, Jarrett and Morgan note that “Little Africa” and the short stories in which it is featured “break from the traditional pastoral images of African Americans” (Jarrett, Morgan xix). To add, Dunbar’s naming of this space as “Little Africa” goes beyond challenging limiting literary and ideological conceptions of black cultural spaces; it also invites the reader to see its inhabitants as part of a larger, already established cultural space (“Africa”) *while* challenging the reader to also think outside of simplistic renderings of Africa through the intricacies of community Dunbar includes in his descriptions. His choice to include such a space – autonomous in its own right – also invokes notions of political power in its invocation of the nation-state. Perhaps more noteworthy, “Little Africa” points to shared heritage and deference to like ancestry; all of its members, despite their different local or regional origins, are a part of a community; are all tied into its affairs.

Several of Little Africa’s features and characteristics point toward common tropes that resonate for people of African descent. “Little Africa” – of course, located North – is where Dunbar’s characters migrated and resettled in their search of freedom and



liberation. Africa thus stands in as a symbol of freedom in Dunbar's stories. He describes the area as "A Republican stronghold, from centre to circumference" (Dunbar, *Complete Stories of Paul Laurence Dunbar* 163). Much of the action in the town takes place on "Douglass Street, which by the way, is the social centre of Little Africa" (31). (This would not be the last homage Dunbar penned for Frederick Douglass, a point which will be elaborated upon shortly.) In addition to his support for political collectivity, Dunbar also seems to support social and cultural unity, evidence by his decision to make "Little Africa" the site of an Emancipation Celebration held on September 22<sup>nd</sup>, the date that Lincoln's preliminary emancipation proclamation was issued. And while these are specific to the experiences of blacks in the U.S., the community newspaper in Dunbar's "Little Africa" is the *Ethiopian Banner* (31), perhaps echoing Harper's message of literacy and the written word as an integral part of black collectivity. Indeed, Dunbar's own belief in autonomous space is further emphasized in a curious shift in narrative tone in "The Finish of Patsy Barns." The narrator, who rarely if ever shifts into polemics, opines, "The negro has very strong within him the instinct of colonization and it was in accordance with this that Patsy's mother had found her way to Little Africa when she had come North from Kentucky" (122-123).<sup>93</sup> This is doubly significant in the face of the newly colonized nations in Africa as a result of the Berlin Conference. Thus, the assertion of the need for autonomous political space is a poignant reinforcement of the importance of an explicitly named *Little Africa*. Despite the fact that Dunbar did not

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<sup>93</sup> Critics point out that Dunbar's vacillation between the folksy and the polemical are a byproduct of the confines of the literary establishment. See Jarrett and Morgan's introduction to *The Complete Short Stories of Paul Laurence Dunbar*, especially xix-xx.

write about neocolonization specifically, he, like Harper, was certainly not unaware nor uninterested in international affairs. He was just as concerned with the place of black people within them.

A revealing exposé of Dunbar's worldview appears in his poem, "The Conquerors," also known as "The Black Troops in Cuba." The poem thematically diverges from Harper's "Proclaim a Fast" from its very beginnings in its title. Whereas Harper uses her poem to espouse her international politics and speak of transnational identity, Dunbar immediately races the subject – "*Black Troops*" – and is more focused on continuing his celebration of black valor first captured in "When Dey 'Listed Colored Soldiers."<sup>94</sup> And, whereas Harper is concerned with American hypocrisy toward black civilians, Dunbar is indifferent to the imperialist implications of the American military and instead is concerned about the lived experiences and legacy of black soldiers, seeing them as emblematic of how blacks are regarded within the diaspora.

To add, the poem is decidedly more masculine in its imagery, starting with Dunbar's suggestively aggressive title and his equating of "Conqueror" with "The black troops." He opens:

Round the wide earth, from the red field your valour has won,  
Blown with the breath of the far-speaking gun,  
  
Goes the word.  
Bravely you spoke through the battle cloud heavy and dun.  
Tossed through the speech toward the mist-hidden sun,  
The world heard.

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<sup>94</sup> See Jennifer Terry's "'When 'Dey Listed Colored Soldiers': Paul Laurence Dunbar's Poetic Engagement with the Civil War, Masculinity, and Violence." *African American Review* 41.2 (Summer 2007), 269-275. Also see James Robert Payne's "Afro-American Literature of the Spanish Civil War" *MELUS* 10.3 (Autumn 1983), 19-31.

Hell would have shrunk from you seeking it fresh from the fray,  
Grim with the dust of the battle, and gray

From the fight.  
Heaven would have crowned you, with crowns not of gold but of bay,  
Owning you fit for the light of her day,  
Men of night. (1-12)

Dunbar uses imagery of blood (“red field”) and hyperbole (“Hell would have shrunk from you seeking it fresh from the fray”; “Heaven would have crowned you”) in describing the black soldiers to immediately defend and validate their courageousness in battle. He playfully and subtly manipulates chromatic imagery to address the racist undertones of the black troops’ reception in using “men of night.” This serves as a signifier that preserves the masculine tone while highlighting binary images (night / day), complexion, royalty (night / knight) and, pursuant to Dunbar’s commentary on legacy, the notion of seen (day) versus unseen (night). Dunbar’s opening, tone, and purpose was no doubt intentional, a response to the controversy of how black soldiers fighting against Spain in Cuba were being received back in the United States. The post-reconstruction South in particular was a hotbed of tension for returning soldiers, a subject that likely inspired Dunbar because of its widespread coverage. Edgerton elaborates upon the high stakes and tensions surrounding the black troops in Cuba:

After returning to the South, some veteran white soldiers who fought in Cuba protected black soldiers against white insults and violence, but many other white soldiers who had not fought in Cuba joined local whites in hurling insults at the ‘heroic’ black veterans who had ‘saved’ Teddy Roosevelt and others. Others actually attacked them, killing some without facing arrest. Blacks in the South welcomed the returning black soldiers with great pride, but one black Georgian correctly concluded that ‘the Negro’s valor has *intensified* prejudice against him’ The more that newspapers praised these men, the more white southerners were determined to assert their everlasting supremacy. The South’s cherished myth of

black cowardice was not to be questioned, much less dramatically demolished.  
(Edgerton 54, emphasis in original)

Dunbar, attuned to the racial and political landscape, sought to not only valorize the soldiers, but to humanize them. Yet Dunbar seemed to submit to the inevitability of white prejudice – perhaps as a result of how the legacy of these soldiers was unfolding before the country's eyes.<sup>95</sup>

Dunbar, ever concerned with the notion of audience and readership, reveals his awareness of white discourses of inferiority for those of African descent, a point which is reinforced by his treatment of the issue of black valor above, and further reinforced by his treatment their legacy below:

Far through the cycle of years and of lives that shall come,  
There shall speak voices long muffled and dumb,  
*Out of fear.*  
And through the noises of trade and the turbulent hum,  
Truth shall rise over the militant drum,  
Loud and clear.  
Then on the cheek of the *honest* [sic] nation that grows,  
*All for their love of you, not for your woes,*  
There shall lie  
Tears that shall be to your souls as the dew to the rose;  
*Afterward thanks that the present yet knows*  
Not to ply! (10-24, emphasis added)

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<sup>95</sup> Edgerton continues:

Even Teddy Roosevelt, who had praised the courage of black soldiers to the skies shortly after the fighting ended, now turned against them. His political ambitions required the support of white voters who were increasingly hostile to black soldiers in the North as well as the South. Perhaps for that reason, when he published 'The Rough Riders' in *Scribner's Magazine*, early in 1899, he described the outrage he felt when he saw black soldiers of the 10<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment heading toward the rear during a crucial battle, saying that he had to threaten to shoot them with his pistol to turn them back. A black eyewitness, Sergeant Preston Holiday of the 10<sup>th</sup>, angrily denounced Roosevelt in print, pointing out that these men were under an officer's order to go to the rear to bring up essential supplies, something Roosevelt later acknowledged, but he refused to repudiate his published accusation of cowardice. (55)

Claiming that “[h]eaven *would have* crowned” these “men of night” (10, 12), Dunbar suggests that these soldiers are either still living or, for a reason unspecified, cannot yet be given proper tribute in the present, amidst a racially hostile environment in both Cuba and the United States.. They are shrouded from recognition and visibility because of their race, making “men of night” that much more of a powerful pun. Dunbar then forecasts the future (“Far through the cycle of years”), whereupon a “Truth” surmounts the “militant drum” – either a reference to the immediate war or the larger aggression and violence in the form of white hegemony. Just as Harper does, Dunbar disparagingly calls out the “voices muffled and dumb” who appears to be silencing the “Truth” (13-15). In his Ethiopianist vision of a better future, Dunbar imagines a time when the black troops will be looked upon as humans (“for their love of you”) and not objects of pity, seemingly anticipating Hughes’s lines in “I, Too” when he says “they’ll see how beautiful I am / and be ashamed.” Dunbar stresses that “the world heard” (6) what the black troops “spoke through the battle cloud heavy and dun” (4). Yet Dunbar suggests that history is not yet ready to accept the contributions of these soldiers out of a fear that appears directly related to the color of their skin, despite not being named explicitly. Here, we see Dunbar’s awareness of the ways in which the veil of skin color impedes the ability of “the world” to see those of African descent as human. Given this awareness, we must re-examine Dunbar’s perspective when Dr. Tobey states in 1895 that his ultimate aspiration is “[t]o be able to interpret my own people through song and story, and to prove to the many that after all we are *more human than African* (Dunbar, *Life and Works*, 47, emphasis added). One might quickly assume that Dunbar’s aspiration reveals

his own issues of inferiority regarding those of African descent; however, given the context of this poem, we see that Dunbar is more concerned with the ability of “the world” – the audience – to see the humanity of those of African descent, and not that Africans are not human, as his statement, taken alone, suggests. Ever misunderstood, Dunbar requires a wide lens to be fully appreciated. His relationship with the paragon of black uplift during the nineteenth century, and his personal hero, further uncovers the layers of Dunbar’s race patriotism.

#### PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR AND FREDERICK DOUGLASS

Dunbar’s unique brand of Ethiopianism is most visible in his popular poem, “Ode to Ethiopia.” The popular poem was a favorite of Frederick Douglass, so much so that the anti-colonialist, anti-emigrationist Douglass asked Dunbar to read it to him personally upon first meeting him at the first world’s fair in 1893 in Chicago.<sup>96</sup> (Dunbar was there to promote *Oak and Ivy*.) Put another way, two literary lions not generally thought of in diasporic contexts began a mentor-student relationship and ultimately a friendship as a result of their affinity to the broader African diaspora – literally speaking, Douglass’s work in Haiti and Dunbar’s consideration homage to Africa. The young Dunbar could

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<sup>96</sup> See Braxton’s introduction to *The Collected Poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar* (1993), xiii.

It should be noted that even Douglass, despite his extensively noted resistance to colonization, shared a certain ambivalence toward America with regard to citizenship. In his speech delivered in May 1847, “The Right to Criticize American Institutions,” he declares:

I cannot agree with my friend Mr. Garrison, in relation to my love and attachment to this land. I have no love for America, as such; I have no patriotism. I have no country. What country have I? [...] The only thing that links me to this land is my family, and the painful consciousness that here and there are three millions of my fellow-creatures, groaning beneath the iron rod of the worst despotism that could be devised, even in Pandemonium” (76).

See *Frederick Douglass, Selected Speeches and Writings*, ed. Philip Foner, Yuval Taylor (1999).

barely contain his excitement in meeting a man whom he held in such high esteem; he captures his excitement in a letter written to his mother:

The old man was just finishing dinner; he got up and came tottering into the room, 'and this is Paul Dunbar' he said shaking hands and patting me on the shoulder. 'Paul, how do you do? I've been knowing you for some time and you're one of my boys.' He said so much Ma that I must wait until I am with you before I can tell you all. (Dunbar qtd. in Braxton xiii)

Douglass actually paid Dunbar out of his own pocket to serve as a clerk while Douglass was representing Haiti at the fair (xiii). Douglass had served as U.S. consul-general to Haiti from 1889 to 1891. While with Dunbar in Chicago he would also deliver his memorable speech on the state of Haiti in an effort to paint it in a positive light (albeit for U.S. interests<sup>97</sup>). Douglass was certainly a benefit to Dunbar, just as an equally impressed the noted pan-Africanist Alexander Crummell would be years later. Douglass, the lifelong abolitionist, subsequently introduced the young poet to literary contemporaries and arranged to have Dunbar perform a reading of his work at the Haitian Building (xiii; Revell 44). Dunbar not only shared some of Douglass's tensions, but also used the figure of Douglass to conceptualize and espouse his own brand of Ethiopianist doctrine in his poetry.

Before assessing "Ode to Ethiopia," a look at Dunbar's elegy "Frederick Douglass," found in *Lyrics of Lowly Life* (1896), provides a foreground which reinforces the subtleties of Dunbar's Ethiopianist politics. In his emotional tribute to Douglass,

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<sup>97</sup> Douglass had a very complicated relationship with Haiti, a relationship which Nwankwo describes as a "twice-doubled consciousness." Nwankwo notes, "Not only does [Douglass] have to struggle to be both American and Negro, but also to be a 'good' U.S. citizen, and a good 'brother' to the Haitians" (140). This position, which Douglass writes about in his third autobiography, left Douglass uncomfortable and often at conflict. See 139-146.

Dunbar portrays a man who represents race over country, seemingly mirroring Dunbar's own passion for the race. His only reference to nation-state is Ethiopia – the same Ethiopia which finds its way into his short stories, the same boundless conception of blackness that mirrors Dunbar's imagined space of "Little Africa." For Dunbar, Douglass is not a great American patriot, but a transcendental figure; he is to be viewed in a black internationalist context as a credit to the race for all "Ethiopians" to mourn:

And Ethiopia, with bosom torn,  
Laments the passing of her noblest born.  
She weeps for him a mother's burning tears—  
She loved him with a mother's deepest love.  
He was her champion thro' direful years,  
And held her weal all other ends above. (5-10)

Much like Harper, Dunbar's Ethiopia is a female, imbued with traits of sentimentality and nurturing, raising "her noblest born" "with a mother's deepest love." Dunbar celebrates Douglass for his commitment to "Ethiopia" through good times and bad times – "He was her champion thro' direful years." (While Douglass tirelessly worked for the advance of "the race," his previously mentioned relationship to Haiti and the diaspora on the whole was quite complicated and indeed evolved during different periods of his life, a point elaborated upon in the final chapter.<sup>98</sup>)

Dunbar appears to not only admire Douglass, but the traits he exhibits in his pride of race: "And he was no soft-tongued apologist / He spoke straightforward, fearlessly

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<sup>98</sup> Douglass, in his 1893 speech on Haiti, is replete with equivocation that shifts between apologist and radical. On one hand, it is not "on the down grade to barbarism"; on the other hand, "compared to twenty years ago," Haiti, with "her revolutions and defective civilizations," show "a marked and gratifying improvement of her people." "Whether civilized or savage," Douglass opines, Haiti is the black man's country, now forever." Douglass similarly oscillated between U.S. exceptionalism and being one with the African diaspora at various points. For a comprehensive discussion of Douglass's nuanced relationship to the West Indies and to Africa, see Nwankwo 129-152.



uncowed” (19-20). If we recall that a central aspect of Ethiopianism is allegiance to “the race” and a “boundless blackness,” so to speak, Dunbar’s focus on “the race” becomes significant. This is consistent with Braxton’s claim that Dunbar’s writing in some ways would “anticipate” the views of Du Bois (xx, xxxv). The racial politics espoused in Dunbar’s poetry point to a Du Boisian sense of unapologetic commitment to the cause of racial uplift. Though not overtly international in scope, Dunbar’s writing is also not explicitly “national” at all; that is, his focus on race allows him to transcend national boundary, and allegiance. His deployment of a less intentional, fluid, black internationalist perspective informs a broader sense of racial collectivism present in his poetry.

