“THE COMPOSITIONS PUBLISHED UNDER HER NAME ARE BELOW THE DIGNITY OF CRITICISM.”

The Boone family left Pennsylvania for the western country, and Daniel Boone engaged in his first “long hunt.”

Is it just me, or does it seem strange to you, that as above in the case of Daniel Boone born in 1734, and in the case of Cudgoe born in 1735, and in the case of Ganiodaio (Handsome Lake, half-brother of Cornplanter) born in 1735, we are speaking of the birth of a white man, and of the birth of a black man, and of the birth of a red man, almost in the same historical breath? (I here confess, as an aging historian who has been the product of his upbringing, it still seems strange to me no matter with what intensity I have struggled to pass beyond the cultural circumstances of that upbringing!)

By this point the “great chain of being, from lowest to highest” conceptual framework which governed (governs?) so much of our thinking had become minutely calibrated, with the human scale rising from “the lowliest Hottentot” (certain small black indigenes of South Africa) to “glorious Milton and Newton.” If blacks such as Phillis Wheatley were indeed capable of the creation of imaginative literature, given appropriate circumstances in their lives, then it was the debased circumstances under which they lived which were holding them down, and they were entitled to a higher position on this chain of beings. For this reason, Wheatley would be manumitted soon after her poems were published. For this reason, also, there came to be scores of analyses

1. A comment made by Thomas Jefferson. [In order to demonstrate what value the evaluation of Jefferson possessed, I will elaborate on the contemporary criticisms of the compositions published under her name.]
of her poetry, pro and con. —It was good and she wrote it and that proves something. —It was good but she
didn’t write it and that proves something. —She did write it but it wasn’t any good and that proves something.
— — — Etc.
In this year Robert Lowth announced that there was poetry buried in the BIBLE, that certain parallelisms were,
in actuality, embedded poems that were simply not in our translations being presented as such. These passages
amounting to poetry would not be printed as such in English-language Bibles for another two full centuries. Here for instance is GENESIS 4:23-24 first as it would be available to Thoreau, and then as it is available now
to us in a presentation emphasizing the parallelistic repetitions of the original poetry. By this method of
presentation it becomes clear that Lamech’s story of personal retribution for the moral instruction of his plural
wives was that he had just taken final revenge for some wrong by killing not two people, but one person:

- Genesis 4:23 — And Lamech said unto his wives, Adah and Zillah, Hear my
  voice; ye wives of Lamech, hearken unto my speech: for I have slain a man
  to my wounding, and a young man to my hurt.
- Genesis 4:24 — If Cain shall be avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy and
  sevenfold.

- Genesis 4:23-24 — Lamech said to his wives:
  “Adah and Zillah, hear my voice;
  wives of Lamech, listen to my utterance:
  I have killed a man for wounding me,
  a boy for bruising me.
  If Cain is avenged sevenfold,
  then Lamech seventy-sevenfold.”

In approximately this year Phillis Wheatley was born in Africa. We have no idea what her name was. The slave
name “Phillis,” of course, would be assigned to her in honor of the negrero vessel that carried her away on the
Middle Passage.
August 3, Monday: In the Boston Evening Post appeared a rather unusual sort of advertisement:

To Be Sold

A parcel of likely Negroes, imported from Africa, cheap for cash, or short credit; Enquire of John Avery, at his house next Door to the White-Horse, or at a Store adjoining to said Avery’s Distill House, at the South End, near the South Market; Also, if any Persons have any Negro men, strong and hearty, tho’ not of the best moral character, which are proper Subjects for Transportation, may have an exchange for small Negroes.

2. For this and other such maps: http://hitchcock.itc.virginia.edu/Slavery/search.html
The ship that had brought this parcel of likely Negroes on the Middle Passage had been the *Phillis*.

The thing that was unusual about this particular sad occasion was that one of the “small Negroes” who were traded out in this way for a black male adult who had proven to be too dignified or otherwise too unmanageable and was thus to be sent “down the river” to be worked to death in a labor gang in the fields, was a little girl about seven years old, wearing only a piece of old carpet tied about her waist, a genius, who would grow up to be Phillis Wheatley, the poet, so named in honor of the ship that had brought her and the white family that had bought her. She would be able to learn English in just 16 months. She would later become a student of Latin. She would be writing poetry by age 12 or 13. Thank God this little girl was a genius! –It was her hot ticket to being treated almost as a human being.

December 21, Monday: Phillis Wheatley’s poetry first appeared in print, in the *Newport, Rhode Island, Mercury*. Her contribution was “On Messrs. Hussey and Coffin.”

The town of Acton voted to encourage local manufacture over the purchase of British goods.

