

“Let us imagine the scene,” begins Henry Louis Gates Jr. in his introduction to a 1985 special issue of *Critical Inquiry* on race and writing. “One bright morning in the spring of 1772, a young African girl walked demurely into the courthouse at Boston to undergo an examination, the results of which would determine the direction of her life and work.”¹ In the masterful story Gates proceeds to tell, the girl is the poet Phillis Wheatley; her examiners are the Massachusetts colonial governor and lieutenant governor and a group of sixteen prominent white lawyers, clergymen, and merchants of Boston; and the matter on trial is her ability to write the poems she has assembled for publication. He writes,

Perhaps she was shocked upon entering the appointed room. For there, gathered in a semicircle, sat eighteen of Boston’s most notable citizens. . . . 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. . . . 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.²

The examination of Phillis Wheatley was, Gates concludes, “surely one of the oddest oral examinations on record.”³ But there is in fact

no known record of such an event. There is only the one-page attestation “To the Publick” that appears as a prefacing document in her volume *Poems on Subjects Moral and Divine* (1773), bearing the names of eighteen of “the most respectable Characters in Boston,” offering their assurance that Wheatley “has been examined by some of the best Judges, and is thought qualified to write” the poems collected in the volume.⁴ The attestation suggests that Wheatley’s intellectual ability to write such a poem had at some point come under scrutiny, but nowhere does it state that the signatories had examined her themselves.

Still, so vivid was the image Gates crafted of Wheatley entering the examination room, so compelling the scenario of the black poet and her white judges, and so powerful its encapsulation of Enlightenment-era controversies over the intellectual capacity of black people—as Gates put it, “Western culture’s use of writing as a commodity to confine and delimit a culture of color”—that Gates and his readers would return to it many times over the next twenty years.⁵ Somewhere in the retellings, the story took on a life of its own, and its imagined lineaments assumed the solidity of fact. Some scholars absorbed and re-presented the story as a fact of U.S. literary history.⁶ Others issued seasonable reminders that there was no evidence to substantiate the scene.⁷ One senior scholar of African American literature voiced her frustration that it has “been repeated so often by so many eminent scholars that people generally forget that it is one interpretation of an authenticating device included in [Wheatley’s] volume of poetry.”⁸ Still others sidestepped the issue of the examination’s historical facticity but continued to use it as a framework for interpreting Wheatley’s career.⁹

Seventeen years after he first introduced the story of Wheatley’s trial in *Critical Inquiry*, Gates returned to it with renewed emphasis and detail in a number of retellings designed for the U.S. public. Delivering the Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities on 22 March 2002 in Washington, D.C., Gates both acknowledges the conjectural elements of the scenario and gives it a firm point of reference in historical time, thus conferring upon the event an even greater sense of historical certainty:

Bear with me as I try to recreate imaginatively a curious scenario indeed. The historical record is sparse; for our purpose, let us elaborate upon it with a tissue of conjecture. On 8 October 1772, a small, delicate African woman, about eighteen years of age, walks into a

room, perhaps in Boston's Town Hall, the Old Colony House, to be interviewed by eighteen gentlemen.¹⁰

Writing for the *New Yorker* on 20 January 2003, Gates withdraws the "tissue of conjecture" and again posits 8 October 1772 as the latest possible date for the examination:

It was the primal scene of African-American letters. Sometime before 8 October 1772, Phillis Wheatley, a slim African slave in her late teens who was a published poet, met with eighteen of the most influential thinkers and politicians of the Massachusetts Colony. 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? The details of the meeting have been lost to history, but I've often imagined how it all might have happened.¹¹

The paragraph reappears with minor editorial changes as the opening to Gates's book-length celebration of *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley*, published a few months later.¹² That these highly publicized recountings of the trial scenario have influenced public memory concerning Wheatley's career is underscored by the appearance of children's picture books such as *Phillis's Big Test* (2008), which have brought the trial scene to life in vivid full-color illustrations for a new generation of Wheatley readers.¹³ In this essay, I will reexamine the image of the trial of Phillis Wheatley, propose a new way of understanding the race and gender dynamics that shaped her career, and explore how similar dynamics continue to inflect our interpretation of her poems today.