The notion that Dunbar believed in collectivist principles is supported in his praise of Douglass and his collectivist sensibilities:

When men maligned him, and their torrent wrath  
In furious imprecations o'er him broke,  
He kept his counsel as he kept his path;  
*'T was for his race, not for himself he spoke.* (Emphasis added, 31-34)

Thus, Dunbar lauds Douglass for putting the collective above the self; the collective, in this case, is people of African descent. Another enticing possibility in these lines is in Dunbar’s potential wordplay when he says “kept his counsel”; one might even read a veiled endorsement of Douglass’s handling of his post as U.S. consul to Haiti in these lines. Douglass’s appointment to the position of U.S. consul to Haiti was met with much opposition; predictably, many whites called for his appointment to be rescinded (Nwankwo 140). The idea of a black man collaborating with a Haiti, given the

aforementioned tensions already present in the U.S.'s dealings with the first black independent State, was troubling. Haiti's status as a target for U.S. imperialist interest furthered this tension; specifically, the potential conflict of interest was of dire consequence for those who sought to annex it. Yet, despite the protest, Douglass was able to retain his position. Indeed, "men maligned him" on many different occasions, making the potential play on words when Dunbar says "He kept his counsel as he kept his path" an intriguing subtlety. (Of course, Douglass's outspoken nature made him no stranger to conflict and controversy, be it in his break with William Lloyd Garrison, or even marrying a white wife.) Thus, these lines carry a multitude of possibilities. Still, given the context of their meeting at the World's Fair, Dunbar would have been aware of Douglass's relationship to Haiti at the very least, making these lines a possible acknowledgment of support for Douglass's involvement with black uplift on an international scale.

Dunbar's final lines bring together the personal and political, offering a story-like closure to the relationship he and Douglass shared. He breaks from a descriptive elegiac form and instead closes with a personal address to Douglass:

Oh, Douglass, thou hast passed beyond the shore,  
But still thy voice is ringing o'er the gale!  
Thou 'st taught thy race how high her hopes may soar,  
And bade her seek the heights, nor faint, nor fail.  
She will not fail, she heeds thy stirring cry,  
She knows thy guardian spirit will be nigh,  
And, rising from beneath the chast'ning rod,  
She stretches out her bleeding hands to God! (55-62)

Tonally, Dunbar seems to be communicating directly to Douglass through his change to personal pronouns, making the lines seem as if they are meant for him to read.

While Dunbar is continuing his focus on Douglass and “the race,” his final lines directly support Ethiopianist visions of uplift at their very conclusion. He borrows directly from Psalm 68:31 in his closing, stating that “[the race] stretches out her bleeding hands to God.” Dunbar’s use of interchangeability within the subject is noteworthy here, as Dunbar shows he was clearly familiar with the oft-cited Ethiopianist bible verse while treating “the race” and “Ethiopia” as one. Echoing Lawal, Dunbar’s usage of “Ethiopia” serves as an inclusive term for “black African.” Thus, Dunbar reflects his understanding of Douglass as a figure beyond the limitations of patriotism or binding forces of nation; instead, he invokes a black internationalist perspective and instead uses “thy race” to place his legacy within a transcendental racial context.

#### DUNBAR AND THE AFRICAN PAST IN “ODE TO ETHIOPIA”

Using Spanish sestet, Dunbar opens with a unifying call to a common past:

O Mother Race! to thee I bring  
This pledge of faith unwavering,  
    This tribute to thy glory.  
I know the pangs which thou didst feel,  
When Slavery crushed thee with its heel,  
    With thy dear blood all gory. (1-6)

Immediately, the reader is confronted with the speaker’s “unwavering” collectivist politics. By using “Mother Race,” the speaker is thereby positioned as one of “Afric’s son,” a term that became ubiquitous by the early nineteenth century to make plain blacks’ allegiance to – and physical and generational distance from – Africa as homeland. This

“pledge” – made in the form of a poetic “tribute” – is not merely obligatory, but is informed by the speaker’s awareness of his race’s past “glory,” a central Ethiopianist tenet. And, just as his predecessors appropriated the story of Joseph to understand their condition, Dunbar connects beyond a historical past and identifies with a shared feeling in order to “know the pang” of slavery, noting its impact on the race on the whole. (Dunbar, the child of former slaves, was born seven years after U.S. slavery was abolished.) The speaker’s empathy and interchangeability of feelings points toward the notion of linked fate and shared experiences, all transcendental and collectivist in nature.

Dunbar locates his glory in the dignified way in which Africans persevered and contributed during slavery, making use of the common comparison to Christ in the persecution and suffering of his people:

Thou hast the right to noble pride,  
Whose spotless robes were purified  
By blood's severe baptism.  
Upon thy brow the cross was laid,  
And labour's painful sweat-beads made  
A consecrating chrism. (31-36)

Dunbar’s reasoning for his declaration that “Afric’s sons and daughters” have the “right” to be so empowered rests in the survival of “blood’s severe baptism” from slavery; his allusion to “spotless robes” hearkens back to essentialized images of Africa espoused earlier in the century where Africa before the slave trade was regarded as “the scat of ease and pleasure” and even “paradise” (Hamilton 35).<sup>99</sup> In essence, it echoes

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<sup>99</sup> Hamilton stated: “The country of our forefathers might truly be called paradise, or the scat of ease and pleasure, until the foul fiends entered – fiends did I say? Yes, the name is too sacred an appellation for the base ravagers of the African coast: Until the man-stealing crew entered, peace may be said to be within her borders, and contentment in her dwelling, but the dealers in human flesh, not contented with setting the

Wheatley's nostalgic references to "Afric's fancy'd happy seat." Of course, in keeping with the Ethiopianist doctrine, Dunbar ends borrowing from the actual scripture to exhort the race upon whose "Brow the cross was laid":

Go on and up! Our souls and eyes  
Shall follow thy continuous rise;  
Our ears shall list thy story  
From bards who from thy root shall spring,  
and proudly tune their lyres to sing  
Of Ethiopia's glory. (43-48)

For Dunbar, Africa's destiny was also the destiny of its descendants, again hearkening back to the familiar "millennial" brand of Ethiopianist politics foretelling of a prominent future to inherit. He emphatically declares his hope for Africa ("Go on and up"). More importantly, the rise would be followed and documented by its descendants, blacks throughout the diaspora whose "souls and eyes / Shall follow [Ethiopia's] *continuous* rise"). Unique in Dunbar's final stanza is the simultaneous coronation of Africa (as Ethiopia) and of the poet. Foretelling of a "continuous rise" of Africa promised in Psalm 68, Dunbar elucidates the importance of maintaining a record and documenting "thy story"; moreover, it is "bards" of African descent – "from thy root" -- who must ("proudly) preserve the eminence of Ethiopia, the mysticized and mythologized cornerstone of the diaspora.

Dunbar's coronation of the bard speaks to not only a Romantic vision of self, but of an African-centered vision of creativity. That he sees the poet, and perhaps himself, as a central figure in evincing (if not continuing) a sense of race pride speaks to Dunbar's

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nations on to fierce, bloody, and incessant contests – not consented with making Africa groan from its sea line to its centre; but as if to be the more immediate instruments of cruelty, they obtain the captives taken in war, they kidnap thousands, they sever from them all their enjoyments!" (Hamilton 35)

own preoccupation with the role and potential of poetry as a force beyond the page – that is, not poetry for poetry’s sake, but poetry as a call to consciousness as well. Dunbar, of course, was quite preoccupied with his place as a poet and the role that race played within his craft.<sup>100</sup>

Thus, in his seemingly focused (imagined) nostalgia for a paradisiacal Africa, Dunbar actually offers a proscription for future poets; he essentially appropriates Ethiopianist doctrine to black literature, suggesting not only shall princes come from Egypt, but writers, as well (subtly placing them in the same level of esteem). Implicitly, Dunbar seems to imbue an unspoken gift of perspective to these writers, perhaps personally advocating for the creation or recognition of an black poetic tradition. In the same vein, he establishes a sense of responsibility - to “proudly tune their lyres to sing” – which writers within this tradition are to follow. The foundational criteria for this writers, however, is one inescapable reality: they are all linked by a common bond of ancestry.

As many U.S. blacks would accept Christianity as their own during the century, Psalm 68:31 would gain immense importance in how they would ultimately understand their relationship to what would be a distant homeland by century’s end. Ethiopianism provided a basis of common heritage, collectivist vision, community voice, future

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<sup>100</sup> For a discussion of the complex nature of Dunbar’s consciousness and its reception, see the summer 2007 Special edition of *African American Review*, particularly Lillian Robinson’s “Paul Laurence Dunbar: A Credit to His Race?”

promise, shared resistance against white hegemonic power, and a shared conception of kinship as Africans destined descendants.

Dunbar and Harper, taken together, evince a sense of a trans-spatial and diachronic understanding of a racial / cultural identity and legacy. Preceding the New Negro / Harlem Renaissance, black poets in the U.S. did indeed reflect upon their relationship to both Africa and the African diaspora through a reappropriation of Ethiopianist doctrine. This doctrine, within their verses, further reemphasized the notion of shared destiny as well as other trans-spatial linkages and realities created by shared oppression under White hegemony, thus creating an intersection between the writing of these poets and another longstanding tradition of black writers of utilizing Christianity and the Bible as a form of racial protest.

While an Ethiopianist worldview was indeed a unique feature within the black literary tradition during the nineteenth century, it was not the only way through which poets connected to the diaspora. Many poets, as will be shown, looked beyond American borders at their “African” brethren throughout the diaspora in more direct fashion, outside of Biblical contexts. Aware of the world around them, these poets often venerated objects, moments, and places outside of the diaspora in dedication poems, expressing kinship through shared experience and struggle. Whether reaching to Africa, Haiti, or South America, these poets recognized long before the New Negro / Harlem Renaissance that their identities and existences were not merely a matter of political allegiance; they were inextricably bound to the fates of their ancestors abroad, as well.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **“WE MUST RISE OR FALL WITH THE RACE”: TRIBUTES, HISTORIOGRAPHICAL RECLAMATION, AND THE POLITICS OF DIASPORIC VERSIFICATION**

At the dawn of the New Year in 1893, Chicago was abuzz like never before. The city's rise to prominence had gained both national and international attention in the last half of the nineteenth century, owing much of its fortune to the Industrial Revolution, Westward expansion, and its advantageous lakeside location. It was, in the words of Arnold Lewis, “a paradoxical American city, for it was both a representative and an exceptional example of development in the United States in the nineteenth century” (2). A symbol of the United States' growth, Chicago “was both product and preview” (1), offering a glimpse of the country's present and future. It showcased to its citizens the latest of global innovation, and symbolically represents the increasing spotlight taken by the United States on the global stage. Yet in the shadows of the World's Columbian Exposition were black people, enduring what Rayford Logan famously called “the nadir” period of U.S. history.

For them, 1893 was another year replete with false promises, convict exploitation, lynchings, and Klan intimidation. Thus, the decision to exclude blacks from the World's Columbian Exposition, though unsurprising, was both a statement of insult to their history and future, just as it was a reminder to the dismal present. Scheduled to speak at the opening ceremonies was an aging and conflicted Frederick Douglass, who had witnessed manifest destiny and was now witness to a new era of overseas expansion.



During the planning stages of the exposition Douglass found himself in the peculiar position of U.S. minister resident and consul general to Haiti.

By then a living legend to blacks in the U.S., and also having garnered the respect of white dignitaries, Douglass spoke to the approximately 1500 assembled at the exclusionary World's Fair about his time as Consul to Haiti. While speaking of Haiti, Douglass also chose to speak of the African diaspora, unmistakably including Ethiopianist undertones in his address:

My subject is Haiti, the black Republic; the only self-made black Republic in the world. I am to speak to you of her character, her history, her importance and her struggle from slavery to freedom and to statehood. I am to speak to you of her progress in the line of civilization; of her relation with the United States; of her past and present; *of her probable destiny; and of the bearing of her example as a free and independent Republic, upon what may be the destiny of the African race in our own country and elsewhere.* (Douglass 203, emphasis added)

Douglass's invocation is noteworthy for two reasons. For one, he references Haiti's own past to inform his confidence in its future; secondly, he draws attention to "her example" for blacks to use in Chicago, the U.S., "and elsewhere." Said another way, for Douglass, Haiti's history of independence - which his employer, the United States government, did not recognize until 1862 - serves as a wellspring of hope, and also hints toward the power in adopting a transnational racial politics. Moreover, the anti-emigrationist Douglass concedes the salience of African identity across geographical boundaries, spaces which to one degree or another were familiar or were becoming familiar with white hegemony, particularly in the aftermath of the Berlin Conference. Douglass's reflexivity in sentiment points to his concern not only with blacks in the U.S., but black people throughout the diaspora, including Haiti.

Douglass's speech captures an underappreciated theme present throughout the nineteenth century, well before Marcus Garvey or the New Negro Harlem Renaissance seized upon it: with regards to freedom and political condition, the fate of people of African descent transcends national boundary. Douglass, with Ethiopianist undertones, made clear that the fate of one would be inextricably linked to the fate of the other. Fittingly, he draws attention to Haiti's unique position in history as "the only self-made black Republic in the world"; its position as such would be remarked upon time and time again by black poets in a similar vein.

This chapter expands upon the Ethiopianism present in the poetry of black poets in the U.S. by highlighting tribute poems that look beyond its borders in their conceptualization of freedom. In dedicating these poems to people, places, and dates of significance within the African diaspora, black poets engaged in a multifaceted project of redemption of image, reclamation of history, and critique of (white) hegemony, not dissimilar to that of Douglass's 1893 speech. Just as importantly, they seized upon a historiographical imperative characteristic of the latter part of the nineteenth century, seeking to craft narratives of their own history in their own words. In effect, they engaged in a project of tradition-building, exalting symbolic locations and historical figures, including even their contemporaries in verse. This, as scholar Dickson Bruce has argued, was also large preoccupation of the late nineteenth century for blacks in the United States,<sup>101</sup> an embrace of newfound freedom in the aftermath of the Civil War.

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<sup>101</sup> See Dickson Bruce's *Black American Writing from the Nadir: The Evolution of a Literary Tradition, 1877-1915*

In doing so, they sometimes looked beyond their own shores for inspiration, venerating figures in various parts of the diaspora –often in the Western Hemisphere – and celebrating victories for people of African descent abroad in their struggle for freedom and autonomy. This chapter will excavate lesser-known poetry from black writers from the United States, both prominent and obscure, in the latter half of the nineteenth century to show how the failed promise of freedom furthered a trans-spatial racial identity. In the process, these writers humanized or venerated historical figures. They celebrated seminal moments in the struggle for freedom, emancipation, and / or independence through their use of tribute. Just as the trailblazing historian George Washington Williams<sup>102</sup> was determined to “modestly strive to lift the Negro race to its pedestal in American History” (Williams, George iv), so were several of his literary counterparts. Decades before Alain Locke would even think to compile *The New Negro* (1925), their poetry sought to canonize various figures of the race within the historical narrative. Haiti in particular, by virtue of being the first and only black republic to successfully overthrow slavery, was immeasurably inspirational, a lynchpin of hope to

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<sup>102</sup> Williams himself was one of many who devoted his life to the uplift of the African diaspora, serving as U.S. consul to Haiti before Frederick Douglass. Perhaps his most infamous endeavor was his critique of King Leopold II, in which he wrote of having “been disenchanted, disappointed and disheartened” by the conditions of Africans under Belgian rule (Williams, George qtd. in Franklin 246). Showing his disdain for white hegemony, He boldly castigates the King in his open letter to Leopold II:

Instead of the natives of the Congo “adopting the fostering care” of your Majesty’s Government, they everywhere complain that their land has been taken from them by force; that the Government is cruel and arbitrary, and declare that they neither love nor respect t[h]e Government and its flag. Your Majesty’s Government has sequestered their land, burned their towns, stolen their property, enslaved their women and children, and committed other crimes too numerous to mention in detail. It is natural that they everywhere shrink from “*the fostering care*” your Majesty’s Government so eagerly proffers them. (246)

See John Hope Franklin’s *George Washington Williams: A Biography* (1998), especially chapter thirteen.

the identity, outlook, and indeed the consciousness of those living in the U.S. under bondage or a chimeric form of freedom.