As early as the 21st of December, 1767, the town [of Acton] voted to “comply with the proposals, by the town of *Boston*, relating to the encouraging of manufactures among ourselves, and not purchasing of superfluities from abroad.” On the 5th of March, 1770, the town entered into a covenant not to purchase nor use foreign merchandise, nor tea.

The state of public affairs was again brought before the town on the 21st of December, 1772, and referred to a committee, consisting of Capt. Daniel Fletcher, Francis Faulkner, Deacon Jonathan Hosmer, Deacon John Brooks, Josiah Hayward, Ephraim
Hapgood, Captain Samuel Hayward, Simon Tuttle, and Daniel Brooks. Their report was made on the 18th of the following month, and expresses the general sentiments of the people in this vicinity. At this time the town had no representative in the General Court, and a vote was passed recommending to the representatives of the people, that they use every constitutional measure in their power to obtain a redress of all their grievances.\(^3\)

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3. **Lemuel Shattuck**’s 1835 *A History of the Town of Concord*, Boston MA: Russell, Odiorne, and Company; Concord MA: John Stacy, 1835

(On or about November 11, 1837 **Henry Thoreau** would indicate a familiarity with the contents of at least pages 2-3 and 6-9 of this historical study.)
Fall: The Reverend George Whitefield died in Newburyport MA after preaching in York and Malden. His next
preaching had been scheduled to be in Concord.

Hail, happy saint, on thine immortal throne, 
Possest of glory, life, and bliss unknown; 
We hear no more the music of thy tongue, 
Thy wonted auditories cease to throng. 
Thy sermons in unequal’d accents flow’d, 
And ev’ry bosom with devotion glow’d; 
Thou didst in strains of eloquence refin’d 
Inflame the heart, and captivate the mind. 
Unhappy we the setting sun deplore, 
So glorious once, but ah! it shines no more.

Behold the prophet in his tow’ring flight! 
He leaves the earth for heav’n’s unmeasur’d height, 
And worlds unknown receive him from our sight. 
There Whitefield wings with rapid course his way,
And sails to Zion through vast seas of day.
Thy pray’rs, great saint, and thine incessant cries
Have pierc’d the bosom of thy native skies.
Thou moon hast seen, and all the stars of light,
How he has wrestled with his God by night.
He pray’d that grace in ev’ry heart might dwell,
He long’d to see America excell;
He charg’d its youth that ev’ry grace divine
Should with full lustre in their conduct shine;
That Saviour, which his soul did first receive,
The greatest gift that ev’n a God can give,
He freely offer’d to the num’rous throng,
That on his lips with list’ning pleasure hung.

“Take him, ye wretched, for your only good,
Take him ye starving sinners, for your food;
“Ye thirsty, come to this life-giving stream,
“Ye preachers, take him for your joyful theme;
“Take him my dear Americans, he said,
“Be your complaints on his kind bosom laid:
“Take him, ye Africans, he longs for you,
“Impartial Saviour is his title due:
“Wash’d in the fountain of redeeming blood,
“You shall be sons, and kings, and priests to God.”

Great Countess, we Americans revere
Thy name, and mingle in thy grief sincere;
New England deeply feels, the Orphans mourn,
Their more than father will no more return.

But, though arrested by the hand of death,
Whitefield no more exerts his lab’ring breath,
Yet let us view him in th’ eternal skies,
Let ev’ry heart to this bright vision rise;
While the tomb safe retains its sacred trust,
Till life divine re-animates his dust.

The “Old Manse” of Concord was at this point being built for the Reverend William Emerson and Madam Phoebe Bliss Emerson, who were residing (for four years) in Grandmother Phebe Walker Bliss’s Block House home in Concord. Eventually the grandmother would also come to reside at this new manse.

The grandfather, the Reverend Daniel Bliss, was already deceased as of 1764, six years prior to the house’s construction, and could never have entered the structure — Nathaniel Hawthorne’s perfervid imagination to the contrary notwithstanding.

It was at Madam’s preference that the rooms in the manse were so tiny, for Mary Moody Emerson would inform Ellen Emerson that “it was my mother’s fault”:

My father built it just according to her ideas, and she used to say “she was tired of great barns of rooms,” so he had all the rooms made little boxes to please her.

Spring: The Boston poet Phillis Wheatley “went for her orals,” so to speak.

One bright morning in the spring of 1772, a young African girl
4. The “Block House” was so called because it had served as the community’s garrison house during “King Phillip’s War”. It stood between the cemetery and the courthouse on the Milldam, about a hundred yards from the town meetinghouse.