What led Gates to claim that the examination took place on or before 8 October 1772? It is uncertain because neither the Jefferson lecture, the *New Yorker* article, nor *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley* provides a footnote. The only known dated copy of the attestation appears in an advertisement in *Lloyd's Evening Post and British Chronicle* in September 1773, where it is dated 28 October 1772.¹⁴ Evidence shows that the attestation was signed not on or before 8 October 1772, but on 28 October 1772. The Gates scenario of the "trial of Phillis Wheatley" continues to unravel when we consider what was taking place in Boston on Wednesday, 28 October 1772. On that very day, at Faneuil Hall, the freeholders of Boston convened an emergency meeting to investigate reports that the salaries for colonial judges would no longer be paid by the colony but by the Crown.¹⁵ John Hancock, a signer of the Wheatley attestation, was "chosen Moderator" of the meeting.¹⁶ Gov-

ernor Thomas Hutchinson, another signer of the Wheatley attestation, was probably also in attendance, for he had been centrally involved in the long-simmering colonial controversy over previous attempts by the British government to manipulate the colonial courts.¹⁷ The Crown's attempt to appoint itself paymaster for colonial judges was viewed not only as a manipulation but also as an outright infiltration of the courts. It was, as the freeholders explained in a pamphlet documenting the meeting, a political emergency that "spread an Alarm among all considerate persons who have heard of it in Town and Country; being viewed, as tending rapidly to compleat the System of their Slavery."¹⁸ So important and so involved were the discussions initiated on Wednesday, 28 October that they "continued by adjournments" for four full days until Monday, 2 November, when the meeting finally concluded with the appointment of the Boston Committee of Correspondence, charged with the responsibility to "state the Rights of the Colonists and of this Province in particular, as Men, as Christians, and as Subjects; to communicate and publish the same to the several Towns in this Province and to the World, as the Sense of this Town, with the Infringements and Violations thereof that have been, or from Time to Time may be made."¹⁹ This committee was one of the first standing committees of correspondence formed in the Revolutionary era. On a day of such consequence, in the midst of a colonial political crisis, it seems impossible that eighteen leading citizens of Boston—including the governor and lieutenant governor—would excuse themselves from a crucial political meeting to conduct an examination of Phillis Wheatley.

How, then, if not through oral examination, might the attestation have come into being on 28 October 1772? How were the signatures of eighteen prominent Bostonians collected that day? Clues to an alternative scenario appear in a letter from the Boston merchant John Andrews to his brother-in-law William Barrell in Philadelphia dated 24 February 1773. Andrews reports on the status of Wheatley's poems:

In regard to Phillis's poems they will originate from a London press, as she was blamd by her friends for printing them here & made to expt a large emolument if she sent ye copy home, which induced her to remand it of ye printers & also of Capt Calef, who could not sell it by reason of their not crediting ye performance to be by a Negro, since which, *she has had a paper drawn up & signd* by the Gov. Council, Ministers, & most of ye people of note in this place,

certifying the authenticity of it, which paper Capt Calef carried last fall.²⁰ (emphasis mine)

Andrews states that Wheatley herself “had a paper drawn up & signd” attesting to the authenticity of her manuscript. His letter suggests an alternative narrative of the making of Wheatley, one that assigns her a commanding role in the early stages of her public career.

This alternative narrative begins to unfold on 29 February 1772, when a proposal first appeared in the *Boston Censor* to publish the poems by subscription with the Boston printer Ezekiel Russell. It is not clear whether Phillis Wheatley or her mistress, Susannah Wheatley, devised the advertisement, but its text declared that the poems had “been seen and read by the best judges, who think them well worthy of the Publick View; and upon critical examination, they find that the declared Author was capable of writing them.”²¹ Later that spring or summer plans for publication of Wheatley’s poems changed; she withdrew the manuscript from her Boston publisher and decided to seek a press in London. Andrews’s February 1773 letter suggests that Wheatley herself, in consultation with “friends,” made the decision based on financial considerations. It is also possible that she turned her attention to England in connection with the Somersett case tried before the King’s Bench in London in spring and early summer 1772. James Somersett was an enslaved black man brought to London by his master, customs officer Charles Steuart of Boston, in November 1769. Somersett ran away from Steuart in October 1771, and suit was filed on his behalf to prevent him from being remanded and returned to slavery in the sugar plantations of the West Indies. The first printed American notice of the case appeared on 23 July 1772, in the *Boston News-Letter*: “Somerset having been baptized prosecutes for his freedom.”²² Lord Mansfield’s ruling, rendered on 22 June 1772, determined that Somersett would not be returned to Steuart, and was broadly interpreted to establish England as a zone of emancipation for enslaved blacks. The first American print reports of the ruling appeared in the *New York Journal* on 20 August 1772, with fuller accounts of the ruling and its consequences appearing the following month in the *Essex (Mass.) Gazette*, *Boston News-Letter*, *Boston Gazette*, and *Boston Post-Boy*.²³ This evidence suggests that the Mansfield ruling and its consequences were well known in Wheatley’s Boston by September. It is possible that the news reached Wheatley even sooner by word of mouth among African American sailors, the “Black

Jacks” of the Atlantic world, especially given the fact that both Somersett and Steuart had been Boston residents until 1769.