#### TOUSSAINT L'OUVERTURE, HAITI, AND THE POETICS OF FREEDOM

The Haitian Revolution – formally completed in 1804 – played a key role in furthering Ethiopianist doctrine as well as a diasporic worldview of linked fate for black people. The attention paid to the Haitian Revolution and its figures underscores the importance of this watershed moment for blacks in the United States. Stephen G. Hall captures the importance of this moment as not only a matter of freedom, but a matter of conceptualizing blacks throughout the diaspora:

Haiti, the site of the only black republic in the Western hemisphere, offered a place for potential emigration as well as a metaphorical symbol (in the present) and actual symbol (in the past) of ultimate triumph in the antislavery war.

As African American intellectual discourse in the Antislavery War suggests, the war meant more than a simplistic contest between anti- and pro-slavery forces; rather, it operated as a war of ideas and rhetorical strategies that revolved around defining, appropriating, and applying terms usually reserved for majoritarian populations and extending them to African American populations and other diasporic communities of color. (Hall 79)

This relationship between blacks throughout the diaspora and Haiti, made apparent during the nineteenth century and subsequently renewed in subsequent diasporic liberation movements, became and remained an integral part of Pan-Africanist thought and black uplift. Yet in the United States an underexplored avenue of expression for capturing these liberation struggles comes in the form of tribute poems specifically addressing these liberation struggles.

Sara Fanning argues that “Haiti, in many ways, was the black nation underpinning early American ideas of Black Nationalism” (Fanning 62). And, if we accept Patricia

Hill Collins' assertion that "Black Nationalism is based on the belief that black people constitute a people or 'nation' with a common history and destiny" (Collins 30-31), black poets' use of the tribute poem was an effort in promoting and recording a history, eschewing traditional understandings of the nation-state in order to actualize their common destiny.

Haiti continued to be a beacon of the principle of freedom and self-determination for poets and the black public throughout the nineteenth century. A well-documented fact, Haiti's independence offered hope and inspiration for Africans throughout the diaspora, just as much as it brought fear and anxiety for white slaveholders. St. Domingue, especially Toussaint, L'Ouverture, represented the sum of all fears to slaveholding whites.<sup>103</sup> For black people, it served as a mirror to see themselves within a larger tradition of revolutionary struggle. Black poets who looked to Haiti often reappropriated it within a broader movement of freedom that included other lands within the diaspora, most often the United States. At the center of these tributes was none other than Toussaint L'Ouverture, the hero extraordinaire for writers of African descent across the diaspora.

The influential T. Thomas Fortune, the former slave who would rise to fame as the dean of black journalism in the United States,<sup>104</sup> regarded Toussaint as a patriot of the

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<sup>103</sup> President Jefferson, for example, wasted little time in severing aid to and relations with the newly sovereign nation, beginning a policy of isolation that would last until the Civil War. For a recent study that captures slaveholders' reactions in various locales within the Southern U.S., see Alfred N. Hunt's *Haiti's Influence on Antebellum America: Slumbering Volcano in the Caribbean* (Baton Rouge, 1988), particularly chapters three and four. Also see Gary B. Nash, *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia* (Cambridge, 1988) for a glimpse into white reactions in the antebellum North.

highest order. Fortune identified with Toussaint's unapologetic pursuit of freedom from white hegemony. Militant in his own right, Fortune chose to invoke Toussaint in the midst of his speech officially proclaiming the formation of the Afro-American League in 1890, the (all-black) predecessor to the NAACP:

Attucks, the black patriot- he was no coward! Toussaint L'Ouverture-he was no coward! Nat Turner-he was no coward! And the two hundred thousand black soldiers of the last war they were no cowards! If we have a work to do, let us do it. And if there come violence, let those who oppose our just cause 'throw the first stone.' We have wealth, we have intelligence, we have courage; and we have a great work to do. (Fortune, "It Is Time to Call a Halt," 222)

Fortune imagines the pursuit of racial justice as not only an act of bravery, but a civic duty. Noteworthy in his remarks is his advocacy of Toussaint as a figure of the same ilk as Nat Turner, despite the distance of national boundary between the two. Fortune goes further in a broader call for black resistance against white hegemony. According to Fortune, those in the post-emancipation world "live in the swim of...tremendous revolution" (222). He uses a diasporic frame in identifying how the "arrogant and insolent intolerance" of the post-bellum United States is akin to the fomentation that led to "the independence of Hayti and San Domingo, the independence of the South American republics, the abolition of slavery in the British West Indies...the abolition of slavery in this country, [and] the recent manumission of Brazilian slaves" (222). In thinking about revolution globally, Fortune makes plain the importance of black struggle abroad as an inspiration to black people domestically. More importantly, he sees this as a

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<sup>104</sup> For a thorough overview of Fortune's impact and significance, see Shawn Alexander's introduction to *T. Thomas Fortune, the Afro-American Agitator: A Collection of Writings, 1880-1928* (Gainesville, 2008)

reflexive relationship, fluid in its interrelations, eschewing national border for a common call to freedom against racialized oppression. To wit: “certainly the blood of Negro patriots was the seed of the independence of Hayti and San Domingo; and in the great revolution of our own country the cornerstones of American freedom were cemented with the blood of black patriots who were not afraid to die” (222).

Fortune, who later went on to serve as editor of Marcus Garvey’s internationally circulated pan-Africanist newspaper, the *Negro World*, proudly wrote of Haiti and Toussaint L’Ouverture in *Dreams of Life* (1905): In “Slavery to the Slave,” he centers the poem on Toussaint, creating an insider-outsider dynamic that portrays him as rightful defender of a land that is rightfully his:

On the hills of Hayti ring  
Mandates of the Frenchman's king,  
And the waves the tidings bring---  
"Slavery to the slave!"

Toussaint arm thee for the fight!  
Strike a blow for human right!  
Crush, O crush! The tyrant's might,  
And thy country save!

Stay thy arm when every foe  
From thy land in haste shall go,  
Sick at heart beneath the blow  
On the battlefield!

Long may Hayti’s banners wave!  
O’er her valiant few, so brave!  
Heroes worthy patriots’ grave,  
Who would ever yield! (Fortune, “Slavery to the Slave,” 1-16)

Fortune opens his tribute to Toussaint L’Ouverture with the shroud of white hegemony looming as an imposition to be overcome. Toussaint’s entrance into the poem through

binary opposition makes him the hero poised to thwart the orders of the villainous “Frenchman’s king.” In this portrayal, Fortune’s entitlement reclaims Haiti from a site of conquest to a space where destiny is fulfilled (“Long may Hayti’s banners wave”). Thematically, Fortune’s echoes the confident sense of entitlement present in Phillis Wheatley’s poetry by framing Toussaint as defending something that is already his (“thy land,” “thy country”). Fortune’s naming of the culprit (“Crush, O crush! the *tyrant’s* might”) is reminiscent of Harper’s “Ethiopia” in its reference to preying tigers. It also is similar to Wheatley’s opening in “To the Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth, when she says

No longer shalt thou dread *the iron chain*,  
Which wanton *Tyranny* with lawless hand  
Had made, and with it meant *t’enslave* the land (17-19)

Fortune continues in this tradition by reaching into the past in an effort to resurrect it, as indicated by his opening words in creating the Afro-American League years before publishing his book of poetry. In crafting this dedication, Horton not only indemnifies white hegemony but also engages in using literature as historical document, seeking to make Toussaint an epic hero. He would not be the only individual involved in such an endeavor, however.

George Clinton Rowe, a South Carolina preacher, also celebrates the Haitian Revolution through tribute poem to Toussaint L’Ouverture. His tribute appears as one of many in a more ambitious project taken on in *Our Heroes: Patriotic Poems on Men, Women and Sayings of the Negro Race* (1890). Before going further, Rowe’s title



deserves a moment of scrutiny for the possibilities expressed within its meaning. Just as was the case for Fortune, Rowe's rendering of Toussaint, a man who never set foot on U.S. soil, as a source of *patriotism* demands a rethinking of traditional notions of national boundary and allegiance. While neither Rowe nor Fortune were advocates of migration, both see fit the framing of a figure "foreign" to the United States as an emblem of *patriotism* to exist within the United States; that is, both look beyond the boundaries of their "homeland" yet within the diaspora – literally, to the creator of another nation – to serve as a model for how to exist within their own. Moreover, Rowe clearly and plainly casts Toussaint L'Ouverture as one of "Our Heroes," claiming allegiance and a common history to bridge the divide of national boundaries. Keeping in mind that "return is perhaps questionable as a defining criterion of diaspora" (King, Christou 171), the stasis of Fortune, Rowe, and others (like Douglass or Harper) who seek to be "patriots" within the United States is irrelevant to their ability to conceive of themselves as within a broader diaspora.

Rowe's book of poetry also serves as a document to African-American history telling.<sup>105</sup> Its organization and subject matter evince his intentions in creating such a lasting document. His preoccupation with influencing the historical narrative and

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<sup>105</sup> Rowe was not the only one to take such a creative approach to Toussaint L'Ouverture's life. Though not an epic in the form of Vincent Ogé, T.T. Purvis's "Lament of Toussaint L'Ouverture" is one of the few poems to humanize Toussaint and attempt to center him as speaker. Purvis was the white wife of the renowned abolitionist Robert Purvis, the son of a white planter and grandson of a blackamoor (Bacon 7). The 82-line poem, which appears in her collection of poems, *Hagar: The Singing Maiden, and Other Stories and Rhymes* (1881) re-imagines Toussaint's days while imprisoned in Besancon, France, where he died. Purvis's poem is an interesting contrast to John Greenleaf Whittier's tribute poem to Toussaint, which also captures his time there, yet from an empathetic yet detached narrator. Also noteworthy in its attempts to humanize Toussaint is William Johnson Vandyne's "Toussaint's Soliloquy," found in *Revels of Fancy* (1891). Vandyne similarly recreates a reflective, humbled, yet still-rebellious Toussaint during his last days.

redeeming the image of people of African descent through poetry is unmistakable, as seen in the preface to his collection:

These poems are all based on historical fact, which, in every case, can be substantiated. The object for which they are presented to the public, is to inform our people that *there is much unwritten history*, of noble deeds, inspiring sayings, and of true manhood and womanhood, *undiscovered*; and *to create that race pride* which is necessary to the growth, progress, and prosperity of any people.

Trusting that this volume may prove an inspiration to many; and hoping that the success of this, may warrant the issue, from time to time, of other volumes of a series now in contemplation.

I am, for the elevation of the Race, Yours ever, GEORGE C. ROWE. (Rowe 4, emphasis added)

Rowe's words clearly indicate his engagement with the project of writing people of African descent into history. Whereas his previous collection of poetry, *Thoughts in Verse* (1887) was not overtly concerned with issues dealing with race (with the poem "Emancipation" being an exception<sup>106</sup>), Rowe makes a definitive and intentional turn in this second volume of poetry to capture the contributions and legacy of "the race." Moreover, he reveals his concern with agency within historiography of speaking rather than being spoken for, or, like Wheatley, speaking *while* being spoken for – or, more accurately, speaking while being silenced. (One recalls Nikki Giovanni's concerns in "Nikki Rosa" echoing a similar theme, some eighty years later.<sup>107</sup>) Rowe felt that history and black identity were not only relevant but essential "to the growth, progress, and

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<sup>106</sup> See *Thoughts in Verse* 77.

<sup>107</sup> Giovanni writes:

I really hope no white person ever has cause  
to write about me  
because they never understand  
black love is black wealth and they'll  
probably talk about my hard childhood  
and never understand that  
all the while I was quite happy (27-33)

prosperity” of all people, and, thus, blacks. His concern with representation is similar to that of George Moses Horton’s, not only as a document in the tradition of poetic realism, but in the shared preoccupation with demonstrating the achievement of the “naked genius” of the African mind. Though Rowe’s concern can easily be gleaned from the title, more can be discerned from the organization of the text itself.

“Toussaint L’Ouverture” serves as the anchor to Rowe’s entire collection of poems, underscoring Rowe’s reverence for him. Of the eight “heroes” in Rowe’s work, “Toussaint L’Ouverture” is by far the longest poem, at four-hundred and fourteen lines. The figures Rowe considers range in achievements and vocation, from service in battle to the pulpit to the pen.<sup>108</sup> Yet by comparison, Rowe’s tribute poem to Toussaint and the Haitian Revolution is far more intricate, lengthy, elaborate, and structured than his other selections. The poem is marked by a preoccupation with chronology. Rather than shift tense, Rowe methodically divides his poem into four sequential sections: “His Ancestry,” “His Boyhood,” “His Manhood,” and “His Prime.” Rowe’s decision to divide the poem as such suggests at least two noteworthy ideas, some of which bear explication for the purpose of this argument. For one, the poem begins with *ancestry* and not his boyhood. Thus, his life is situated within a larger continuum removed from individual self,

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<sup>108</sup> Like contemporary James Madison Bell, Rowe includes a dedication to contemporary writer and poet, Frances Harper. With an eye toward her legacy, he writes:

Long live Frances Ellen Harper!  
Voice and pen instruction give!  
Live thy earnest spirit ever!  
May thy work forever live!

When complete thy earthly missions  
And from toil thou art at rest:  
Still, may coming generations  
Testify, and call thee blest! (25-32)

underscoring Rowe's professed belief in the shared bonds and history of people of African descent. Secondly, by creating a separate section called "His Prime," Rowe treats Toussaint's legacy as almost superhuman or transcendental, considering that "manhood" or adulthood is often understood as a man's typical peak of cognitive and physical development. In this way, Rowe echoes predecessor Charles Lewis Reason (1818-1893), who refers to the insurrectionist as "the 'man of men'" (94) in his own tribute poem.<sup>109</sup> Also worth noting within Rowe's structure is the matter of length within various parts: "His Boyhood" and "His Manhood" are the shortest sections (six stanzas each), with "His Ancestry" and "His Prime" being the longest (eight stanzas and forty-six stanzas, respectively); this emphasis suggests that collective past and legacy is of more importance than the individual – though, of course, the individual in question is certainly remarkable in Rowe's view.

Aside from valorizing the life of Toussaint L'Ouverture, Rowe's poem is also framed as a statement of the shared history and valor of people of African descent. The poem opens by describing the tribe from which Toussaint allegedly descended:

A tribe surnamed the Arradas,  
Sojourned for years, on Africa's  
Southwestern coast.  
Men of physique and strength of mind,  
Excelling others of their kind

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<sup>109</sup> The larger poem in which Reason's reference to Toussaint is contained, "Freedom," actually serves as an elegy to Thomas Clarkson, the English abolitionist (Sherman, *Afro-American Poetry* 49n). The poem conceptualizes freedom as universal, present in various spaces in Europe and Africa at various points in history. Reason places Toussaint's manhood places within this emancipatory framework.

Reason, like Vashon, was present at several National Negro Conventions and worked tirelessly for black uplift. Reason's parents were Haitian immigrants who arrived in New York City during the Haitian Revolution. A lifelong educator, Reason became the first person of African descent to teach at a predominantly white college (Free Mission College) in 1849. For more, see Anthony R. Mayo, "Charles Lewis Reason," *Negro History Bulletin* 5 (June 1942):212-15.

Among a host. (Rowe 1-6)

Rowe's positive if not redemptive description of L'Ouverture's African past was not altogether different than other historical depictions of Toussaint during the period. Lourie Maffly-Kipp notes that "[by] the 1850s, in keeping with a more pervasive historiographical turn toward the exaltation of 'great men' as representatives or national excellence, descriptions of L'Ouverture's exploits became commonplace" and also "symbolized the best qualities of African lineage" (Maffly-Kipp 143). But while his form mirrored those of the era who sought to explicitly champion the strengths and virtues of those of African descent, it is nonetheless symbolic of Rowe's (and others') diasporic consciousness. For Rowe, Africa is not merely synonymous with Egypt or with Ethiopia in Rowe's opening; Rowe, in fact, opens by assigning a family history and location to Toussaint's father, "the chieftain's heir," Gaou-Gwinou:

Gaou-Gwinou, the chieftain's heir,  
Hunting the wild beast in his lair,  
With ruthless hand,  
Was seized, and hurried to the hold  
Of a black ship, thence to be sold  
By slaver band.