“Stack of the Artist of Kouroo” Project
walked demurely into the courthouse at Boston to undergo an oral examination, the results of which would determine the direction of her life and work. Perhaps she was shocked upon entering the appointed room. For there, gathered in a semicircle, sat eighteen of Boston’s most notable citizens. Among them was John Erving, a prominent Boston merchant; the Reverend Charles Chauncey, pastor of the Tenth Congregational Church; and John Hancock, who would later gain fame for his signature on the Declaration of Independence. At the center of this group would have sat His Excellency, Thomas Hutchinson, governor of the colony, with Andrew Oliver, his lieutenant governor, close by his side.

Why had this august group been assembled? Why had it seen fit to summon this young African girl, scarcely eighteen years old, before it? This group of “the most respectable characters in Boston,” as it would later define itself, had assembled to question closely the African adolescent on the slender sheaf of poems that she claimed to have written by herself. We can only speculate on the nature of the questions posed to the fledgling poet. Perhaps they asked her to identify and explain—for all to hear—exactly who were the Greek and Latin gods and poets alluded to so frequently in her work. Perhaps they asked her to conjugate a verb in Latin, or even to translate randomly selected passages from the Latin, which she and her master, John Wheatley, claimed that she “had made some progress in.” Or perhaps they asked her to recite from memory key passages from the texts of John Milton and Alexander Pope, the two poets by whom the African claimed to be most directly influenced. We do

not know.
We do know, however, that the African poet’s responses were more than sufficient to prompt the eighteen august gentlemen to compose, sign, and publish a two-paragraph “Attestation,” an open letter “To the Publick” that prefaces Phillis Wheatley’s book, and which reads in part:

We whose Names are underwritten, do assure the World, that the poems specified in the following Page, were (as we veribly [sic] believe) written by Phillis, a young Negro Girl, who was but a few Years since, brought an uncultivated Barbarian from Africa, and has ever since been, and now is, under the Disadvantage of serving as a Slave in a Family in this Town. She has been examined by some of the best judges, and is thought qualified to write them.

So important was this document in securing a publisher for Phillis Wheatley’s poems that it forms the signal element in the prefatory matter printed in the opening pages of her POEMS ON VARIOUS SUBJECTS, RELIGIOUS AND MORAL, published at London in 1773.

May: An article appeared in the May issue of The Gentleman’s Magazine of London, entitled “Some Account of Phillis, a learned Negro Girl.” The item began with: “Proposals having just been published for printing by subscription, some poems written by Phillis, a negro servant of Mr. Wheatley, of Boston, in New England, the following account has been received from her master.” This was followed by John Wheatley’s letter on how he had found young Phillis Wheatley in 1761 and of her genius in learning the English language in a short period of time. Also, as many people were skeptical that a black could compose such beautiful poetry, it was reported that many prominent Bostonians including the Governor of Massachusetts and John Hancock attested to the fact that the report was indeed true. The sentiment was expressed, that it was hoped in London that a portion of the subscription monies obtained for her book, POEMS ON VARIOUS SUBJECTS, RELIGIOUS AND MORAL, would go toward purchasing the author’s freedom.

The poetry was certainly inoffensive to white masterdom. Phillis accused her white masters, the Wheatleys, and others, of having “mercy” on her and her kind, the “sable race,” in bringing them from their “Pagan land,” and of disregarding their bodily darkness “black as Cain” in order to teach their “benighted” souls to understand about their Savior, Christ Jesus, and His redemption. Once “refin’d” in the fires of slavery, she and other blacks would “join th’angelic train” by becoming just like the white folks.
July: The Wheatleys had sent Phillis Wheatley to London for medical treatment, and there she had met several dignitaries who arranged for the publishing of her work by A. Bell as *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral,* along with a woodcut portrait of the author, characterized as “Negro Servant to Mr. John Wheatley, of Boston, in New England.”
March 21, Monday: Winthrop Emerson Faulkner was born in Acton, Massachusetts. His father Francis Faulkner, as the Town Clerk, would copy the entire Declaration of Independence into the town record book in order to make this declaration of war permanently accessible to all the residents of the town.

Phillis Wheatley wrote from London to a fellow black domestic in Newport, Rhode Island, Obour Tanner. (Miss Obour Tanner, besides being a dear friend who had made the journey aboard the Phillis from Africa with Miss Wheatley, had evidently like her been granted manumission and was working in Newport as a domestic; from the late 1770s onward Miss Tanner would be acting as Miss/Mrs. Wheatley’s literary agent.)

To Miss Obour Tanner, Newport.
Boston, March 21, 1774.