In fall 1772, with news of the Mansfield case circulating, Wheatley accelerated her preparations to resend the manuscript to London with Robert Calef, captain of John Wheatley’s ship, the *London Packet*. Calef had already made an initial attempt to place the manuscript with London publisher Archibald Bell, but as Andrews’s letter indicates, “[H]e could not sell it by reason of their not crediting ye performance to be by a Negro.” Wheatley attempted to bolster the chances of her manuscript’s success on a second attempt and to answer concerns about its authenticity by preparing a number of prefatory documents and communicating with well-placed potential allies in London. On 10 October 1772, she addressed a letter to William Legge, Earl of Dartmouth (1731–1801), celebrating his appointment as secretary of state for North America; a biographical attestation written in Phillis Wheatley’s own hand but signed by the Wheatleys’ son, Nathaniel Wheatley, accompanied the letter.²⁴ (Like Susannah Wheatley, Lord Dartmouth was a friend of the transatlantic Huntingdon Connection and an associate of its sponsor Selina Hastings, Countess of Huntingdon, who would shortly play a crucial role in the authentication of Wheatley’s poems.) Just as she had drawn up her own biographical account to be signed by Nathaniel Wheatley, it is likely that Phillis Wheatley also drew up an attestation (or, as Andrews describes it, had one “drawn up”) reiterating the very claims initially published in the *Boston Censor* six or seven months earlier. The 29 February 1772 proposal reads: “The Poems having *been seen and read by the best Judges*, who think them well worthy of the Publick View; and upon critical examination, they find that the declared Author was capable of writing them” (emphasis mine). For this October 1772 document, Wheatley slightly revises and expands her original claims: “WE whose Names are under-written, do assure the World, that the POEMS specified in the following Page, were (as we verily believe) written by PHILLIS, a young Negro Girl. . . . She has *been examined by some of the best Judges*, and is thought qualified to write them” (*P*, xii; emphasis mine). Nowhere does the attestation state that the signatories had conducted their own examination of Wheatley, only that she had “been examined by some of the best Judges.” In the midst of her final manuscript preparations, on 28 October 1772, with most of the prominent male citizens of Boston gathered at Faneuil Hall, it appears that Wheatley

recognized an excellent opportunity to obtain signatures for this attestation. If, as Andrews's letter relates, she "had a paper drawn up & signd," then the attestation was probably circulated by Wheatley or an associate sometime before, during, or after the freeholders' meeting at Faneuil Hall. It appears that the eighteen "most respectable Characters in Boston," so described in the attestation, were willing on their knowledge of the Wheatley family and the strength of Phillis Wheatley's reputation to state that "we verily believe" she wrote the poems herself.

With the attestation in hand, Wheatley obtained one final prefatory document, a letter corroborating her African birth and enslavement (closely copying the attestation drawn up by Nathaniel Wheatley for Lord Dartmouth) signed by her master John Wheatley on 14 November 1772 (*P*, vi). Captain Calef left Boston for London bearing the attested manuscript on 19 November 1772 (*W*, 31). In January 1773, Calef reported to Susannah Wheatley that in early December (before he had arrived with the new documents of attestation), Bell had carried the poems to be read to the Lady Huntingdon. After questioning Bell closely about Phillis Wheatley and her relation to Susannah Wheatley (well-known to the Countess as a supporter of her Connection), Huntingdon concluded that she was "fond of having the Book dedicated to her."²⁵ The authenticating dedication of Lady Huntingdon helped propel the manuscript forward toward publication, even before the arrival of the attestation on English shores.

The evidence I have assembled here suggests that there was no "trial" of Phillis Wheatley as imagined by Gates, and that Wheatley devised the attestation as part of a months-long strategy to secure the London publication of her *Poems*, obtaining signatures from prominent Boston citizens at a town meeting on 28 October 1772. That she was capable of such tactical thinking is a matter of historical record. In a 1774 letter, the worldly Andrews describes Wheatley as "an *artful* jade."²⁶ What happens if we renovate the powerful—even iconic—image of Wheatley as an enslaved woman poet subjected to a compulsory examination by eighteen elite white men as the price of her authorization? If we raise the screen of the white men and the black woman on trial, what other stories and ways of understanding Wheatley's work stand behind it? In this essay, I will propose one alternative narrative for understanding how she made her groundbreaking career: 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 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.

Wheatley succeeded by appealing to the feelings of women, most of them white, who in turn hand-copied and circulated her manuscripts, bought and sold her books, organized, hosted, promoted, and attended her domestic poetry performances, and commissioned from her original poems on subjects close to heart. Witness this 19 September 1774 letter from Deborah Cushing to her husband Thomas Cushing Jr., speaker of the Massachusetts Assembly and member of a wealthy merchant family: “I . . . sent you one of Phillis Whetly’s books which you will wonder att but Mrs. Dickerson and Mrs. Clymer and Mrs. Ball with some other ladies were so pleased with Phillis and her performances that they boight her books and got her to compose some pieces for them.”²⁷ Wheatley performed her poems before groups of women gathered in private homes in Boston, and these women purchased her books for themselves and commissioned original works on personal or occasional topics. The Boston poet Jane Dunlap may have attended one of these performances, because in her own *Poems upon Several Sermons Preached by the Rev’d and Renowned George Whitefield While in Boston* (1771), she praises the “young Afric damsel’s virgin tongue.”²⁸