For Hayti's Isle, the ship was bound,  
Which years before the Spaniards found --  
Luxuriant, fair.  
The land was rich in fruit and flower,  
Mountains and valleys -- Nature's dower!  
Oh! beauty rare! (7-18)

Thus, the section makes a connection of lineage which is both genetic and diasporic – one between father and son, the other between Africa and Haiti. And, by virtue of Rowe's

very act of writing, Rowe makes a connection between the United States, Haiti, and the Arradas in Africa.

Rowe does not go to great lengths to vilify or mention the slave traders at length as Horton, Harper and others do, eschewing sentimentalism and an appeal to sympathy. In focusing extensively on the inherent value of the riches and bucolic scenes of Haiti, Rowe is able to portray enslavement as unnatural and inhumane, a violation of the body and of the land:

We hear the sound

Of forest songsters, sweet and clear,  
Singing of joy and freedom here  
For beast and bird;  
But man, the image of his God,  
Must bear oppression's cruel rod,  
From him is heard

The sigh, the groan, the sad complaint,  
Toiling and striving, sick and faint;  
Hope dying, dead.  
With wistful eye he scans the sea,  
Feeling that ocean's depth would be  
A grateful bed.

Gaou-Gwinou was purchased here  
By a French prince, and many a year  
He spent---a slave---  
Upon the Breda property;  
And there he reared a family  
And made his grave. (30-48)

Rowe complicates natural beauty by then inserting “man” – likely a reference to slaves – who “[m]ust bear oppression’s huge rod” (35) with “[h]ope dying, dead” (39). The dichotomy of the pure and paradisiacal pastoral scenes with the symbols of the worst of

humanity – specifically, the epitome of manhood with its “cruel *rod*” – relegates slavery to the unnatural. It is no mistake then that nature becomes a sanctuary or space of salvation for the slave, seen in the striking image of a forlorn slave staring at the water contemplating suicide (“A grateful bed”). The tranquility of the untainted land is the foreground from which we understand Toussaint, a point made clear in the subsequent stanza when Rowe states “Gaou-Gwinou was purchased *here*” (43, emphasis added), a land “[t]oo beautiful for tongue or pen” (29). Furthering this point, Rowe subsequently refers to Gaou-Gwinou’s son as “the man whom Nature owes / To her vexed children--- the negroes” (122-123). Rowe’s emphasis on land evokes notions of territory, of homespace, as well as the connection between Toussaint’s African ancestry, his fate, and his achievement.

Rowe uses Toussaint L’Ouverture’s boyhood to not only portray him as a learned child, but to make plain how the love of race pride was integral to his success. Echoing his own message about race pride at outset of his book, Rowe writes that Gaou-Gwinou “taught [Toussaint] of Fatherland, / Loved Africa, torn from whose strand” (79-80). The immediate placement of these lines in the stanza preceding “His Manhood,” which opens, “Thus, up to manhood he arose / A man of wisdom, strength, and repose” (85-87), suggests how important the recognition of ancestry is to one’s growth, or in creating “wisdom, strength, and repose.” (One sees an invocation of the phallus in Toussaint rising “up to Manhood,” possibly suggesting a gendered notion of uplift on Rowe’s part.) This acknowledgement of a diasporic connection and emphasis on its crucial nature functions doubly in the text: just as L’Ouverture’s father instills this in his son to lead

him to greatness, Rowe as storyteller tells the reader of ancestry, past, and its centrality. His portrayal of “His Manhood” and the epic portrayal of “His Prime,” which both move forward through Toussaint’s learned diasporic consciousness, play out the hero’s “destiny.”

Rowe takes great care to note the victory of Toussaint while also pointing out the seemingly inescapable grasp of white hegemony in the character of Napoleon Bonaparte, “Proud conqueror with a treacherous heart” (230). Rowe, then, uses L’Ouverture’s story as a symbol of a global condition: Bonaparte acts a villainous symbol for white global hegemony, whereas Toussaint is the valiant protagonist “Who boldly *opened* freedom’s door / to Afric’s son [s]” (188-189). And, of course, Rowe, writing in the latter half of the century, would be all too familiar with the promise of freedom and the ultimate relinquishing of freedom which would plague Haitians and black U.S. citizens. Accordingly, Rowe’s poem exhibits a continuation of the principle of trans-spatial racial politics; he adds onto the tradition of Ethiopianism in his focus on Toussaint as a diasporic hero “[w]ith perfect trust and faith in God” (149). Tragic though his end may be, Toussaint is absolved in his demise through the structure of Rowe’s poem. Said another way, by connecting Toussaint within a collective, a legacy of resistance, and a lineage, Rowe bookends Toussaint’s life with a larger ancestral connection that demands the reader recognize not only Toussaint, but his people – not only his life, but his predecessors and successors.

Rowe was not the only poet to recognize the heroics outside U.S. borders as a wellspring of hope. Henrietta Cordelia Ray (1849 – 1916), a New York City activist,



schoolteacher, and writer, followed in Rowe's tradition of elevating historical figures.<sup>110</sup> Relatively unheralded<sup>111</sup> until she was the subject of review by Harlem Renaissance's Jessie Redmon Fauset, Ray generally avoided much in the way of poems with racial overtones in her two books of poetry, *Sonnets* (1893) and *Poems* (1910). Like many of her nineteenth century contemporaries, Ray often wrote of morality and personal emotions, but also engaged in the project of celebrating race heroes and those who fought for black freedom. Ray, a schoolteacher, celebrates Toussaint L'Ouverture in her eponymous poem for the enduring lessons he offers, pointing to an ethos of liberation through courage:

Brave Toussaint! thou wast surely born to be  
A hero; thy proud spirit could but spurn  
Each outrage on thy race. Couldst thou unlearn  
The lessons taught by instinct? Nay! And we  
Who share the zeal that would make all men free,  
Must e'en with pride unto thy life-work turn. (Ray 3-8)

Here, Ray connects with the revolutionary's racial consciousness, saying in all but name the bond shared across geographic space to challenge white hegemony ("we / Who share the zeal that would make *all* men free"). Though different from Rowe, who opts to show how Toussaint's African lineage inculcated within him a sense of courage, Ray includes the "lessons taught by instinct" to further elevate Toussaint as hero. She reflexively uses the "lessons" here, imbuing Toussaint with values that those "who share the zeal" of

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<sup>110</sup> Like Rowe, Ray also extended this elevation to figures in history. Though Rowe's preoccupation was with strictly people of African descent, Ray's interests run the gamut, including tributes to contemporary Paul Laurence Dunbar, William Lloyd Garrison, Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, and Toussaint L'Ouverture.

<sup>111</sup> Ray did initially receive some early recognition in 1876 for writing "Lincoln: Written for the Occasion of the Unveiling of the Freedmen's Monument in Memory of Abraham Lincoln."

social justice and racial equality must “unto thy-life work turn.” Thus, to Ray, who received a Master’s Degree in Pedagogy, Toussaint is the ultimate teacher, a necessary inclusion in the corpus of revolutionary history. Her tribute to Toussaint underscores not only the bond across space, but across time. Overtly referring to the Caribbean, she opens, “To those fair isles where crimson sunsets burn, / We send a backward glance to gaze on thee,” (1-2) invoking on a *Sankofa*-based principle of reflecting upon and retrieving the past to move forward. Like Rowe, Ray emphasizes how understanding the history and tradition is indispensable for progress, a tradition that the schoolteacher by trade fittingly continued in her own tribute to Paul Laurence Dunbar.<sup>112</sup> By extension, Ray suggests that through looking toward the diaspora, black people in the U.S. might ameliorate their current strife at the turn of the twentieth century.

#### THE TRIBUTE AS MIRROR: GEORGE BOYER VASHON AND VINCENT OGÉ

Poet George Boyer Vashon adds to the body of tributes to the figures of the Haitian revolution with a 359-line tribute to Vincent Ogé.<sup>113</sup> Ogé was a wealthy mulatto freeman who petitioned for equal treatment between free colored blacks and whites and, upon refusal of institution, incited a revolt of free men of color against the Haitian government. Recent historical scholarship has unearthed the complexities from Ogé’s previously simplified and romanticized heroic motives. Garrigus asserts that “the so-called ‘Ogé revolt’ made him the Revolution’s first great martyr” (35); Vashon, active in

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<sup>112</sup> In *Poems*, she writes of Dunbar, “Who was this child? The offspring of a race / That erst had toiled 'neath slavery's galling chains” (9-10).

<sup>113</sup> Raymond Patterson points out that “Few examples of African American epic poetry appear before the Civil War,” with Vashon’s poem being an early exception, as well as Phillis Wheatley’s “Goliath of Gath” and “Niobe in Distress for Her Children Slain by Apollo” (Patterson 212).

the antislavery circuit in the United States, was thus likely to understand Ogé as such – a man of African descent rallying against the injustice of white oppression – upon writing his tribute in 1853. Vashon, who like Ogé was born free, of lighter complexion, and was relatively privileged, also spent more than two years in Haiti teaching English, Latin and Greek.<sup>114</sup> He later became a regular contributor to *Frederick Douglass's Paper* and was involved with several of the National Negro Conventions as an officer. As a staunch advocate of racial advancement, it comes as no surprise that Vashon's tribute to his Haitian counterpart (found in his aptly titled collection, *Autographs for Freedom*) echoes much of the chagrin he faced as a free black in the United States. In this sense, the tribute poem acts as not only a statement about race, but, quite possibly, a personal narrative.

Vashon's lines are a testament to the bond that blacks within the diaspora felt, both as subjects of their captivity and as agents of their emancipation. Using Ogé has a

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<sup>114</sup> *The North Star* highlighted the story of Vashon's challenges in being admitted to the Bar as a lawyer to "give our readers on *both sides of the Atlantic* some ideas with which the nominally free colored people of this country have to contend, in the pathway of improvement and elevation." A biographical portrait of Vashon was published in the *North Star*, 21 Jan 1848:

Mr. Vashon is a native of [Haiti]. Some years ago he went to Oberlin, Ohio, where he passed through a regular collegiate course, graduating with honor and high rank in his class. From Oberlin he returned to this city, where, for some two or three years, he engaged in the study of the law, under the direction of the Hon. W. Forward. Having completed his legal studies, he applied to the proper committee to undergo the requisite examination, previous to his admission to the Bar. A majority of the Committee refused to examine him, because his complexion was a shade darker than their own. On Saturday last, Mr. Vashon applied to the Court for a rule upon the Committee, directing them to examine him. The Judge refused the rule, for the same reason that a majority of the Committee refused to examine Mr. Vashon. There was no pretence [sic] that the applicant is not of excellent moral character, of gentlemanly deportment and well qualified for admission. In no respect did he come short of the qualifications demanded by the Rules of Court. Had Mr. Vashon possessed a doubtful character, been intemperate or not even learned, yet of pure Anglo Saxon blood, his name would have been entered upon the roll of Attorneys. A few drops of African blood flowed in his veins, and he was refused admission to the Bar. He now leaves his native city, to take up his abode among strangers, expatriated by the cruel prejudices of his fellow citizens. His learning and talents will secure him, we doubt not, great success and honor in the land of his adoption.

focal point, Vashon speaks of the brotherhood and community under the fist of oppression that further united Haitian (free) blacks:

And Ogé standeth in his hall;  
But now he standeth not alone; --  
A brother's there, and friends; and all  
Are kindred spirits with his own;  
For mind will join with kindred mind,  
As matter's with its like combined. (170-175)

Vashon creates a world within his poem that might be a microcosm of the world outside of it; that is, metaphorically, Vashon outlines the very real contours for how someone like himself connects with his ancestors and brethren through his recreated scenes of Vincent Ogé. Ogé “standeth not alone,” as does no one within a community or collective. Not only connected by a familial bond of “brothers” and friends,” he is joined by those of like ideology and consciousness, “For mind will join with kindred mind.” Vashon, active in anti-slavery circles in his own right, thus offers an explanation for his own connectedness to Ogé – and, simultaneously, with those of African descent – in the very act of dedicating his poem to him. His poem, in effect, is a speech-act of joining with kindred mind, just as Ogé’s fellow revolutionaries joined with him in his cause. Vashon was active in the abolitionist circuit as a freeman and fought against the same racist slaveholding force in the United States as Ogé did in Haiti sixty years prior to the poem’s publication.

As the tribute poem continues, the similarities between Vashon and Ogé’s respective conditions manifest, a feat accomplished by Vashon’s deft shift of tense. Rhetorically, Vashon’s decision to fluctuate tense within his verses blurs the temporal

boundaries between past and present. The effect of this is twofold: Vashon links the historical moment preceding him to the one currently facing him, skillfully allowing him to inject a veiled premonition to the United States government. Shifting from valorization of Ogé in Haiti to a more general and cautionary warning, he writes: “They speak of wrongs they had received / Of freemen, of their rights bereaved” (176-177). This curious shift and sleight of pen augments the tribute poem’s subversive potential, functioning as both historical document and call to arms.

Still focused on the congregation of men joining Ogé in the hall, Vashon depicts the men – who we now learn are freemen like Ogé and Vashon – recounting their maligned pasts under a racially unjust system. Vashon again employs the past imperfective and shifts to the present, highlighting the continuous torrent of transgressions faced by the Haitian freemen:

Ah! they had borne well as they might,  
Such wrongs as freemen ill can bear;  
And they had urged both day and night,  
In fitting words, a freeman's prayer; (186-189)

Finally, Vashon remains in the present, almost proselytizing in his offering of general principles:

And when the heart is filled with grief,  
For wrongs of all true souls accurst,  
In action it must seek relief,  
Or else, o'ercharged, it can but burst. (190-193)

Just as much as these lines capture the mounting friction preceding the Haitian Revolution, Vashon’s words might be thought of as a prelude of the sentiments preceding the Civil War in the United States, with tensions in the 1850s approaching a fever

pitch.<sup>115</sup> Whereas Vashon begins elucidating the thoughts, feelings and sentiments of the band of men joining Ogé, his shift in tense and tone from the then-present to his-present (“And when the heart is filled with grief...”) further suggests Vashon’s own connection to Ogé’s struggle. Thus, through a diasporic lens, Vashon is able to identify with and create what would rightfully be called an epic about a struggle to which many black freedmen in the U.S. (and elsewhere) connected. The value and significance of Vashon’s usage of the present tense, then, is shown in its fashioning of the continuum of resistance. The immediate shift from the past to a reflection on the present enables those who all engage in struggle, especially those with conditions relatable to Vincent Ogé, to relate to his lamentation, “...when the heart is filled with grief...[i]n action it must seek relief.” The shift to the present is noteworthy also for what it might represent to Vashon’s biographical experience.

Vashon also had much reason to complain of “rights bereaved as a freeman.” A biographical sketch of Vashon, who later became a regular contributor to *Frederick Douglass’s Paper*, details the denial of his rights:

Having completed his law studies, Mr. Vashon was brought, at once, into point blank conflict with that meanest of all aristocracies, the aristocracy of color. Native of Pennsylvania, as he was, educated, as he was, and honorably certified to, as he was, by his great law master, he was, nevertheless, driven from the bar of his native State, unable to gain admission, simply, because of his color. This heathenish of Pennsylvania was well rebuked by the New York Bar, which at once admitted Mr. Vashon to practice in all the Courts of the State. (“*All Rights for All*”)

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<sup>115</sup> Dunbar’s “An Ante-Bellum Sermon,” which, like, Vashon’s poem, is written decades after the war, makes for an interesting juxtaposition, as both fashion black fraternity as an antecedent to moments of potential freedom.