Dear Obour, — I rec’d your obliging letter enclos’d in your Revd Pastor’s & handed me by his son. I have lately met with a great trial in the death of my mistress; let us imagine the loss of a parent, sister or brother, the tenderness of all these were united in her. I was a poor little outcast & a stranger when she took me in: not only into her house, but I presently became a sharer in her most tender affections. I was treated by her more like her child than her servant; no opportunity was left unimproved of giving me the best of advice; but in terms how tender! how engaging! This I hope ever to keep in remembrance. Her exemplary life was a greater monitor than all her precepts and instruction; thus we may observe of how much greater force example is than instruction. To alleviate our sorrows we had the satisfaction to see her depart in inexpressible raptures, earnest longings, & impatient thirtings for the upper courts of the Lord. Do, my dear friend, remember me & this family in your closet, that this afflicted dispensation may be sanctify’d to us. I am very sorry to hear that you are indispos’d, but hope this will find you in better health. I have been unwell the greater part of the winter, but am much better as the spring approaches. Pray excuse my not writing to you so long before,
for I have been so busy lately that I could not find leisure. I shall send the 5 books you wrote for, the first convenient opportunity; if you want more, they shall be ready for you. I am very affectionately your friend,

October 26, Thursday: People were trying to kill each other at Hampton, Virginia.

Phillis Wheatley wrote from Providence, Rhode Island to General George Washington at his headquarters in Cambridge, Massachusetts:

Sir.

I have taken the freedom to address your Excellency in the enclosed poem, and entreat your acceptance, though I am not insensible of its inaccuracies. Your being appointed by the Grand Continental Congress to be Generalissimo of the Armies of North America, together with the fame of your virtues, excite sensations not easy to suppress. Your generosity, therefore, I presume, will pardon the attempt. Wishing your Excellency all possible success in the great cause you are so generously engaged in, I am, Your Excellency’s most obedient and humble servant,

Phillis Wheatley
Early in the year, General George Washington received a poem from a young woman and wrote that “with a view of doing justice to her great poetical Genius, I had a great Mind to publish the Poem.” He invited her to visit his headquarters in Cambridge.

The poet was of course the now famous Phillis Wheatley, who was then an enslaved Bostonian.
Wheatley is known to have composed 46 poems. Her writing style, based upon that of Alexander Pope, has been characterized as a mixture of “accommodation and protest,” and her work shows her assimilation to the Puritanism of the Wheatley family. In writing of and to her the general made not a single reference to her race, which is a remarkable omission not only by the standards of his day but also by those of our own. (In private correspondence during the 1780s and 1790s George Washington would repeatedly express a devout hope that the state governments would legislate “a gradual Abolition of Slavery; It would prevent much future Mischief.”)
This was the year in which General Washington would be entertained at the Black Horse Tavern in South Woburn MA.

On this continent, freedom, freedom for the white planters of America such as Washington, freedom from England, was an issue. Freedom, however, for the black slaves from the white planters of America such as Washington, and freedom for the white bond-laborers from the white planters of America such as Washington, were not.
February 14, Wednesday: The slave poet Phillis Wheatley wrote from Providence, Rhode Island to her friend Obour Tanner, a slave in Newport, the topic of discussion evidently being the British occupation: “I doubt not that your present situation is extremely unhappy. Even I a mere spectator am in anxious suspense concerning the fortunes of this unnatural civil contest.”

In Massachusetts, people were trying to kill each other at Dorchester Neck.

The Council of Massachusetts appointed Captain Eleazer Brooks of Lincoln a Colonel of the 3d regiment.

Thomas Paine revised his pamphlet COMMON SENSE to include an appendix responding to a Quaker non-violence pamphlet:

To the Representatives of the Religious Society of the People called Quakers, or to so many of them as were concerned in publishing the late piece, entitled “THE ANCIENT TESTIMONY AND PRINCIPLES OF THE PEOPLE CALLED QUAKERS RENEWED, WITH RESPECT TO THE KING AND GOVERNMENT, AND TOUCHING THE COMMOTIONS NOW PREVAILING IN THESE AND OTHER PARTS OF AMERICA ADDRESSED TO THE PEOPLE IN GENERAL.”

Basically his argument, insofar as it was coherent and intelligible, amounted to the attitude that any Friendly witness to non-violence was hypocrisy, in that it pretended to be a religious position entirely separate from politics while, by urging nonresponsiveness to governmental violence, amounting to a sponsorship of the political status quo, it was actually religion dabbling all of its toes in the political mainstream.

Such a crowdpleaser of an argument would sell 500,000 copies.
Following the death of her slavemaster, John Wheatley, Phillis Wheatley was manumitted and married John Peters. Her marriage would be an unhappy and unfortunate one, and she would bear three children two of whom soon died, with her third succumbing soon enough after she died to be buried with her.