White women circulated Wheatley’s manuscript poems in Boston and beyond as a currency of friendship, familial relationship, education, and consolation. When one-year-old Charles Eliot died in Boston in 1772, Wheatley addressed “A Funeral Poem” to his grieving parents Samuel and Elizabeth Barrell Eliot. The infant’s mother and her sister Ruthy Barrell Andrews circulated the manuscript among family and friends of the Eliot and Andrews families in Boston and Philadelphia before it was published in 1773.²⁹ On 30 January 1773,

Susannah Wheatley's niece Elizabeth Walcutt (1721–1811) sent two manuscript poems by Phillis—“On the Death of the Rev. Dr. Sewell” and “To the University of Cambridge, in New England”—to her son Thomas Walcutt (1758–1840), then a student at Dartmouth College (*W*, 355). Wheatley also established an audience among white women in Philadelphia, perhaps through the merchant-class social circles of the Barrell-Andrews family. A manuscript variant of her poem “Atheism” survives in the handwriting of Philadelphia poet Hannah Griffitts (*W*, 356 n. 1). Griffitts (1727–1817) stood at the center of a vigorous network of manuscript circulation among women in the Philadelphia region. Historian Karen Wulf writes that manuscript circulation among white women in Philadelphia “played a key role in [their] reading, writing, and education. Manuscripts could reach wide audiences as friends of friends borrowed and lent, read, recommended, and copied commonplace books, diaries, individual manuscript pages of poetry and prose, and letters.”³⁰ Indeed, it is likely that through Griffitts, Wheatley's poems were circulated among Susanna Wright, Milcah Martha Moore, Elizabeth Graeme Ferguson, Annis Boudinot Stockton, and Julia Stockton Rush.³¹ “Atheism” also appears in the commonplace book of Catherine Haines, who was in the 1770s a student at the Philadelphia school conducted by unmarried Quaker teachers Rebecca Jones and Hannah Catherall. Jones and Catherall instructed their students to copy a number of poems by Griffitts, who may have introduced them to the works of Wheatley as well.³² Wheatley was deeply connected within white women's coteries of manuscript circulation in New England and Philadelphia.

Networks of white and black women also acted as sales agents for Wheatley's published poems in New England. The largest known order for her *Poems* came out of Newport, Rhode Island, center of the regional slave trade and home to active evangelical women's networks, an “Ethiopian Society,” and independent African American Sunday schools hosted in the home of Sarah Osborn, who was white (1714–1796). Osborn was the spiritual backbone of the First Congregational Church of Newport, where two-thirds of the members were women, a significant number of them black.³³ Wheatley's friend and correspondent Obour Tanner, who was African American, joined First Church in July 1768. On 30 October 1773, Wheatley asked Tanner to help circulate proposals and obtain subscriptions for her *Poems*.³⁴ Tanner subsequently acted as an agent for Wheatley's book sales in Newport. “I

shall send the 5 Books you wrote for, the first convenient Opportunity," Wheatley writes to Tanner on 21 March 1774; "if you want more, they Shall be ready for you."³⁵ Six weeks later, Wheatley again writes to Tanner, "I have recd the money you sent for the 5 books & 2/6 more for another, which I now Send & wish safe to hand" and informs her that three hundred more copies of the *Poems* had arrived from London.³⁶ In New Haven, Connecticut, Wheatley found a powerful advocate in Mary Clap Wooster (1729–1807). When Mary's sister Temperance Clap Pitkin died on 19 May 1772, Wheatley composed an elegy in her honor, which appears under the title "To the Rev. Mr. Pitkin on the Death of his Lady" in the 1773 *Poems*. When Mary's husband General David Wooster died in a British raid on Danbury, Connecticut, five years later, Wheatley composed an elegy for him as well. The same letter that enclosed the elegy for David Wooster contains specific business instructions from Wheatley to Mary Clap Wooster concerning the New Haven sales of her book: "You will do me a great favour by returning to me by the first oppy those books that remain unsold and remitting the money for those that are sold," Wheatley writes on 15 July 1778, "I can easily dispose of them here for 12/Lm.^o each."³⁷