The fair-skinned Vashon, whose “complexion was a shade darker” than his examiners (*North Star*), returned from Haiti and continued to be active in abolitionist circles much like his father. Light in skin tone, afflicted by color, “free” only nominally or by comparison, and in direct contention with his government, Vashon certainly could relate to the position of his Haitian predecessor, Vincent Ogé. Though Ogé’s struggle was not entirely inclusive – his rebellion, in the immediate sense, was for the free colored population of Haiti – Vashon was able to connect his struggle across national boundary along the lines of common ancestry.

Above all, however, Vashon is not passively resentful of his African ancestry; rather, he embraces it. Vashon taught in Haiti after the Pennsylvania bar did not admit him (Sherman, *African American Poetry* 153). Like his contemporaries, he was active in civic organizations including the Colored Men of America, in addition to his participation in the National Negro Conventions. Although only “[a] few drops of African blood flowed in his veins” (*North Star*), Vashon, through his poetry, demonstrates his commitment to a larger cause and the larger community of those of African descent through struggle. And despite our contemporary amnesia of Vashon’s efforts and writings, he, like several of his contemporaries, was regarded highly for his poetry during his day. One commenter in *Frederick Douglass’s Paper* enthusiastically offers adulation for Vashon’s work: “[Vashon may be read after reading the verses of [William Cullen] Bryant, [John Greenleaf] Whittier, and [Nathaniel Parker] Willis” (*Frederick Douglass’s Paper*). He attended the Negro National Convention of 1853 with luminaries including Frederick Douglass, James McCune Smith, and James W.C. Pennington, along with

fellow writer and outspoken Pan-Africanist Elymas Payson Rogers, and, fittingly enough, the great-uncle of Langston Hughes, John Mercer Langston.<sup>116</sup>

Vashon's use of a diachronic, transnational identification is emblematic of the ways in which blacks in the United States, poets or otherwise, connected to the larger African diaspora, thus adding to what might aptly be considered a diasporic consciousness or awareness. Namely, the decision to identify across time and geographic space by intentionally referencing an African past positions them to see themselves in the same position as their Haitian counterparts when faced with the specter of white hegemony. Thus, the past becomes politic, retrievable as a *modus operandi* for the challenges facing blacks during the nadir period in the United States. "No history," Matsuda insists, "can be pure event, pure evolution; each is rather a repetition, a return to a story which must be retold, distinguished from its previous telling" (15). Vashon's retelling of the story of Vincent Ogé is a testament to this, just as is Rowe, Fortune, Reason, and Ray's praise, reclamation, and reappropriation of Toussaint L'Ouverture. Their re-tellings point to the centrality of creating and preserving memory in cultural consciousness, an act of historiographical significance.

As Hua reminds us, memory is inextricably linked to historical and political struggle (197); the Haitian Revolution, of course, is a landmark in this chronological terrain. These poems are thus a diasporic intervention, an act of historicizing that simultaneously resists hegemonic historiographical forces of erasure while (re-) creating a space for readers of African descent to unify. Their tribute poems can be usefully read

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<sup>116</sup> For complete records of attendees, minutes, and drafted resolutions from these conventions, see *Bell: Proceedings of the National Negro Conventions: 1830 – 1864* (1969).



as a testimony to a global political struggle for which their race and “African-ness,” ontological as it may be, was an indelible fact. Haiti, of course, was at the center, but not the totality, of these testimonies.

#### AMISTAD AND THE AFRICAN DIASPORA: TRIBUTES TO JOSEPH CINQUÉ

While Haiti was an obvious site of inspiration for writers of African descent, inspiration was also to be found in other figures. James Monroe Whitfield, a freedman and lifelong activist born in New Hampshire, continued the project of history building in his poetry. Whitfield’s voice is another that has been silenced over time; in his case, his voice was anything but. Known to Williams Wells Brown, Frederick Douglass, and Martin Delany among others as a gifted poet,<sup>117</sup> Whitfield saw his poetry as a vehicle of protest, an extension of the politics that he exercised in his everyday life. (Whitfield’s *America and Other Poems* [1853] was dedicated to none other than Martin Delany.<sup>118</sup>) Comparatively, whereas contemporaries such as Joshua McCarter Simpson, Frederick Douglass, and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper were consistent in critiquing the United States while understanding that it would ultimately be their home, Whitfield openly questioned this relationship. For example, having no faith that the United States would ever be hospitable toward people of African descent, he, along with his wife, signed a petition circulating during the Civil War calling on Congress to set aside funding for the

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<sup>117</sup> Whitfield, like Delany, did not imagine it feasible for people of African descent to live in the United States. Outspoken, he gained notoriety for his politics and his poetry; while in Buffalo he made a living in one of the most quintessential (and, for African Americans, sacred) spaces to be heard: the barber shop. For a comprehensive treatment of Whitfield and his legacy, see Levine and Wilson’s introduction to *The Works of James M. Whitfield*.

<sup>118</sup> The dedication reads, “To Martin Delany, M.D.: This volume is inscribed as a small tribute of respect for his character, admiration of his talents, and love of his principles, by the author.”

resettlement of blacks in Central and South America.<sup>119</sup> Yet despite the relative difference in his politics, Whitfield can still be grouped within a cadre of poets who sought to historicize, reclaim, and celebrate figures across the diaspora.

Just as others would pay their respects to Toussaint L'Ouverture, Whitfield would turn his attention to another revolutionary figure of African descent: Sengbe Pieh, otherwise known as Joseph Cinqué.<sup>120</sup> Cinqué, of the Membe in West Africa, was regarded as the chief conspirator and agitator in the infamous takeover of *The Amistad* slave ship in 1839. He was an appropriate subject for the pro-emigration Whitfield, as his resistance to European hegemony ultimately led to his being returned to Sierra Leone.<sup>121</sup>

Whitfield's tribute of Cinqué is noteworthy in its parallels to tributes to Toussaint L'Ouverture; namely, Whitfield conceives of Cinqué's disobedience against the State *as* an exemplary act of patriotism for others to take up, near and far, across time:

All hail! thou truly noble chief,  
Who scorned to live a cowering slave;  
Thy name shall stand on history's leaf,  
Amid the mighty and the brave:  
Thy name shall shine, a glorious light  
To other brave and fearless men,  
Who, like thyself, in freedom's might,

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<sup>119</sup> Levine and Wilson observe that "as the signers of the petition put it, they supported a project that would provide blacks with 'some country in which their color will not be a badge of degradation'" (12).

<sup>120</sup> A testament to Whitfield's reach, Martin Delany reprints "To Cinqué" in *Blake – or, the Huts of America*. Whitfield had previously dedicated his collection of poems, *America*, to Delany. See Levine 2, 49n.

<sup>121</sup> A rumor persists that upon his return to Sierra Leone, Cinqué became a slave trader. This myth was directly addressed in *The Journal of American History* 87.3. See Jones, Howard, "Cinqué of the Amistad a Slave Trader? Perpetuating a Myth"; Finkelman, Paul, "On Cinqué and the Historians"; Wyatt-Brown, Bertram, "Mea Culpa"; and McFeely, William, "Cinqué, Tall and Strong," all in the same edition.

Shall beard the robber in his den.  
Thy name shall stand on history's page,  
And brighter, brighter, brighter glow,  
Throughout all time, through every age,  
Till bosoms cease to feel or know  
“Created worth, or human woe.” (1-13)

Consistent with tributes to Toussaint, Whitfield makes Cinqué venerable yet human, honorable yet attainable, regal yet relatable. As both Rowe and Whitfield understand, the point of the tribute is not merely to commemorate a hero, but to create a figure to appropriate for the challenges of the present. Thus, in quite methodical fashion, Whitfield deems Cinqué worthy at the outset (“truly noble”), coyly suggests his inclusion to the historical narrative (“Thy name shall stand on history’s leaf”), and immediately claims his name as “a glorious light,” an inspiration and influence “other brave and fearless men” faced with the tyranny he chose to resist. Recognizing the interminability of racial oppression, Whitfield rescues Cinqué from being passively remembered in history, stating that “throughout all time, throughout every age,” his memory “shall stand on history’s page.” His use of the “brighter, brighter, brighter” in succession (10) furthers the intensity and perpetuity of the “glow” that Cinqué represents. Interestingly, he departs from the ABAB structure of the entire poem – hitherto and subsequently – by adding onto the line “Till bosoms come to feel or know” with “Created worth, or human woe.” In effect, the lines implore the reader to examine these lines in particular, perhaps to adopt a sense of empathy, given the emphasis created.<sup>122</sup> A “noble chief,”

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<sup>122</sup> (Also of note: the line of emphasis happens to be the thirteenth line.)

Cinqué is to be emulated, consistent with historicizing pieces considered earlier in this chapter.

Whitfield finishes the poem emphasizing the legacy and influence of Cinqué, using him as a rallying cry much like Fortune, Rowe, and Ray do with Toussaint:

Thy name shall nerve the patriot's hand  
When, 'mid the battle's deadly strife,  
The glittering bayonet and brand  
Are crimsoned with the stream of life:  
When the dark clouds of battle roll,  
And slaughter reigns without control,  
Thy name shall then fresh life impart,  
And fire anew each freeman's heart.  
Though wealth and power their force combine  
To crush thy noble spirit down,  
There is above a power divine  
Shall bear thee up against their frown (14-25)

With Cinqué's name framed within of patriotism despite his act of resistance being exactly the opposite, Whitfield makes his "disobedience" not only acceptable, but desirable; it is to be encouraged and expected of others. It goes from an act of rebellion to an act of responsibility; thus, Whitfield, in effect, updates Wheatley's narrative of entitlement to human (or God-given) rights. In this respect, freedom is owed to Cinqué and those in his condition. It must be acquired by any means necessary.

Just as noteworthy is Whitfield's sophisticated understanding of the nature of white hegemony as more than a physical imposition. His observation that "wealth and power" are the prime culprits which come together "To crush thy spirit down" shows the activist's acute awareness of the relevance of class, capital, and control as it relates to the conditions of those in the African diaspora. And, fittingly, Whitfield's subject Cinqué

was aboard a Spanish ship before leading the mutiny of the *Amistad* off the Cuban coast; the wayward ship eventually landed in Long Island. With Cinqué's eventual return to Sierra Leone after being jailed and detained in Connecticut, Whitfield has chosen a figure who embodies transnational struggle within the diaspora through his own lived experience.

For Whitfield, and for poets who exalted the lives of people of African descent, the act of writing tribute went beyond pure adulation. In the same manner that Wheatley wrote "To S.M.," or as Harper wrote about Aunt Chloe, a much more profound statement was being made by Rowe, Vashon, Whitfield and their contemporaries: against a silencing tide that whitewashed the experiences and narratives of black figures, these stories must be told. In the words and tradition of George Washington Williams, they "modestly [strove] to lift the Negro race to its pedestal in American history" (Williams iv). Such an act went beyond mere fancy or expression; it served "to instruct the present, to inform the future" (iv), a motivation explicitly expressed in these tribute poems. And in recording the lives and feats of people of African descent across the diaspora, these writers, in turn, advance a transnational narrative; by adding them to the corpus of (black) writers from the United States, they suggest an interconnected, diasporic, transferable vision explicitly expressing kinship through common history, condition, and challenge. In the same fervor that these writers commemorated and defended the actions of these revolutionary figures, several also directed their attention to the importance and significance of emancipated spaces.

## POETRY AND PLACE:

### THE SIGNIFICANCE OF WEST INDIAN EMANCIPATION

In the immediate aftermath of the Evansville race riot in 1903, Paul Laurence Dunbar reflected on the irony of black loyalty and patriotism at the dawn of a new century, one which followed a century of enslavement, emancipation, and harrowing shortcomings. In his famous “The Fourth of July and Race Outrages,” published in the *New York Times*, *Chicago Defender*, and several other periodicals, Dunbar lambasted his black countrymen and women for their seemingly blind and uncritical allegiance to a country which continued to fail them in protecting basic human rights:

Not even the Jew and the Chinaman have been able to outdo us in the display of loyalty. And we have done it all because we have not stopped to think just how little it means to us. [...]

With citizenship discredited and scored, with violated homes and long unheeded prayers, with bleeding hands uplifted, still sore and smarting from our long beating at the door of opportunity, we raise our voices and sing, ‘My Country, ‘Tis of Thee’; we shout and sing while from the four points of the compass comes our brothers’ unavailing cry, and so we celebrate. (Dunbar, “Negro Author Voices Protest” 5)

Echoing his recently deceased elder and mentor Frederick Douglass from his seminal piece, “What is the Fourth of July to the Slave?” written fifty years prior, Dunbar, a native Ohioan, continues the tradition of questioning the notion of homespace. In doing so, he problematizes and challenges the spatial boundaries of violence often associated with the South, noting how “the four points of the compass” all point toward the same ominous fate for blacks in the United States. Whether before or after emancipation, the Fourth of July remained symbolic; by the turn of the twentieth century it came to represent hypocrisy in all forms, be it in promises unfulfilled or in misplaced patriotism.

The relationship between the Fourth of July and free and enslaved blacks is one that has been fraught with tension since its inception. In New York, for example, blacks were banned from celebrating Independence Day in 1800 (Alexander 56). Kachun suggests a “direct correlation” between the Haitian revolution, white French immigrants and refugees, and an increase in racial violence – particularly in black public celebrations; in fact, during an outbreak of violence during a Fourth of July celebration in 1804, black boys vowed to “shew [the whites] San Domingo” (Kachun, *Festivals of Freedom* 25). In Philadelphia and elsewhere, blacks were gradually excluded from (white) displays of patriotism, which, as Kachun notes, coincided with the (legal) termination of the Atlantic Slave trade in 1808 (25). Tellingly, many blacks chose July 5 to celebrate, as it “brought attention to their unique experience and more accurately reflected their reality as unequal residents in a hostile land” (Alexander 57). These exclusions further fostered a sense of racialized patriotism before and after the Civil War. Black Fourth (or Fifth) of July celebrations and First of August celebrations were commonplace, with Emancipation Proclamation celebrations and Juneteenth celebrations occurring in the aftermath of the Civil War. Inevitably, many celebrations would be accompanied by violence, such as the Hamburg Massacre in South Carolina during the nation’s centennial. In short, whether before or after Emancipation, be it in the West, Midwest, South, or North, as Dunbar explained, the unifying thread was this: Liberty was not a privilege extended to black women and men.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> See Adam Cribblez’s *Parading Patriotism: Independence Day Celebrations in the Urban Midwest* (2013) for an examination of the evolution of the holiday as it relates to representation, race, and class conflict. Though focused primarily on the upper-Midwest, Cribblez considers relevant movements from

This irony was not lost on poets of who looked past the Fourth of July and instead turned their attention to another date, in another land. Whitfield historicizes this irony in “Ode for the Fourth of July” (1853), treating slavery as the unfinished business of the Revolutionary War. He writes:

May those great truths which [U.S. Revolutionary War soldiers] maintained  
Through years of deadly strife and toil,  
Be by their children well sustained,  
Till slavery ceases on our soil –  
Till every wrong shall be redressed,  
And every bondman be set free;  
And from the north, south, east and west,  
Paeans shall rise to Liberty. (17-24)

Given the stipulations of the Fugitive Slave Act, Whitfield subtly may be suggesting the ubiquity of the adversity and disenfranchisement facing those of darker hue in all parts of the country (“north, south, east and west”). Though Whitfield appears to be heaping praise upon those who fought against the British for freedom, he quickly belittles those incomplete efforts and refocuses the poem on the source of the holiday’s hypocrisy:

May that same God whose aegis led  
Our patriot sires on Bunker’s height,  
Shed the same blessings on our head,  
The heroes of a *nobler* fight (25-28, emphasis added)

Later going on to proclaim the inevitability of slavery’s demise (37-40), Whitfield imagines true patriotism within the context of social justice. Liberty was not an abstract concept, nor was it purely in God’s hands; it was an entitlement that was to be fought for. Whitfield here captures a sentiment that would echo with the majority of black poets and

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other parts of the country, including the influx of immigrant and various “othered” groups, as it relates to the evolution of American nationalism.



leaders with the U.S. on the question of patriotic allegiance: the ideas vested in the Constitution were worth fighting for; the realities, however, as they related to “Afric’s sons and daughters,” however, must be fought against.