December 16: A brief notice appeared in the “Died” section of Boston’s The Massachusetts Spy, a newspaper published by Isaiah Thomas with an illustrated masthead designed by Paul Revere, of the death of Phillis Wheatley. The notice reads:

"at Boston, Phillis Peters (formerly Phillis Wheatley) an African, aged 31, known to the literary world by her celebrated
The newspaper did not indicate the date or cause of death. It is known that she died in poverty and that her marriage had been troubled. It is known that two of her three children had died very young, and that the sole surviving child died soon enough after its mother’s death to be interred with its mother. The grave of this person who had arrived in Massachusetts attired in a fragment of old carpet would receive no headstone. Although there is a statue in her honor, you will need to travel to Jackson, Mississippi to view it.


Phillis Wheatley and Thomas Jefferson: The Birth of African-American Literary Criticism

In THE TRIALS OF PHILLIS WHEATLEY: AMERICA’S FIRST BLACK POET AND HER ENCOUNTERS WITH THE FOUNDING FATHERS, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., examines the significance of the work of the eighteenth-century African-American poet Phillis Wheatley in three ways: (1) through analysis of Wheatley’s intellectual battles with a White leadership that viewed the Black race as inferior; (2) through a study of the author’s status as an African slave in America; and (3) through an exploration of the poet’s impact in how Americans, Whites and Blacks, have, since before the publication of Thomas Jefferson’s NOTES ON THE STATE OF VIRGINIA (1787), viewed race in narrow and dichotomous terms. By prioritizing Wheatley’s status as an African slave who proved through her work that Blacks were human, Gates makes significant contributions not
only to the growing scholarship in Black Atlantic Studies, but also to the inquiries on the history of race in America, especially the historical construction of Whiteness as an essential identity that subsumes Blackness. Tracing the beginnings of a long tradition of White imagination of Blackness, Gates reveals, through analysis of a vast literature spanning from the writings of Jefferson and of earlier intellectuals to the work of critics of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s, the large impact that Wheatley’s work has had on American culture.

First, THE TRIALS OF PHILLIS WHEATLEY contributes to the groundbreaking studies on Wheatley that have emerged since the 1990s and earlier from the scholars of the Black Atlantic world. According to Paul Gilroy, the term “Black Atlantic world” refers to the transformations that resulted from “this historical conjunction — the stereophonic, bilingual, or bifocal cultural forms originated by, but no longer the exclusive property of, blacks dispersed within the structures of feeling, producing, communicating, and remembering.” This scholarship is mainly concerned with the historical and cultural connections, disconnections, and struggles among Black communities from around the world. Migration and resistance are major dynamics of this Black Atlantic world. As Gilroy wrote: “The history of the black Atlantic since then, continually crisscrossed by the movement of black people — not only as commodities — but engaged in various struggles towards emancipation, autonomy, and citizenship, is a means to re-examine the problems of nationality, location, identity, and historical memory.”

THE TRIALS OF PHILLIS WHEATLEY contributes to the inquiry that Gilroy outlines above because it represents Wheatley as a major participant in the struggle for freedom and equality in the Black Diaspora. First, as Gates suggests, Wheatley’s resistance might have begun on the slave-ship called the Phillis which brought her to Boston on July 11, 1761, when she was about seven years old (pages 16-17). According to Gates, among the cargo of the ship, which had recently returned from gathering slaves in Senegal, Sierra Leone, and the Isles de Los, off the coast of Guinea, was “a slender frail, female child” who was probably from the Senegambian coast of Africa (page 16). Although he identifies Wheatley as a Senegambian, Gates does not examine the historical circumstances in West Africa which led to Wheatley’s enslavement. In this sense, THE TRIALS OF PHILLIS WHEATLEY is narrow and particularist because it does not reflect the “Africancentric” approach to Black Atlantic history which, as Paul Lovejoy suggests in IDENTITY IN THE SHADOW OF SLAVERY (2000), “introduces a perspective that is not centered in the history of Europe or colonial America but instead in trans-Atlantic origins.”

Nevertheless, Gates’s book is, to a limited degree, “trans-Atlantic” since it reflects the influence of Wheatley’s work in the international formation of a Black Atlantic literary culture. Referring to Vincent Caretta, a major scholar of

eighteenth-century Black Atlantic literature, Gates argues that a 1772 court ruling in England, which “made it illegal for slaves who had come to England to be forcibly returned to the colonies,” helped create a positive atmosphere for Blacks (page 31). Despite its involvement in slavery, England, unlike the United States, gave Black intellectuals the opportunity to publish their writings. As Gates shows, in 1772, when Wheatley finally received from her eighteen White examiners a document attesting to her ability to write literature, her benefactor and owner Susanna Wheatley turned to her friends in England for help (page 30). Gates explains: “Through the captain of the commercial ship that John Wheatley used for trade with England, Susanna engaged a London publisher, Archibald Bell, to bring out the manuscript” (page 31). Gates continues: “And so, against the greatest odds, POEMS ON VARIOUS SUBJECTS, RELIGIOUS AND MORAL became the first book of poetry published by a person of African descent in the English language, marking the beginning of an African-American literary tradition” (page 31).