While Wheatley built her career with support from both black and white women, it was her white female agents and audiences who asserted a definitive influence over the content of her poems. Wheatley composed "On Recollection," one of her most significant poems, upon encouragement from a circle of young white female friends and supporters in Boston. According to an account first appearing in the *London Magazine* in March 1772, the poem "was occasioned by her being in company with some young ladies, when one of them said she did not remember, among all the poetical pieces she had seen ever to have met with a poem upon RECOLLECTION. The African (so let me call her, for so in fact she is) took the hint, went home to her master's," and wrote the poem, dedicated to her friend "Miss A—— M——."³⁸ White women also elicited from her the elegies and occasional pieces that make up more than half of her published volume of poems. Wheatley's nineteenth-century biographer Margaretta Matilda Odell writes, "If any one requested her to write upon any particular subject or event, she immediately set herself to the task, and produced something upon the given theme. This is probably the reason why so many of her pieces are funeral poems, many of them, no doubt, being written at

the request of friends.”³⁹ Several poems originated at the request or suggestion of Wheatley’s white female friends at Boston’s Old South Church. The Wheatley family attended New South Church; Phillis Wheatley joined Old South on 18 August 1771. Thankfull Hubbard Leonard (1744–1772), a childhood friend and neighbor of the Wheatleys on King Street, also attended Old South. When Thankfull’s husband, Thomas Leonard (1743/1744–1771), died in 1771, Wheatley composed the elegy “To a Lady on the Death of her Husband.” When Thankfull herself died in 1772, Wheatley composed yet another elegy in her honor. Lucy Tyler Marshall joined Old South on the same day as Wheatley, and when Lucy’s husband Samuel Marshall died six weeks later on 29 September 1771, leaving her a pregnant widow, Wheatley composed for her the elegiac “On the Death of Doctor Samuel Marshall.”⁴⁰ These three poems all appear in Wheatley’s book. In fact, twenty-one of thirty-nine poems in the 1773 volume are elegies or occasional poems, and at least twelve of them are written about or for white women.

Taken together, these elegies and occasional poems and the correspondence compose a striking pattern: they reveal that the poet achieved her early reputation in large part by transacting in feelings of grief and loss among white women. The potent image of the Wooster elegy wrapped in business instructions for his grieving widow suggests that Wheatley’s white female audiences understood that they might complete these emotional transactions by helping her promote her book. White women appear to have regarded Wheatley as a particularly compelling performer of loss and a purveyor of consolation, perhaps because her elegies consistently mobilize images that are deeply evocative of her own experience of enslavement, such as familial separations, bereaved parents, and ocean transits. “To a Lady and her Children, on the Death of her Son and their Brother” describes familial separation in terms of ocean passage:

Still do you weep, still wish for his return?
 How cruel thus to wish, and thus to mourn?
 No more for him the streams of sorrow pour,
 But haste to join him on the heav’nly shore. (*P*, 83)

“To a Lady on her Coming to North-America with her Son, for the Recovery of her Health” evocatively remembers the ones left behind: here, a “spouse bereft of wife and son, / In the grove’s dark recesses

pours his moan" (*P*, 79). "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" consoles bereaved parents: "To shining guards consign thine infant care / To waft triumphant through the seas of air" (*P*, 85). Although scholars tend to mourn the absence of explicit reference to the Middle Passage in poems such as "On Being Brought from Africa to America," suggestive images appear time and again in Wheatley's elegies as she refers to transit across the seas to evoke feelings of separation. The poet appears to have bolstered her elegiac authority by quietly referencing her situation as a slave.

But how do we account for the appeal of elegies to the white merchant-class women of Boston, who were in the 1760s and 1770s profiting from explosive economic growth, which gave them new social and cultural status and unprecedented economic power as consumers of luxuries and commodity imports? Why at this moment did white women celebrate public expressions of their own bereavement?⁴¹ The literary culture of mourning developed by Wheatley for and with her white female patrons marks the ascendancy of emotion and especially feelings of grief, loss, or woundedness in the constitution of liberal models of American identity.⁴² Scholars of sentimentalism have argued that such displays of sympathy and bereavement were deeply connected to the rise of the middle class, the entrenchment of commodity culture, and self-consciousness about the moral and emotional consequences of consumerism.⁴³ It may be that the white women in Wheatley's circle participated in and relished public displays of grief or mournfulness to deflect attention from the political implications and responsibilities of their increasing wealth. Some may have been self-conscious about the political charge newly associated with merchant-class cultures of consumption, especially in the context of political tensions created by the Sugar Act (1764), the Stamp Act (1765), and the Townshend Acts (1767); indeed, some white women in Wheatley's Boston circle did participate in boycotts, spinning bees, and other political actions in the years when Wheatley was most active in preparing and promoting her book.⁴⁴ Others registered a softer complaint or tried to moderate their self-image through the public practice of sympathy, which after the publication of Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) was viewed as a marker of good taste, civic-mindedness, and social class, as well as a potent form of "cultural capital."⁴⁵ But as much as they may have been conflicted and self-conscious about the

moral and social impacts of the commodity consumerism they participated in and benefited from, none of the white women in Wheatley's Boston circle appear to have been troubled enough by the systems of slaveholding that also capitalized their economic and social privilege to use their resources to emancipate Wheatley, a contradiction noted by British observers in the *Monthly Review* of December 1773: "We are much concerned to find that this ingenious young woman is yet a slave. The people of Boston boast themselves chiefly on their principles of liberty. One such act as the purchase of her freedom, would, in our opinion, have done them more honour than hanging a thousand trees with ribbons and emblems."⁴⁶ Their conduct seems to prove the observation made by James Baldwin, Lauren Berlant, Lori Merish, and Karen Sánchez-Eppler that participation in cultures of sympathy and bereavement has often masked white women's complicity with systems of commodification and domination.⁴⁷