James Madison Bell, devout activist, educator, orator and poet, also laments this contradiction in *The Poetical Works of James Madison Bell* (1901). Born in 1829, Bell already had an impressive record as an abolitionist and activist by the time his fellow Ohioan Dunbar was born more than forty years later. In the aftermath of the Fugitive Slave Act, he and his family relocated to Canada, where he actively supported, fundraised, and aided his “personal friend” John Brown of Harper’s Ferry fame (Arnett 7-8). While remaining active in uplift after the Civil War (he eventually would be hosted by President Chester A. Arthur in 1884 as a result of his work with the A.M.E. Church) (14), Bell remained consistent in using poetry as a means of critiquing racial injustice. Bell joins the tradition of black poets reflecting upon the diaspora to critique the United States. Of the twenty-seven poems in his collection, three are specifically dedicated to the First of August. In his lengthiest treatment of the subject, “Dawn of Freedom” – incidentally read during a commemoration of West Indian Emancipation (Bell, *Poetical Works* 35n) – Bell craftily sets up the contradiction presented by the Fourth by juxtaposing polar opposites on the scale of power: White House politicians and black slaves / peasants:

Columbia had her many days  
Of frolic, sport and joy, and glee;  
But none of universal praise;  
No soul-inspiring jubilee;  
No day on which, *from palace dome*

*And from the lowly thatched-roof tent,  
Would mutual heartfelt greetings come,  
Memorial of some grand event. (81-88, emphasis added)*

Bell's use of binary opposition creates a series of starkly contrasting binaries: "palace dome" / "*lowly* thatched-roof tent; politician/property; powerful/powerless; lawmakers / non-citizens; and, given the history of slaveholders in the White House, master / slave. In each, the latter is cast as outside of the "frolic, sport and joy, and glee" of Columbia, a metonym for the State. By extension, slaves are outsiders within their land of birth; they are, as poet John Willis Menard puts it in "The Negro's Lament," "worse than an alien in my native land" (Menard 2).

As the poem progresses, Bell shifts tone to question the logic of recognizing and observing three pillars of traditional patriotism in the U.S.: Independence Day, Thanksgiving, and President George Washington's Birthday. His rhetorical questioning augments the dilemma of adhering to traditionally defined narratives of patriotism for blacks in the United States, free or enslaved:

*She had her Independence day,  
But what was July's Fourth to him  
Whose class and kind and kindred lay,  
All fetter-bound in mind and limb;  
And what the pilgrim's yearly feast,  
And what the birth of Washington,  
To him whose grievous bonds increased  
With each new day's unfolding sun? (89-96)*

Borrowing from Douglass's well-known use of the interrogative, Bell's verses are also noteworthy in their invocation of shared experience ("him / Whose class and kind and kindred lay / All fetter-bound in mind and limb"). In Bell's view, the plight of the slave

was the plight of the free black population. He imagines the free and enslaved black population as having to accept the underbelly of the United States' history. What, after all, was the celebratory value of Washington's presidency to those on Washington's plantation? Patriotism, thus, was a fraught concept for any person of African descent in the United States, North or South, free or enslaved. Bell explains:

He had no day---there was not one  
Of all the days that formed the year,  
Which did not point to wrongs begun,  
And oft beguile him of a tear. (94-97)

Whereas the Fourth of July became a measuring stick deprivation of rights accorded to people of African descent in the United States, the First of August, 1834 – when the British Parliament officially enacted the Abolition of Slavery Bill in its West Indian colonies – was a beacon of hope for what might be for blacks living in the United States, free and enslaved. Just as the Haitian Revolution within the black poetic tradition in the U.S. symbolized the promise of freedom for “Afric's sons and daughters,” so did the First of August and the abolition of slavery in the British West Indies.

Blacks in the U.S. invoked their ancestral and diasporic ties in celebrating progress abroad while using the Fourth of July to draw attention to the lack of it at home. Though evidence of public celebration of Haitian Independence is scant,<sup>124</sup> there is no denying the significance and public celebration of August 1, 1834 by blacks in the

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<sup>124</sup> For a detailed treatment of the challenges in the researching of (and subsequent commentary on) public celebrations of the Haitian Revolution, see Mitch Kachun's “Antebellum African Americans, Public Commemoration, and the Haitian Revolution: A Problem of Historical Mythmaking,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 26.2 (Summer 2006).

Caribbean and the U.S.<sup>125</sup> Genevieve Fabre observes that “the British Parliament ending slavery in the West Indies encouraged black Americans to think of their fate more in terms of a diaspora than in the limited frame of state or U.S. events” (Fabre 82). First of August celebrations were “far more meaningful” than American Independence Day, according to Levine and Wilson (95n); at the very least they offered more hope than the hypocritical observance of the Fourth of July in the antebellum United States. Edward Rugemer articulates the unique position that the First of August celebrations held as a political statement in response *to* the Fourth of July:

...[T]he fortuitous proximity of the Fourth of July and the First of August allowed black and white abolitionists, often together, to project their movement into the public sphere. The Fourth of July made summer into the time of year when Americans affirmed their political identity. The First of August explicitly rejected the exclusive nationalism of the Fourth while the memory of that year’s celebration was quite fresh. (Rugemer 229-230)

The gravity of the event was not lost on blacks agitating for equal rights, as it emancipated more than 650,000 slaves (Whitfield places the number at 800,000)<sup>126</sup> from an empire on path to becoming the most powerful in the world in subsequent decades. Douglass, Dunbar, and many others in the black community were certainly aware of the hypocrisy of The Fourth of July, both before and after the abolition of slavery. Thus, the

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<sup>125</sup> See, especially, Genevieve Fabre, “African American Commemorative Celebrations in the Nineteenth Century” in *History and Memory in African American Culture*, ed. Genevieve Fabre and Robert O’Meally (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 72-88; William B. Gravely, “The Dialectic of Double-Consciousness in Black American Freedom Celebrations, 1808-1863,” *Journal of Negro History*, 67 (Winter 1982), 303-05; Mitch Kachun, *Festivals of Freedom: Memory and Meaning in African American Emancipation Celebrations, 1808-1915* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003); J.R. Kerr-Ritchie, *Rites of August First: Emancipation Day in the Black Atlantic World* (2007); W. Caleb McDaniel, “The Fourth and the First: Abolitionist Holidays, Respectability, and Radical Interracial Reform,” *American Quarterly* 57 (March 2005), 129-151.

<sup>126</sup> See “Stanzas for the First of August” in Whitfield’s *America*.

focus on the First of August – and on freedom and resistance abroad on the part of people of African descent – became a call to a transnational racial politics for leaders from the middle of the nineteenth century to the Civil War. This transnationalist thrust echoed beyond emancipation through the end of the century.<sup>127</sup> Naturally, black poets reverberated this sentiment.

Within the black poetic tradition exists an awareness of the First of August in and of itself as a momentous and pivotal event. The verses that accompany it evince a keen awareness of diaspora, not only in its connection with Jamaica, but in an unwavering faith of the contagiousness of condition. The spread of freedom across those areas in the Western Hemisphere affected by slavery and racialized oppression was not just a hope, but an inevitability. This shared belief transcended ideology; anti-colonialists and emigrationists alike recognized the interrelatedness of their fate with those throughout the diaspora. Much of the poetry retained Christian focus while stepping outside the parameters of Ethiopianism to embrace the foundations of a Black Nationalist pretext in its invocations of shared history, its emphasis on the need for land, an embrace of a shared politics, and a recognition of a kinship and common destiny.

James Madison Bell, who emigrated to Canada and then returned to the states to live in San Francisco, voices the familial bond between blacks that was forged by the United States' complicity in exploiting Africa during the slave trade. Referencing a common ancestry, he uses language similar to Al-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz's oft-quoted

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<sup>127</sup> See Chapter Seven, "Rethinking Liberty" in Rugemer's *The Problem of Emancipation: Caribbean Roots of the Civil War* for more on the significance of Jamaican emancipation, especially within an interracial abolitionist context.

observation that the “chickens [were] coming home to roost” to make sense of the violence taking place during the Civil War<sup>128</sup>:

America! America!  
Thine own undoing thou has wrought,  
*For all thy wrongs to Africa,*  
*This cup has fallen to thy lot,*  
Whose dregs of bitterness shall last  
Till thou acknowledge God in man;  
Till thou undo thine iron grasp  
And free *thy brother and his clan*. (199-206, emphasis added)

Bell, in the midst of the Civil War, casts slavery as the country’s original sin, with emancipation as its only possible salvation. In doing so, Bell employs a variation of Wheatley’s salvation-liberation ideology, with the major distinction being Bell’s distinct ambivalence toward and distance from the state. Using “America” as a metonym, Bell subtly critiques white Christians for employing and enforcing a double standard of religion, à la Frederick Douglass.<sup>129</sup> Seemingly indifferent about the “undoing” of the country, Bell’s distance is an articulation of his powerlessness, even in the face of a career dominated by activism. He anticipates John Willis Menard’s<sup>130</sup> words in “The Negro’s Lament” (1879):

How long must I remain  
An alien in my native land?  
.....

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<sup>128</sup> Malcolm X made these comments in reference to the assassination of John F. Kennedy during the aftermath of a question and answer session with reporters. This, of course, was a comment that was wrongly maligned because of its misinterpretation. The comparison is apt, as both Bell and Malcolm X were pointing out how a culture of violence and a lack of accountability had returned to haunt the country. See chapter ten in Manning Marable’s *Malcolm X, A Life of Reinvention* (2011).

<sup>129</sup> See Douglass’s poem, “A Parody,” at the conclusion of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*.

<sup>130</sup> Menard, the first black person elected to Congress, was married to a Jamaican woman. See his poem, “To My Wife” in *Lays in Summer Lands* (1879).

So fair and so false! thou are a lie  
Against both natural and human laws (1-2, 9-10)

Yet, in the spirit of Wheatley, the hopeless Bell reminds America that blacks are part of “th’angelic train,” as he insists that “thy brother and his clan” are freed, as well. Whereas Bell’s angst and impetus comes from looking back to the source of the diaspora in order to spread freedom through the United States, the poem takes on an entirely new layer of meaning when considering these lines were delivered upon his return to San Francisco during a First of August celebration in 1862 (Bruce, *Origins* 310). Given this context, Bell’s poem embodies movement; it calls upon the spirit of freedom abroad to enact freedom in his own backyard.

Not unlike tribute poems, the verses that commemorated the celebration of the First of August holiday emphasized transferability of freedom. Specifically, these works revealed often invoked the holiday as a symbol of inevitability. The pro-emigrationist Whitfield captures it thusly:

And from those islands of the sea,  
The scenes of blood and crime and wrong,  
The glorious anthem of the free,  
Now swells in mighty chorus strong;  
Telling th’ oppressed, where’er they roam,  
Those islands now are freedom’s home. (“Stanzas for the First of August,” 25-30)

While acknowledging his distance (“*those* islands of the sea”), Whitfield casts the freedom struggle as a unifying force, the agent that “[n]ow *swells* in mighty *chorus* strong.” Such is the nature of diaspora, at once distant yet connected with those in different geographic spaces. For, as Whitfield makes obvious, the First of August was a

cause for celebration “where’er [th’oppressed] roam. Given the racialized nature of slavery, and considering Whitfield’s life work, this example of diasporic versification is unmistakably critical of white hegemony. Amidst a literary period where many poets avoided such subjects, Whitfield, Bell, and other unheralded bards were writing and fighting to give voice to the unheard; they were literally writing a silenced perspective into the historical and literary record. Their writing is a direct challenge to the provincial thinking that renders their work “assimilative”; as race patriots, these poets were at once voicing their entitlement to the rights of their country *while* advocating for their brothers and sisters across the water. And, as seen in the verses of Dr. Joshua McCarter Simpson, even a staunch anti-emigrationist can adopt a transnationalist politics.

“MAN OF SONG AND SOUL”: DR. JOSHUA McCARTER SIMPSON AND THE  
PROMISE OF FREEDOM AT HOME AND ABROAD

Joshua McCarter Simpson’s poetry embodies an acute transnational race pride while exhibiting an awareness of audience. A stalwart defender of justice for people of African descent, Simpson made an art of re-appropriating popular American music to produce ironic or satirical critiques of slavery and contradictory legal or religious practices in his collection of poems, *Emancipation Car* (1874).<sup>131</sup> Though Simpson’s legacy was not an enduring one, he was, in his time, well known. A contributor to *The North Star*, Simpson<sup>132</sup> was known to white and black activists before and after the Civil

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<sup>131</sup> The title page of *Emancipation Car* in full reads “The Emancipation Car, Being an Original Composition of Anti-Slavery Ballads, composed exclusively for the Under Ground Rail Road.”

<sup>132</sup> His name appears as “J.C. Mc Simpson” in both periodicals.



War. Frederick Douglass described how Simpson's poetry was used at, fittingly, at the First of August celebration in 1854:

The choir, composed about equally of both sexes, then sang a song composed by J. Mc. C. Simpson, of Zanesville. A male and female voice upon the stage sang a single verse with was answered by the balance of the choir, who stood opposite the stage, upon the ground. The song purported to be an invitation from Queen Victoria to the colored people of the United States, to fly from servitude into Canada.<sup>133</sup> The difficulties and dangerous by those who attempt this were rehearsed, and the music was handsomely performed, the effect was visible upon all present. It was much applauded by the white folks present. (Douglass, *Frederick Douglass's Paper*)

Following in the tradition of black poets writing each other into history, Albery Allson Whitman included his own dedication poem to Simpson, "The Lute of Afric's Tribe":

When Wrong the gospel of endurance preached;  
The lute of Afric's tribe, tho' oft beseeched,  
In all its wild, sweet warblings never swelled.  
And yet when Freedom's lisplings o'er it stole,  
Soft as the breath of undefiled morn,  
A wand'ring accent from its strings would stroll –  
Thus was our Simpson, man of song and soul,  
And stalwart energies, to bless us born. (Whitman 8-16)

Both Douglass and Whitman point to the uniqueness of Simpson's musicality, with Whitman going as far as to credit Simpson as being a spokesman for the race.

Simpson's reliance on popular song and music was something he was well aware of, so much so that it was at the center of his consciousness as he reflected upon his legacy. In his introduction to *Emancipation Car*, Simpson is humble about "this little work" (Simpson vi), imploring readers to recall that "I do not profess to be a Byron, Milton, Pollock, or Young" (v). Yet he was also quite adamant in asserting his ability and the significance of his contribution, noting with emphasis that this work is "the *first*

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<sup>133</sup> The poem Douglass is referring to is "Queen Victoria Conversing with Her Slave Children"

of its kind in the United States” (vi), referring to his heavy reliance on re-appropriating popular songs. These serve as a nod to his concern with audience and purpose.

Preoccupation with legacy notwithstanding, Simpson was probably more interested in the notoriety of his poems for their message. He asserts that his re-appropriation of song as a mode of critique is “to change the flow of those sweet melodies (so often disgraced by Comic Negro Songs, and sung by our own people,) into a more appropriate and useful channel” (v). (One sees Simpson entering a world that Dunbar would letter inhabit, though in more complicated fashion.) Simpson thus realized the significance of oral poetics and conceived of verses that could be communal in its aesthetics and transformative in its politics.<sup>134</sup> Some of this awareness was undoubtedly informed by his own evolution in thought.

Simpson’s poetry reveals a complicated conceptualization of identity for descendants of Africa in the Western Hemisphere, one which might be considered akin to those of anti-colonialists in its staunch resistance to emigration, all while espousing a staunch and unwavering pride in African ancestry. Simpson’s complex notion of allegiance reinforces a common theme: acknowledgment of a linked political fate to those of African descent in the Western Hemisphere, most often (though not exclusively) in the case of their West Indian counterparts. The realization of this consciousness for Simpson

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<sup>134</sup> Simpson was not the only one to make use of song as a form of protest. James Monroe Whitfield’s “America” is a prime example of this. A parody of “My Country ‘tis of Thee,” it opens:

America, it is to thee,  
Thou boasted land of liberty, -  
It is to thee I raise my song.  
Thou land of blood, and crime, and wrong.