The scant data on Wheatley’s biography shows that there are key experiences such as the events that led to Wheatley’s capture and the predicaments that the child faced during the Middle Passage that remain to be known. Another difficulty in the scholarship about Wheatley is the lack of information on the interactions that Wheatley had in her early career with her White critics. Gates writes: “We had no transcript of the exchanges that occurred between Miss Wheatley and her eighteen examiners” (page 29). Gates gives a detailed list of these critics, who included Thomas Hutchinson, who was the governor of Massachusetts between 1769 and 1774; Andrew Oliver, a Harvard graduate and “the colony’s lieutenant governor (and Hutchinson’s brother-in-law through his wife’s sister)” (page 8); the Reverend Mather Byles, who was another Harvard graduate and a Tory Loyalist; the poet and satirist Joseph Green; the Reverend Samuel Cooper, who was a poet, Harvard graduate, and minister nicknamed “the silver-tongued preacher” (pages 10–11); James Bowdoin, who was “one of the principal American exemplars of the Enlightenment” (page 11); the Reverend Samuel Mather, known as “one of the greatest in New England” (page 14); and many other White dignitaries of Boston.

In order to understand the purpose of the examiners’ meeting with Wheatley, one must read the essay “The Day When America Decided That Blacks Were of a Species That Could Create Literature” that Gates wrote in The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education in Autumn 1994.9 In that article, Gates asked a series of questions on the relations between the White leadership and Wheatley in eighteenth-century America. Referring to a meeting that 18 notable White men of Boston held in the city’s courthouse in the spring of 1772 to give Wheatley an “oral examination” about her work, Gates asked: “Why had this august group been assembled? Why had it seen fit to summon this young African girl, scarcely 18 years old, before it?” Gates later wondered: “Why

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was the creative writing of the African of such importance to the eighteenth century’s debate over slavery?“ (page 51) Seeking to answer these questions, Gates suggested that the White men’s attitude was a product of the belief of both Americans and Europeans in the incapacity of Africans to produce literature, an assumption which, as Gates argued, was antithetical to the Cartesian tenets of the Enlightenment movement which equated reason to humanity (page 51).

In THE TRIALS OF PHILLIS WHEATLEY, Gates takes his inquiry further by raising serious issues about the relationships between the White leadership in eighteenth-century America and African-American literature. In an attempt to understand the obstacles that Wheatley had to overcome in America for being a Black woman intellectual, Gates traces them to the racialist discourse which surrounded her poetry on that meeting which was held in Boston one afternoon in October 1772. Gates writes: “The panel had been assembled to verify the authorship of her poems and to answer a much larger question: was a Negro capable of producing literature?” (page 5). In this gathering, Gates identifies an important moment in African-American literature: “Their interrogation of this witness, and her answers, would determine not only this woman’s fate but the subsequent direction of the antislavery movement, as well as the birth of what a later commentator would call ‘a new species of literature,’ the literature written by slaves” (page 7).

Later, Gates discusses the importance of Wheatley’s experience by focusing on the arrival, life, and work of the poet and how they were transformed for the better and for the worse by the racist discourse of the Enlightenment movement that inspired her American critics. Using both up-to-date and early sources, Gates reveals the strong impact of racism on how Wheatley’s work has been interpreted from the eighteenth century to the 1970s.

First, Gates describes the relations between Jefferson and Wheatley as similar to those between a biased critic of African-American literature and a genuine African-American writer. The interaction between the two individuals was tainted by the subtle racism that prevented Jefferson from acknowledging the merit of Wheatley’s poems. Taking part in the racist tradition in which philosophers of the Renaissance and of the Enlightenment such as Francis Bacon, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel misrepresented Blacks as people who possessed no arts, sciences, or feeling, Jefferson was prone to demean not only Wheatley’s POEMS but also the entire Black race. Gates writes: “Thomas Jefferson had associated Africans with apes: black males find white women more beautiful than black women, Jefferson had argued, as ‘uniformly as is the preference of the Orangutan for the black woman over his own species” (page 26). Jefferson’s racism, Gates suggests, resonated with the Elizabethan conception of the Great Chain of Being, which excluded Black people from the human family.10 Paradoxically, as Gates shows, unlike the European Enlightenment thinkers, Jefferson “has qualified praise for the African’s musical propensities” (page 43). Gates refers to the passage in

NOTES ON THE STATE OF VIRGINIA where Jefferson described Blacks as being "more generally gifted than whites with accurate ears for tune and time" (page 43). Another paradox Gates reveals is that Jefferson, who was clearly a racist philosopher, coincidentally became the first critic of African-American literature. Gates describes a letter that Jefferson received from his French colleague François, "the Marquis de Barbé-Marbois," in which the author commended Wheatley for having published "a number of poems in which there is imagination, poetry, and zeal" (page 42). As Gates points out, Jefferson was not pleased by such high appraisal and was quick to prove the contrary to the French critic. Gates explains: "As outlined in Queries VI and XIV of the Notes, Jefferson lays out clearly his views. 'The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism.' The criticism comes in a passage setting out his views on the mental capacity of the various races of man. 'In general, their existence appears to participate more of sensation than reflection,' Jefferson writes about blacks" (page 42).