Wheatley appealed to her white female auditors' desire to avoid facing these stark moral contradictions, including their relationship to the enslaved woman poet who stood before them and the racialized division of labor their emotional transactions reproduced, by constructing their transactional enterprises of feeling as a collective form of imagination. Wheatley describes the imagination as an alternative to lesser occupations of consciousness available to consumer-class white women. In her poem "On Imagination," she writes:

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. (*P*, 65)

English literary critics from the time of John Dryden had derogated fancy as a less original and comprehensive capacity of mind than imagination.⁴⁸ Wheatley describes the lesser operations of fancy in language suggestive of the gendered activities of commodity consumption. In fact, she personifies Fancy as an especially committed female shopper, "roving;" "now here, now there," until smitten by "some lov'd object," whose "silken fetters"—tactile, textile mercantile luxury—"bind" the "mind." The act of shopping, the visiting of shops, was a phenomenon new to the eighteenth century. Indeed, the use of the word "shop" as a verb dates to the middle 1760s, and Wheatley's cultural moment. "Shopping appears to have been born at the moment when commodity

and luxury converge,” Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace writes, and specifically around the consumption of imported goods such as coffee, tea, sugar, and tobacco, whose habitual use soon vested them with an aura of necessity; feelings of need, appetite, desire, and compulsion merged without discipline in the act of shopping.⁴⁹ Wheatley critiques this undisciplined disposition of mind and feeling as a “soft captivity.” Compare, then, her description of “Fancy” as a compulsively “roving” female shopper to her description of the superior powers of “Imagination” as “the leader of the mental train”: “Before thy throne the subject-passions bow, / Of subject-passions sov’reign ruler thou” (*P*, 67). She continues:

We on thy pinions can surpass the wind,
 And leave the rolling universe behind:
 From star to star the mental optics rove,
 Measure the skies, and range the realms above.
 There in one view we grasp the mighty whole,
 Or with new worlds amaze th’ unbounded soul. (*P*, 66)

According to these lines, imagination unbinds and transports us to a higher comprehension of “the mighty whole.” Many of Wheatley’s elegies capitalize on this discourse of flight and ascent, following souls in their transits across oceans and into the heavens. This transporting experience of collectivity was the cultural enterprise Wheatley wanted her white female audiences to believe in and subscribe to, even as she stood before them, a woman bound like so many others whose unfree labor in the households of Boston, as well as in fields, workshops, and factories farther away, subsidized these literary transports.

Wheatley offered her circle of white women readers, auditors, and supporters the idea that emotional transactions referred to the mental function of imagination and conducted with aesthetic distinction could be improving, transporting, and even redeeming. Perhaps a few of her white women supporters were motivated in part by a desire to absolve themselves of and transport themselves away from their own deep implication within the systems of human bondage that capitalized merchant-class success. As Berlant has observed, sentimentalism attempts to absolve its own constitutive contradictions and idealize its own immobilizing ambivalence by projecting conflict onto “an imaginary realm where agency is somehow unconstrained by the normative connections of the real.”⁵⁰ This project of “arranging grief,” as Dana Luciano describes it, served to “enabl[e] minute, enlivening

variations in the becoming of the human subject.”⁵¹ Was that what they wanted, the circle of white merchant-class women who supported Wheatley: some “enlivening variation” in the conduct of their pleasurable but increasingly banal days, some opportunity to identify differently without confronting or upsetting too much the exploitative economic systems from which they drew economic, material, and social benefit, an opportunity to demonstrate feeling in public that won the attention and approval of others?

And what did Wheatley gain from allowing herself to be conscripted into emotional labor, trading consolation for the attentions of well-connected white women? She grew an audience, developed a network of supporters, published a remarkable first book, and engineered her own manumission. It also may be that she was able to demonstrate her own capacity for emotional work, contesting racist eighteenth-century notions of African Americans as a people constitutionally incapable of ascertaining certain forms of a feeling—a people whose “griefs,” as Thomas Jefferson writes, were “transient,” a people who were categorically “impassive” or “dispirited.”⁵² Speaking for the dead, as Paula Bennett notes, allowed Wheatley to construct her poetic authority “*in loco mortui*.”⁵³ Wheatley also constructs a mode of moral authority in her elegies by promoting orthodox protocols of grief management, especially the practice of limiting displays of grief as a sign of one’s accession to the will of God.⁵⁴ As she writes in “A Funeral Poem on the Death of C. E. an Infant of Twelve Months”:

Say, parents, why this unavailing moan?
 Why heave your pensive bosoms with the groan?
 To *Charles*, the happy subject of my song,
 A brighter world, and nobler strains belong. (*P*, 70)

In “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,” Wheatley urges:

Resign thy friends to that Almighty hand,
 Which gave them life, and bow to his command;
 Thine *Avis* give without a murm’ring heart,
 Though half they soul be fated to depart. (*P*, 85)

Wheatley modeled the same mode of grief management in her extremely spare and conscripted references to her own experiences of enslavement, which she invokes only indirectly, so as not to appear

to solicit consolation from her audience. In “To the Right Honourable WILLIAM, Earl of DARTMOUTH,” she references her own losses only to explain “whence [her] love of Freedom sprung”:

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? . . .
 Such, such my case. And can I then but pray
 Others may never feel tyrannic sway? (*P*, 74)

Deflecting attention from her own sense of loss in having been “snatch'd” from her family, she touches briefly on the “sorrows” her parents felt, but only in order to establish a base of feelings for sympathizing with the patriot campaign against the “tyrannic sway” of British governance. As Julie Ellison observes, Wheatley practiced “self-protectiveness in her evasion of the victim's position.”⁵⁵ In so doing, she quietly positioned herself as a model of disciplined grief and a master of control over her own feelings.

But if this sentimental formula allowed Wheatley to transform her own silenced griefs into a model of moral and poetic authority, the formula ultimately failed her, and so did her circle of white women supporters. She continued to write beyond her first book, through the death of John Wheatley on 12 March 1778, her marriage to John Peters on 1 April 1778, and the death of Mary Wheatley Lathrop (John and Susannah Wheatley's daughter) that fall. Even when she fled wartime Boston for Wilmington, Massachusetts, she wrote assiduously. From 1779 to 1784, Wheatley lived in Boston, bearing three children, burying three children, still writing, and still trying to make a living from her poems. From October through December 1779, she published proposals for a second volume of thirty-three poems and thirteen letters in the *Boston Evening Post and General Advertiser* each week. This volume of poems appears to have been carefully designed to transact in the valuable sympathies of her female supporters to an even greater extent than her first: twenty-four of thirty-three proposed poems are elegies or occasional poems such as “To P.N.S. & Lady on the death of their infant Son,” and “To Mrs. W—ms on Anna Eliza.” But her call for subscribers went unfulfilled before her death on 5 December 1784: the set of white women that had once hosted performances, commissioned poems, hand-copied and circulated manuscripts, and sold her first

book withdrew its support. What happened to the women who once found her verses so consoling and transporting? What about those to whom she had dedicated new poems in her second book? Was mourning no longer in fashion? Did elegiac African American poets go out of style? Did Wheatley's manumission, her adulthood, and her marriage place her beyond the realm of permissible associates for middle-class white women? Did the subjects of her encomiums acknowledge the free Phillis Wheatley when they passed her on the street? Or did the abolition of slavery in Massachusetts in 1783, one year before Wheatley's death, increase the pressure to maintain and even renew race-based social boundaries? Did one of her white women supporters promise in an ostensibly well-meaning moment to help place that precious second manuscript, maybe to carry it to a well-connected male relative, and then forget, misplace, or destroy it? How many of the white women whose griefs she memorialized dared to acknowledge, let alone mourn, the extent of Wheatley's losses by enslavement or take action to redress them? How many of the white women she consoled in turn consoled her on the deaths of her children? How many of them gathered to commemorate her when she died? The story of Wheatley and her white female patrons in Boston makes plain the evasions, irresponsibilities, and betrayals at the heart of white sentimentalism and its racialized divisions of emotional labor.



Since its introduction by Gates in 1985, the iconic legend of the "trial of Phillis Wheatley" has been told and retold not only as a legend to the racist thinking of the Enlightenment and modern conditions for knowledge production but also as a paradigm for understanding how race, sex, and gender shape relations of power in the public sphere and in the academy. In 1995, Karla F. C. Holloway compares the "inquisition" of Wheatley to "Professor Anita Hill's testimony before the skeptical members of the United States Senate Judiciary Committee."⁵⁶ Nellie McKay uses the Wheatley trial legend as a framework for exploring the devaluation of African American literature and literary scholarship in her 1998 essay "Naming the Problem That Led to the Question 'Who Shall Teach African-American Literature?'; or, Are We Ready to Disband the Wheatley Court?" Pointing to the dismissal of centuries of writing by gifted African American authors and the protracted struggle to bring African American literature into

institutional teaching and scholarship, McKay writes, “The problems that Wheatley faced before the ‘court’ of eighteen ‘judges’ remained almost unchanged for the next two hundred years.”⁵⁷ Acknowledging and extending McKay’s observations, Russ Castronovo claims in 2005 that “the Wheatley Court”—the underestimation and tokenization of African American authors and scholars—“has continued in one form or another in the syllabi, hiring practices, disciplinary assumptions, and notions of canonization operative within academia.”⁵⁸ It appears that the Gates legend of the “trial of Phillis Wheatley” has drawn at least some of its commanding imaginative power from its resemblance to familiar scenarios of knowledge production and academic professionalization, the experience of the individual mind on trial before a panel of powerful and distinguished judges, and an academic model of individual accomplishment, public proving, and elite authorization as the pathway to publication, as well as the role of gender and race especially in structuring these interactions and opportunities.