See Robert James Branham, “Of Thee I sing’: Contesting ‘America,’” *American Quarterly* 48 (1996): 623-650.

is remarkable by his own admission, given a hostile intellectual climate against African ability (elucidated in Chapters One and Two) and the shroud of doubt cast over the prospect of their freedom. In a revealing admission, he divulges the struggles of seeing himself through the eyes of others during his youth in the North, three decades before Du Bois:

I was educated to believe that it was all right for us to be slaves, though a native of Morgan County, Ohio, I pretended to believe it too; and when quite a boy, would ridicule the Abolitionists as fools, devils, mischief-makers, &c., whenever I was in the presence of my old Boss or the Anti-Abolitionists. (iii)

Simpson's admission to (and subsequent repudiation of) having to bear witness to and recreate such enmity toward his own and his sympathizers points to the overarching dominance of white hegemony. From his childhood in the 1830s, Simpson was trained in the mask-wearing that Paul Laurence Dunbar would articulate more than a half-century later. Ever reflective, Simpson recognized that in the face of overt oppression he could "'Write and sing about it – you can sing what would be death to speak'" (iv). It was his hope that his work would receive "a hearty welcome in every State, community and family in the Union, *and as far as a friend to the slave may be found*" (vi). All too aware of the injustice that beset both the North and South in the United States, Simpson would look beyond the U.S. at other people of African descent in expressing his hopes for freedom. In fact, his very first written and performed piece of original work was a tribute poem recognizing the Emancipation of enslaved Jamaicans.

Written in 1842, four years after Jamaican emancipation, "The First of August in Jamaica" serves as a caustic and multilayered critique of the United States. Simpson

immediately subverts form in the poem / ballad's design through its arrangement. The piece is written to the tune of "Hail Columbia," the nation's unofficial national anthem before Francis Scott Key's "Star Spangled Banner" was adopted<sup>135</sup>. Thus, with an ear toward popular culture, Simpson immediately positions himself to make a scathing and even treasonous critique by praising another country in place of the United States, essentially writing or singing *over* words meant to do the opposite. In this way, Simpson repeats the refrain of Douglass, Dunbar, and others who chastise celebrations of "American Independence" (e.g. "Hail Columbia," "The Fourth of July"). Instead, he fashions himself a race patriot by exalting the freedom of his enslaved brethren, favoring a transnational racial politics over a (white) American nationalism.

Before considering to the "First of August," a revisiting of the schism between Independence Day and West Indian Emancipation celebrations serves as useful context for Simpson's perspective. It is likely that Simpson wrote this with commemoration of "The First of August" with Douglass's message in mind, a point underscored in his own footnote to another poem, "Fourth of July in Alabama":

The following piece is the meditation and feelings of the poor Slave, as he toils and sweats over the hoe and cotton hook, while his master, neighbors, and neighbors' children are commemorating that day, which brought life to the whites and death to the poor African. Air---" *America*." (Simpson 41n)<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Whereas "The Star Spangled Banner" gained prominence in the twentieth century, becoming the official U.S. national anthem by decree of Congress in 1931, "Hail Columbia" was generally more popular in the nineteenth century. See Oscar George Theodore Sonneck's 1909 *Report on "The Star Spangled Banner," "Hail Columbia," "America," "Yankee Doodle,"* commissioned by the Library of Congress.

<sup>136</sup> In addition to "Hail Columbia," "America" was also a popular patriotic hymn that predated "The Star Spangled Banner."

Though Simpson's focus in the abovementioned poem is indeed the condition of the slave in the United States, his use of "the poor African" supports a broader, more comprehensive view of a transnational racialized struggle, one in which whiteness is diametrically opposed to blackness. Indeed, his lamentations are on par with the tradition of black poets and leaders reflecting upon the liminal space occupied by slaves and freed blacks. As he sees whites celebrating, his realization of his second-class status informs his sense of a racialized patriotism:

Yet we have got no song.  
Where is the happy throng  
Of Africa's sons?  
Are we among the great  
And noble of the State,  
This day to celebrate?  
Are we the ones? (29-35)

Fittingly, Simpson openly wonders about the "song" for "Africa's sons" *while writing* a text employing parodic song to critique the United States. He evinces his understanding of oppression as State-sponsored in recognizing the dearth of black representation within Government. Simpson responds to his own rhetorical question emphatically while making an obvious observation about how exclusion from the state espoused a special brand of race patriotism:

No! we must sing our songs  
Among the Negro Gongs  
That pass our doors.  
How can we strike the strains,  
While o'er those dismal plains,  
We're bleeding, bound in chains,  
Dying by scores?  
  
While e'er four million slaves

Remain in living graves,  
Can I rejoice,  
And join the jubilee  
Which set the white man free,  
And fetters brought to me?  
'Tis not my choice. (29-42)

Simpson minces no words in highlighting the hypocrisy that informs his race patriotism. Like many of his time, he cannot be jubilant in partaking in a clearly white nationalist, exclusionary enterprise (“Which set the white man free / And fetters brought to me?”); instead, he can only voice his grievances through songs – “our songs” – made by a marginalized collective. That link would allow Simpson and other poets to identify with struggle beyond borders.

Simpson’s invocation of the diaspora in both subtle and overt ways further demonstrates the significance of Jamaica in the imagination of blacks in the U.S. Whereas hypocrisy of the Fourth of July bred hopelessness, the very reality of emancipation in the British West Indies bred hope. By comparison to his critique of the United States in “The Fourth of July in Alabama,” Simpson takes on a much more celebratory tone while embracing collective politics in his discussion of Jamaican Emancipation.

Specifically, Simpson suggests his belief in a nation within a nation through his creation of an exclusively black collective – specifically Jamaican – in the form of the speaker. The use of the collective pronoun in “The First of August in Jamaica” is clearly meant to allude to the lived experience of the enslaved:

To-day we gladly congregate,  
A happy band to celebrate

The day we rose from slavery's tomb.  
Our clanking chains no more are heard;  
Our limbs no more by fetters scarred;  
Our backs no more are drenched with blood;  
Our tears have ceased our cheeks to flood;  
Our wives and children, all so dear,  
Are bowed around the altar here. (8-22)

Simpson graphically imbues the speakers with characteristics and conditions commonly associated with the enslaved: “clanking chains”; “limbs no more by fetters scarred”; and “backs” that are no longer “drenched with blood.” He also makes mention of family, not only subtly reinforcing the humanity of the slave in doing so, but also alluding to the closeness of kinship bonds that might otherwise be disrupted without emancipation. This closeness is further compounded by his use of the personal pronoun “our” and its repetition.

In assuming the voice of enslaved Jamaicans (“our”), Simpson suggests a relatability of various experiences within the African diaspora: his position as a free black Ohioan to that of the enslaved in the U.S; the position of a black slave in the U.S. with that of a Jamaican; and, finally, the experiences of Jamaicans to that of others of African descent in the diaspora, including the U.S. The poem opens by positioning Jamaica as a beacon of light – even as a center of freedom within the diaspora:

Hail thou sweet and welcome day,  
Let the angels join the lay,  
And help us swell the anthems high.  
Tune all your golden harps once more,  
And strike to notes ne'er struck before,  
Yea let the morning's zephyr-breeze,  
Bear the echo o'er the seas;  
Let all the islands bond and free,  
Proclaim Jamaica's liberty, (1-9)

Simple yet telling, Simpson's exhortation – to "Let all the islands *bond* and *free* / proclaim Jamaica's liberty" – locates Jamaica as a nexus of freedom whose message shall travel "o'er the seas." Just as important as Simpson's recognition of the diasporic implications of freedom is his claim that emancipation is consequential for those who are in bondage *and* those who are not, a claim which reflects upon his own perspective as a free Ohioan and also speaks for the outpouring of similar sentiments from other black poets – the majority of whom were also born free in the U.S.

Immediately after enumerating the abuses suffered by the enslaved Africans in Jamaica, Simpson underscores the importance of the First of August as another domino falling in the African diaspora's path to freedom. He transforms the Atlantic Ocean – symbolically a site of travel, trauma, and tragedy for Africans – from a place of peril to a space of possibility:

May Hayti gladly catch the gale,  
And Portorico tell the tale;  
Let the Atlantic's dancing spray  
Salute this new-born happy day. (23-26)

In the course of his verses, Simpson metaphorically tells a story of life ("new-born") from death ("from slavery's tomb"), a Christ-like resurrection through persecution. Simpson's second verse takes the reader from a wretched past to a promising future, one that goes beyond a moment to a movement, for the emphasis is not on Jamaica, but in surrounding isles. Thus, the First of August is not merely a day of celebration, but a call to mobilization. In the same breath that the (black) Atlantic "salute[s] this new born happy day," Simpson expresses his desire that its neighboring countries also see the



liberation of its African slaves. (Haiti – not recognized by the United States as a free nation until 1862 – is to “gladly catch the gale; Puerto Rico – where slavery was not abolished until 1873 – is to “tell the tale.”) To the very end, Simpson is unwavering: the implications of emancipation for blacks in Jamaica reverberate throughout the diaspora, even for a free black poet in Ohio.

The final verse of the poem further affirms Simpson’s call to action, as well as his notion of collective responsibility in protest. The poem’s conclusion depicts former slaves emancipated on The First of August as righteous, a fraternity of the benighted and highly favored:

Wake the psaltry, lute and lyre,  
And let us set the world on fire.  
And may Jehovah blow the flame,  
Till all mankind shall see the light  
Of knowledge, liberty and right!  
Our hands are clear of human blood;  
We bought our liberty from God.  
Love, joy and peace are now combined  
With freedom's golden chain entwined,  
Firm united may we stand,  
A happy, free and social band;  
Each brother feels his brother's care.  
And each his brother's burthen bear. (38-50)

The final stanza completes the coronation of slave to freeman, with the “clanking chains” of the past replaced by “freedom’s golden chain entwined.” Simpson is careful in reiterating the notion of movement and momentum; his usage of natural imagery suggests both inevitability and a connection with God, or a (John) Lockean notion of “natural rights,” to the righteous and oppressed in Jamaica. He skillfully manages to combine a peaceful righteousness (“A happy, free and social band”) with a shadowy, latent threat of

violence (“let us set the world on fire”), albeit divinely inspired (“may Jehovah blow the flame”), in his imagery. Unlike the slave master who drenched their backs with blood (19), “Our hands are clear” of any such thing, a literal and metaphorical comparison of morality and indemnification of culpability on the part of the oppressor. Simpson’s poem is both a celebration of moment and momentum, an anthem commemorating a past and foretelling a prosperous future, not unlike James Weldon Johnson’s “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing”<sup>137</sup> would be more than a half-century later.

Like Haiti, Jamaica is a part of a larger movement within the freedom struggle, one that is not complete “till all mankind see the light / Of knowledge, liberty and right!” Yet the spread of freedom across the diaspora is not merely God’s work; it is the product of collective struggle, linked fate, and shared understanding, underscored in the poem’s final couplet. Thus, the sympathy and transference of feeling in the line “Each brother feels his brother’s care” fittingly points back to Simpson himself, for it is he, a free black writer in a land of bondage, who writes this tribute to his Jamaican brethren, knowing that “each his brother’s burthen bear.” Even in its initial conception, Simpson’s tribute to the First of August makes an explicit connection to Haiti as a predecessor to an even longer movement of resistance.

The version of “The First of August” present in *Emancipation Car*, published nine years after the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment, subtly points to the

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<sup>137</sup> James Weldon Johnson’s famous words read in full:  
Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us,  
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us,  
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun,  
Let us march on till victory is won.

inevitability of freedom moving through the diaspora. Yet an earlier version of the poem, published in *The North Star* in 1848, captures significant differences from the third verse onward, revealing a more vitriolic tone which connects Haitian Independence to Jamaican Emancipation, thereby furthering the intersectionality of black resistance and struggle:

Let St. Domingo proudly boast  
The power and valor of her host;  
Yea, let her freeborn sons proclaim  
The glory of a Toussaint's name;  
And let Besancon's prison tell  
The chieftain's fame from cell to cell,  
Where he with bold heroic pride  
For his own native country died. (27-34)

Again, Toussaint becomes a central figure for the freedom of Africans throughout the diaspora. And, unlike the version which would ultimately land in *Emancipation Car*, Simpson further departs from the script by spending an entire half of the poem refocusing the reader on injustice closer to home:

But can we – dare we thus rejoice  
While slavery sends her dismal voice  
From haughty base America?  
Brave heroes boast of patriot sires,  
While monuments and dazzling spires  
Out-top Green Mountains loftiest peak,  
And glory of their country speak. (37-42)

Again, Simpson underscores the ways in which black poets utilized the diaspora as a mirror that they would hold up to the United States for its hypocrisy. Kinship vis-à-vis Haiti and the British West Indies, as expressed by the lines above, thus complicate the

traditional possibilities of patriotism within the nation-state and instead help to further the doctrine of racial solidarity put forth in Ethiopianism.

Seemingly aware of the optimistic mood hitherto present in the poem, Simpson abruptly tempers the hopes of those celebrating. He depicts the act of rejoicing as a potential impossibility (“can we...?”) or even as brazen foolishness (“dare we...?”) in the face of “haughty, base America.” The moral interrogation immediately builds momentum, shifting from a call to action to a calling out of hypocrisy:

And while the church and state combined,  
Secured by arms, compose their mind,  
And thank their God for freedom won  
By brave heroic Washington, -  
Thy old Atlantic’s western waves  
Becloud her shores with drowned slaves; (47-52)

Simpson, never identifying “they” in name, creates a matrix of dichotomies in his increasingly mordant piece: oppressor / victim, free / slave, evil / good, and, without explicitly naming it, white / black. Drawing from the tradition of Wheatley and Harper, Simpson uses Christianity as the pivot through which these dichotomies are based, even creating a binary between black and white religion in his reference to “their God.” Christianity becomes as a shield empowering Simpson to make his most biting critique: “America, imbrued in blood, / Offensive is to man and God” (53-54). This is a microcosm of a larger dichotomy in the poem, a split between time and space that juxtaposes the emancipated population of African descendants in the then-present with an enslaved population of African descendants for the foreseeable future. In this version, the poem ends ominously, indicting white Christians for “pervert[ing] the truth.”

Her ministers, each Sabbath, all,  
Repent! repent! to sinners call;  
Yet spurn God's word for filthy gain;  
Pervert the truth, and loud proclaim,  
"Salvation - peace, felicity,  
To all the islands of the sea;  
The prison-house of sin is oped,  
Through Jesus Christ, the heathen's hope;  
But, negro, thou wast born a slave,  
And thou must fill a bondman's grave;  
No balm in Gilead can be found  
To heal your deep and mortal wound (81-92)

Like Wheatley before him, and like his contemporary Whitfield, Simpson imagines freedom in the diaspora within a politicized version of a salvation-liberation ideology. He adds to Wheatley by depicting this as the responsibility of free blacks, perhaps a condemnation of the bleakness of possibilities faced by enslaved women and men of African descent. Simpson's choice to place this responsibility of freemen is more of a condemnation of the inhumanity of slavery, rendering slaves as powerless. His view comes as no surprise given his active participation within the Negro Convention Movement as a delegate of Ohio.<sup>138</sup> Given his association with Christian black freemen not born into U.S. slavery, Simpson's view is understandable.