Later, as Gates argues, Jefferson took a harsher tone towards Wheatley and Black people, saying: "Misery is often the parent of the most affecting touches in poetry. Among the blacks is misery enough, God knows, but no poetry. Love is the peculiar oestrum of the poet. Their love is ardent, but it kindles the senses only, not the imagination. Religion, indeed, has produced a Phillis Weatley [sic]; but it could not produce a poet" (page 44).

Having stated Jefferson’s racist positions, Gates then gave another perspective on the Founding Father. He writes: "He [Jefferson] believed that Africans have human souls, they merely lack the intellectual endowments of other races. Like his contemporaries, he separated 'what we would call intelligence from the capacity for religious experience.' This division allows for both the religious conversion of slaves, as well as for the perpetuation of the principle of black inferiority. Guilt, as well as the growing evidence that blacks are indeed Homo Sapiens, meant that Africans could no longer be regarded as brutes. So Jefferson accepted the souls and humanity of slaves, while still maintaining their inferiority. Phillis is, for Jefferson, an example of a product of religion, of mindless repetition and imitation, without being the product of intellect, of reflection. True art requires a sublime combination of feeling and reflection" (page 44).

Gates’s argument that Jefferson’s racism belied his guilt-ridden conscience about Black humanity is pertinent, because it sheds light on a major figure of American history whose views on race are fraught with contradictions. Reading the 1964 edition of NOTES ON THE STATE OF VIRGINIA, one can see that Jefferson’s dualism towards Blacks also stemmed from fear, since he was deeply convinced that the human beings he had enslaved would by virtue of their natural rights seek vengeance when opportunity arose. Because he was afraid of alliance between runaway slaves and the British army, Jefferson devised a code for the repatriation of slaves to Africa. He wrote: "[The] revised code further proposes to proportion crimes and punishments ... pardon and privilege of clergy are proposed to be abolished; but if the verdict be
against the defendant, the court in their discretion may allow
a new trial. No attainder to cause a corruption of blood, or
forfeiture of dower. Slaves guilty of offences punishable in
others by labor, to be transported to Africa, or elsewhere, as
the circumstances of the time admit, there to be continued in
slavery. A rigorous regiment proposed for those condemned to
labor.”

As the above statement shows, Jefferson’s views on African-
Americans did then have a transatlantic dimension, since it
anticipated the idea of return to Africa, which, from a non-
racist perspective, was popular among nineteenth-century Black
nationalists such as Martin Robinson Delany and Alexander
Crummel. It would have been good for Gates to place Jefferson’s
racism and Wheatley’s resistance in the crucial discourses about
the connections between race and Africa in which African-
American intellectuals have participated since slavery. In fact,
Gates had the opportunity to do so in his analysis of Wheatley’s
1768 poem “On Being Brought from Africa to America.” The poem,
which is quoted in Gates’s book, reads:

’Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there’s a God, that there is a Saviour too:
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
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. (pages 70-71)

In this poem Wheatley ambiguously calls Africa “my Pagan land”
while she celebrates her Blackness and her Christian faith. As
Gates shows, “On Being Brought” has unfortunately become “the
most reviled poem in African-American literature” for the
following reasons: “To speak in such glowing terms about the
‘mercy’ manifested by the slave trade was not exactly going to
endear Miss Wheatley to black power advocates in the 1960s”
(page 71). Gates’s rationale weakens the importance of “On Being
Brought” because the poem, which is fraught with contradictions
in Wheatley’s relationship to Africa, can help us understand the
poet’s views on the relations between the Black Atlantic world
and Africa. In this sense, the criticisms of Wheatley’s
attitudes about race, which Gates summarizes and debunks in the
second half of his book, are not meaningless, because they help
us position a major Black intellectual in the current
conversation about the global significance of racial identity
and social struggle. Frankly, one wonders why Gates seems to be
irritated by twentieth-century Black critics such as Stephen
Henderson, Addison Gayle, Jr., and Amiri Baraka, who he attacks
for either re-enacting Jefferson’s indictment of Wheatley (page
82) or for seeking “forms of black expression” or “cultural
affirmation” in Wheatley’s work (pages 74-84). Gates writes:
“Too black to be taken seriously by white critics of the
eighteenth century, Wheatley was now considered too white to
interest black critics of the twentieth. Precisely the sort of
mastery of the literary craft and themes that led to her
vindication before the Boston town-hall tribunal was now

summoned as proof that she was, culturally, an impostor.... As new cultural vanguards sought to police and patrol the boundaries of black art, Wheatley’s glorious carriage would become her tumbril” (page 82).

Gates’s comment reflects conflictive views about race and national or cultural identity. It is unsettling to know that Gates, who uses African iconography in his theorizing of African-American literature, is nonetheless disturbed when critics try to do the same thing with Wheatley’s work. Referring to the critics of the Black Arts Movement, Gates writes: “We can almost imagine Wheatley being frog-marched through hall in the nineteen-sixties or seventies, surrounded by dashiki-clad, flowering figures of ‘the Revolution’: ‘What is Ogun’s Relation to Esu?’: ‘Who are the sixteen principal deities in the Yoruba pantheon of Gods?’ ‘Santeria derived from which African culture?’ And finally ‘Where you gonna be when the revolution comes, sistah?’” (pages 83-84). This statement reflects a condescension toward the same African culture that Gates celebrates in THE SIGNIFYING MONKEY: A THEORY OF AFRO-AMERICAN LITERARY CRITICISM (1988), where he traces “the black voice” in African-American literature to Esu Elegbera, the Yoruba trickster who has the power to create free-play and indeterminacy in the Black text. Esu received this power from a calabash that the High God Olorun [or Olodumare] in Yoruba mythology gave him. 12 If Gates is apprehensive about African-centric interpretations of Wheatley’s work, why does he end THE TRIALS OF PHILLIS WHEATLEY with an anagram-translated form of “On Being Brought” in which the narrator says:

Aren’t African men born to be free? So Am I. Ye commit so brute a crime On us. But we can change thy attitude. America, manumit our race. I thank the Lord. (page 88)

The line “Aren’t African men born to be free?” is a Pan-Africanist statement that cannot be interpreted without reference to the transnational dimensions of Wheatley’s cultural or political views on Blackness, Africa, and America. In this sense, as Gates points out at the end of his book, the question is not so much “to read white, or read black; it is to read” (page 89). Yet a balanced reading of Wheatley’s poems must validate the author’s ideas about Africa and Blackness as well as those she had about America and Whiteness. Re-interpreting Wheatley’s work requires analysis of the racist historical contexts and myths that confronted the author. Yet it also requires a study of the role that home, racial identity, resistance, and tradition, conceived both locally and transnationally, played in her life and work.

THE TRIALS OF PHILLIS WHEATLEY makes great contributions to Black Atlantic Studies in its own ways by representing Wheatley as an African slave who achieved radical transformations in her status and in that of the entire African race through intellectual means. The most pleasurable moment in the book is when Gates writes: “Essentially, she [Wheatley] was auditioning for the humanity of the entire African people” (page 27). Some fifteen years after she was brought to America as slave, Wheatley became

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12. In THE SIGNIFYING MONKEY, Gates describes Esu Elegbera as the messenger of the Yoruba god Ifa. Esu has a calabash given to him by Olorun, the god’s emissary. The Calabash has the power to propagate itself (page 8). The calabash also has the “ASE,” the element with which Olodumare, the supreme deity created the universe (page 7).
the first Black writer to publish a poem, dismantling the racist view that Black people were not intelligent or human. As Gates has convincingly shown in his book, Wheatley’s success has had a strong impact on American culture, notably on Thomas Jefferson’s views on race and African-American literature and on the tradition of minimizing Wheatley’s work that it has engendered. However, though it is warranted, Gates’s critique of Jefferson’s legacy in Black literary criticism is problematic because it centers mainly on the critics of the Black Arts Movement who rightfully seek racial and/or cultural affirmation and authenticity in Wheatley’s poems. These critics were simply trying to place Wheatley’s work in the global history of the struggle and survival of Black people and cultures.

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“It’s all now you see. Yesterday won’t be over until tomorrow and tomorrow began ten thousand years ago.”

- Remark by character “Garin Stevens” in William Faulkner’s Intruder in the Dust

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This stuff presumably looks to you as if it were generated by a human. Such is not the case. Instead, upon someone’s request we have pulled it out of the hat of a pirate that has grown out of the shoulder of our pet parrot “Laura” (depicted above). What these chronological lists are: they are research reports compiled by ARRGH algorithms out of a database of data modules which we term the Kouroo Contexture. This is data mining. To respond to such a request for information, we merely push a button.
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