#### UPDATING SALVATION-LIBERATION IDEOLOGY

Simpson remained consistent in his belief in the freedman's responsibility in procuring freedom for the enslaved, both near and far. Similar to his contemporaries and predecessors, Simpson also imagined this in a strictly Christian context, not explicitly Ethiopianist yet very much within its dogmatic course of uplift. This message is

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<sup>138</sup> See *Minutes of the Proceedings of the National Negro Conventions, 1830-1864, Vol 1* (1969)

presented without decoration in “Freedom’s Call,” which happens to be one of a handful of the fifty-six pieces in *Emancipation Car* that is *not* explicitly set to popular music or given any musical instruction. Though it is similar to other pieces in the collection by virtue of its terse metric structure, adherence to rhymed verse, and the inclusion of a refrain, the absence of instruction points the reader directly to the words. And, as the title suggests, “Freedom’s Call” is just that: a bringing together of voices, and, unequivocally, a call to action:

Come, come to freedom's call---  
Old and young, come one and all,  
Join now to celebrate  
Eighteen hundred and thirty-eight.  
Sing, freemen, sing, sing, freemen, sing,  
Sing a song, for it won't be long,  
Till the slaves are all set free. (1-7)

Just as in “The First of August in Jamaica,” Simpson opens the poem with imperatives though this time directly demanding collective, intergenerational action. Similarities abound: Jamaican Emancipation remains the impetus for collective mobilization; celebration and recognition of the moment remains central; and a “brighter coming day” (as Harper might put it) awaits. But most important in “Freedom’s Call” is Simpson’s choice in speaker and audience, and its implications.

Whereas his previous tribute poem to Jamaica and the First of August featured Simpson channeling the voice of the newly emancipated Jamaican slaves, Simpson opens “Freedom’s Call” with what seems to be an omniscient speaker. The third verse, however, alludes to the possibility that the speaker is indeed of the United States through a personal interjection:

Hark! what is this I hear?  
A dismal sound salutes my ear.  
Groans from the living graves,  
Of thirty hundred thousand slaves.  
Pray, Christians, pray; pray, &c.,  
Weep and pray for the glorious day,  
When the slaves are all set free (15-21)

The dismayed speaker references “groans” from “thirty hundred thousand slaves,” a reference to the approximately three million enslaved blacks in the U.S. according to the 1850 census.<sup>139</sup> Of note here is the shift in tone from the prophetic (“sing a song, for it won’t be long / ‘till all the slaves are set free”) to the personal (“Hark! What is this I hear?”), a real-time epiphanic moment which underscores the relationship between “Jamaica’s Iles” and the land of “living graves,” the United States. Put another way, the speaker – possibly Simpson –, reenacts the realization of kinship across the diaspora, using personal embodiment to depict the *movement* of freedom as not only a political act, but one of personal consciousness. The personal voice reiterates the shared responsibility implied in the final line of “The First of August,” “and each his brother’s burthen bear.” The theme of movement and mobilization remains the bedrock of Simpson’s message, this time featured in the refrain found in the last three lines of each stanza. This movement, of course, is one that is ordained by the will of God.

Further emphasizing the importance of Christ in uplift is the second stanza, which deviates from the repetition established throughout Simpson’s poem. With the exception

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<sup>139</sup> Figures from the 1850 census number the U.S. slave population a 3,200,364 women and men out of 3,428,502 blacks (Helper 7), a number that was available and referenced by abolitionists. Hilton Rowan Helper’s, *The Impending Crisis of the South: How to Meet It* (1857), an abolitionist text, was of such influence that some historians argue was more responsible for causing the Civil War than Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Simpson’s reference to “thirty hundred thousand slaves” likely refers to this commonly referenced statistic.

of the second, each of the stanzas' final lines do two things: they call freemen to act (either in prayer, praise, song, or action), and they reference the inevitability of the day "when the slaves shall all go free." The second stanza, however, goes further, deviating from form to emphasize the role of God in liberation:

Praise, freemen, praise; O praise, &c.,  
Praise the Lord, for it was his word  
That set the captive free. (12-14)

Consistent with much of the discourse of his nineteenth century contemporaries (and a marked difference from twentieth century successors), Simpson's understanding of black freedom is within a biblical context. It is indeed divinely inspired, and only through a sustained devotion to Christ can Africans and their descendants in the diaspora truly heed "Freedom's Call." That he understood freedom in a transnational context speaks to his reading of the Bible as a diasporic text. In a separate poem, "Freedom's Cause," Simpson underscores his belief in the inextricable relationship between Christ, creed and cause<sup>140</sup>:

Our cause is just and holy---  
We feel it in our veins;  
For Jesus came all men to save  
From misery, sin and chains.  
His blood ran free on Calvary  
For every human soul.  
From Palestine to Africa---  
It saves from pole to pole,  
Our cause is just and holy,  
To it we'll ever stand. (31-40)

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<sup>140</sup> According to Simpson's own footnote, "Freedom's Cause" is set to the air of the popular hymn, "We Won't Give Up the Bible."



While Jesus is indeed for “all men,” Simpson’s spatial markers for salvation, “Palestine to Africa,” are not insignificant. Africa is lifted to the level of the Christian holy land, all while representing one extreme (or “pole”) in Simpson’s imagination. Just as in Simpson’s tribute to Jamaica, people of African descent share God’s favor in their pursuit to rid themselves “from sin, misery, and chains.” Indeed, each stanza of the poem begins “Our cause is just and holy,” almost as if reminding the white “unfeeling” audience who might otherwise deny their humanity.

Though Simpson was staunchly anti-emigration (as evidenced in the poem “Old Liberia Is Not the Place for Me”), he, like his contemporaries, evinces a reverence for the linked fate of those within the Africa diaspora. The poetry of Simpson mirrors that of Bell and Whitfield in averring how the events in lands far away from the United States were of concern to the linked fate of those throughout. The same can be said for the history-building present in the poetry of T. Thomas Fortune, Henrietta Cordelia Ray, George Boyer Vashon, and George Clinton Rowe, James Monroe Whitfield, and James Madison Bell, who used their platform to engage in a project of reclamation for a history otherwise obscured. Thus, in paying tribute to other figures and lands beyond the diaspora, black poets echoed the sentiment of an aging Frederick Douglass, who captured the sentiment of collectivity already present within the poetic tradition in his address given at the World’s Fair:

[T]he negro, like the Jew can never part with his identity and race. Color does for one what religion does for the other and makes both distinct from the rest of mankind. No matter where prosperity or misfortune may chance to drive the negro, he is identified with and share the fortune of his race. We are told to go to Haiti; to go to Africa. Neither Haiti nor Africa can save us from a *common* doom.

Whether we are here or there, *we must rise or fall with the race*. (Douglass, “Lecture on Haiti” 207, emphasis added)

## TOWARDS A CONCLUSION

In *Chaotic Justice*, John Ernest observes, “Too often, [nineteenth century black literature in the U.S.] is identified simply as the beginnings of a literary tradition that eventually discovers its force in the Harlem Renaissance,” a false linear continuum that “is fully realized in the unprecedented authority that some of the most prominent African American writers enjoy today” (7-8). This dissertation responds to this concern, challenging the imposition of a broad sequential linearity (and, with it, the accompanying narrative of “progress”) by positioning pre-New Negro poetics as unique in their own right, grappling with their own imperatives and churning out their own share of accomplishments. In making this analysis, I have examined black poetry at its beginnings in the United States with a close eye on “the race that extends beyond the identity or social position of authors,” as well “the race that is manifest in the literature and in the web of connections that both lead to and follow from the literature” (7). To that end, I have looked specifically at the ways in which poets have meditated upon race and their relationship to it, thus, their examining their relationship to others (black and white) within and beyond the borders of the United States.

In doing so, I have attempted to walk a difficult tightrope: that is, I have sought to augment the connectedness of black poets in theme and content, argue for the presence of a shared understanding of “speculative kinship” (Rusert) through a shared challenging of traditional notions of boundary and home, and avoid the “ethnic absolutism” which Paul Gilroy so ardently resisted in his seminal text, *The Black Atlantic* (1993). I have sought to highlight but one aspect of a variegated terrain in focusing on how black poets have

considered the question of diaspora in varying degrees, which in and of itself requires an examination of cultural interplay. Yet, a space must exist for relationships to exist as parallel processes; that is, one must acknowledge that black poets in the United States were at once admirers of Longfellow or the Earl of Dartmouth while also recognizing themselves as *other* when being compared to them. Dunbar, of course, embodied such an existence in his poetry and his life; he was as an acquaintance to the Wright brothers and favorite of literary critic William Dean Howells, all while being a friend to Frederick Douglass and sharing a circle (the ANA) with W.E.B. Du Bois and Alexander Crummell. This study has sought to engage Gilroy's "fatal junction of the concept of nationality with the concept of culture" (2) by complicating nationality itself. It does not submit to the impulse of assuming an atavistic yearning between all black poets, writers, or people within the United States. However, it does, in parallel process, emphasize the *presence* of a discourse that signifies upon a common history and destiny as a bedrock for history building, uplift, and action between people of African descent. I do not suggest a latent desire to superficially return to ancestral roots on the part of these poets, as that would be historically inaccurate (emigration movements notwithstanding); rather, I suggest that their verses point to a shared kinship – be it through common condition, culture, or some combination – present within black literary thought (and thus within black communities) long before the New Negro. In short, I have posited a race patriotism that at once seeks inclusion in the form of full citizenship within the nation-state, yet recognizes allegiance that transcends the nation-state through a recognition of shared African ancestry across borders. Thus, in turn, this dissertation has sought to demonstrate the importance of

diaspora in the resistance of white hegemony for black poets – race patriots – in the United States, before the twentieth century.

Within an era that witnessed a decreasing proportion of African-born blacks living in the United States, black poets maintained their speculative kinship with those of like descent, both within and beyond national boundaries. This comes in the face of remarkable historical circumstances: the scourge of slavery; the establishment of the American Colonization Society; the advocacy of the National Negro Convention Movement; westward expansion (and the concomitant expansion of slavery); the danger of the Fugitive Slave Act; the Civil War and Emancipation; the false promises of Reconstruction; the rise of U.S. imperialism and the neocolonialism of Africa; and the nadir period of Jim Crow. Yet whether before or after emancipation, tributes to West Indian Emancipation and critiques of the Fourth of July remained. To add, the salvation-liberation ideology that indemnified white hegemony through Christ maintained its edge in the form of an Ethiopianist worldview. In the process, it ultimately solidified the place of Africa as inseparable spiritual ancestor, codifying the syncretism of displaced cultures and bodies (subsequently reclaimed / resurrected) into a collective with shared history, shared ambitions, and a shared destiny. This context, established in chapter one, provides a lens to understand the significance of the poetic production of blacks in the United States through immensely consequential historical events. I have also sought to foreground the significance of their work within the realm of literary history.

Throughout, this study has focused on poetry because of its inherent gravity for people of African descent; as elaborated upon in chapter one, it has historically

represented the pinnacle of creative output within Western discourse. Black bards, then, were situated – nay – relegated, to a position of inferiority, whereupon the very act of writing verse was an affront to the Western narrative. The pursuit of their craft and subsequent publication, distribution, and memorializing of their verses are remarkable when considering the intellectual climate in which they were produced. Their accomplishments, though underappreciated, are that much more impressive. Thus, as I argue, they are deserving of recognition on their own grounds and not within “American” poetry or as an embryonic incarnation of the efflorescence of creative output widely known as the New Negro / Harlem Renaissance. David Hume’s writings had no adverse effect on how the poetry of Thomas Paine would be received; the same privilege, of course, was not enjoyed by Phillis Wheatley. Yet Wheatley, the focus of chapter two, set forth a coy tradition of resistance that drew upon the Bible as a form of resistance, a torch that would be carried into the nineteenth century.

Chapter three explores the evolution of the Bible as a diasporic text which engendered the regional transnationalism found in the works of Paul Laurence Dunbar and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, arguably the two most prolific black poets of their time, if not the century. Ethiopianism signified the solidification of an ordained form of uplift, one which intersects with Black Nationalist precepts in its emphasis on a shared fate, heritage, and destiny. Both Harper and Dunbar recognize the unique space that people of African descent would occupy in the United States before and after the Civil War. Though both writers displayed no desire to emigrate, they also evince a transnationalism in their poetry, writing, and letters that makes plain their sense of

belonging to a larger diaspora. Using Christ in similar fashion as Wheatley – perhaps as a decoy – the pair continue a tradition of critique of white hegemony domestically and abroad, extending Wheatley’s salvation-liberation ideology into considerations beyond the borders of the United States. This practice was not isolated and unquestionably existed in the verses of Harper and Dunbar’s contemporaries, a focus of chapter four.

In addition to writing against aggressively dismissive intellectual discourses, black poets before the Harlem Renaissance were writing both with and against the literary terrain. The emulation of form, as I have argued, was not derivative but combative, seeking to display a “naked genius,” be it through Wheatley’s self-assuredness in calling upon the muses, Horton’s explicit declaration of purpose in “spread[ing] the blaze of African genius and thus dispel[ling] the sceptic [sic] gloom” (42) excluding blacks from serious consideration within poetry, Simpson’s reappropriation of popular folk music to themes resonating with black communities, Harper’s didacticism and moralism, or Dunbar’s usage of sestet and dual voices in his poetry. These were not bards of “idle fancy,” nor soldiers of fortune, nor emulative puppets and assimilationists; instead, as I have argued, they must be heralded for their intentionality, for these poets “were well aware that they were writing in a field of power relations (literary, critical, commercial, social) in which their Black identities imbued their creative activities with political meaning” (Jarrett qtd. in Ernest 114). Thus, before the New Negro not only sought to express themselves creatively; they sought to express themselves with purpose. They utilized “fettered genius,” to borrow from Leonard, not

only to advocate for themselves and their individual legacies, but for the legacy of a larger collective of black bard as well.

As I contend in the final chapter, the oft-misunderstood and underappreciated poets were tradition builders. Ernest contends that black writers “had no stable narrative of history or community capable of either shutting out or representing the force of historical experience” (7). This reality is precisely what makes their efforts both extraordinary and essential as we look at literary history for black people. They possessed the prescience to realize that the sophisticated exclusionary discourses that denied them creative ability *also* denied them a history; thus, as expressed in chapter four, these poets exalted *their* patriots – sometimes blacks of *other* nations – in order to inscribe their stories onto the historical record. In the cases of Dunbar (who commemorated Douglass), Whitman (who commemorated Simpson), and Rowe (who praised Harper), these poets praised each other within a literary world that often found them “beneath the dignity of criticism.” In the case of the cohort of poets who paid tribute to Toussaint L’Ouverture, or Vincent Ogé, or Cinqué, black poets were writing their heroes into history, a history that shaped them as having none to speak of, let alone write about. To provincialize their thought to being “American” would be to erase their musings and even romanticizing of Africa, “Ethiopia,” or their engagement with Cuba, Jamaica, Haiti, and other geographic spaces within the African diaspora. To ignore the historical contexts established in the first chapter would be to gloss over the layers of meaning in the significance of form, style, and theme expressed within a rich period of literary production.



This dissertation is meant to continue a trend of recent studies providing welcome insights into the nineteenth century, and open up a lens for more analysis of poetry in particular. Studies such as Callahan's *Between the Lines* truly embrace the transnational and all of its possibilities by considering the totality of the Americas; considering how transformative the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were for descendants of Africa, more work in this area is needed to fully grasp the collective politics of those within the African diaspora as expressed through literature, on both sides of the Atlantic.

Additionally, though Ernest makes a salient point regarding the limitation of studies which only consider the social status and biographical details of the poet, more research is needed to excavate the intricacies of forgotten poets who were once heralded and celebrated during their time. The role of black newspapers as literary organs, briefly alluded to in chapter one, might also be a fertile ground for future scholarly harvest. Whereas the work of twentieth century Africana scholars has primed academia and indeed popular culture to celebrate the one-hundred year anniversary of the Harlem Renaissance, the work of twenty-first century Africana scholars might lead to a long overdue sesquicentennial of a period yet to be named, yet already written in the annals of verse and history by able pens.

Fitting, then, are the words of James Weldon Johnson, who – a literary historian in his own right – posed a question of his predecessors a century ago that stays with us to this day:

O Black and unknown bards of long ago,  
How came your lips to touch the sacred fire?  
How, in your darkness, did you come to know

The power and beauty of the minstrel's lyre?  
Who first from midst his bonds lifted his eyes?  
Who first from out the still watch, lone and long,  
Feeling the ancient faith of prophets rise  
Within his dark-kept soul, burst into song? ("O Black and Unknown Bards," 1-8)

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