My renarrativization of Wheatley’s career is less focused on a tableau of heroic overcoming than on a less triumphant reckoning with the failures of female solidarity that contributed to the failure of her proposed second volume of poems and the disappearance of its manuscript. It is a story that, like Gates’s, suggests strong continuities to contemporary cultural and intellectual conditions. Indeed, it is a story that calls up yet again the long-standing tensions and contradictions embedded in the notion of female solidarity or “sisterhood” as conceptualized by middle-class white women who have called themselves feminists but have been unwilling to confront their complicity with other kinds of inequality structured around race, class, sexuality, and religion. The title of my essay—“Our Phillis, Ourselves”—attempts to acknowledge and indict this history by making reference to the landmark second-wave feminist health text *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (1973), published in Boston, the city that Wheatley and her circle called home. Throughout the compilation of many successive editions of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, the Boston Women’s Health Book Collective struggled to fully incorporate the perspectives of women of color.⁵⁹ Across more than two hundred years of American women’s writing, we see patterns of white women evading confrontation with and interrogation of the structures of racial and economic privilege that valorize their feelings and experiences as normative and deserving of center stage under the pretense of universalizing feelings like sympathy and sisterhood.

What this dynamic cost Wheatley and American poetry has been explored by June Jordan in her essay “The Difficult Miracle of Black Poetry in America: Something Like a Sonnet for Phillis Wheatley,” first published in the *Massachusetts Review* just a few months after Gates’s original writing on the trial of Phillis Wheatley in *Critical Inquiry* in 1985.⁶⁰ Jordan reminds her readers again and again that Wheatley’s poems are the product of extreme tension between genius, consciousness, and unfreedom; this tension is so profound it defies neat articulation, even by a gifted author like Jordan herself. “Was it a nice day? Does it matter?” “It was not natural. And she was the first.” These are the poetic rejoinders Jordan interjects throughout the essay, between narrations of Wheatley’s life and accomplishments, to indict the unnatural contradictions the enslaved poet worked in and through, the silencing of her own thoughts, feelings, and experiences required to extract the interest and support of white female audiences. Jordan writes:

If she, this genius teenager, should, instead of writing verse to comfort a white man upon the death of his wife, or a white woman upon the death of her husband, or verse commemorating weirdly fabled white characters bereft of children diabolically dispersed; if she, instead, composed a poetry to speak her pain, to say her grief, to find her parents, or to stir her people into insurrection, what would we now know about God’s darling girl, that Phillis? Who would publish that poetry, then? But Phillis Miracle, she managed, nonetheless, to write, sometimes, towards the personal truth of her experience.

Jordan too observes the limits of the sentimental formula Wheatley relied on to maintain her circle of supporters. She notes the dissolution of those relationships after Wheatley’s manumission, her twenty-first birthday, the death of Susannah Wheatley, and her marriage to John Peters, and she mourns the unpublished second Wheatley book and its lost manuscript. “From there we would hear from an independent Black woman poet in America,” she writes. Earlier in the essay, Jordan reflects,

This would be the poetry of Phillis the lover of John, Phillis the woman, Phillis the wife of a Black man pragmatically premature in his defiant self-respect, Phillis giving birth to three children, Phillis, the mother, who must bury the three children she delivered into

American life. . . . This would have been the poetry of someone who had chosen herself, free, and brave to be free in a land of slavery.

This Phillis, Jordan concludes, would have been able to “speak the truth of our difficult maturity in an alien place,” the truth of the constraints she worked under, in, and through as an unfree African American woman poet.

If Jordan’s essay powerfully counts the costs to Wheatley and American poetry, my essay will conclude by naming what this sentimental dynamic has cost white women and U.S. literary history. For this new telling of the story of Phillis Wheatley calls up a now old and familiar account of how sentimentality has enabled distractions, displacements, and disavowals that facilitate the aestheticization of victimhood, political incapacity, and irresponsibility among privileged white women. To tell the story of how white women learned to trade the power that comes from consciousness, responsibility, discipline, and vision for the power that comes by winning, indulging, and holding the attentions of others is to break the rules for what has counted and continues to count as polite behavior among middle-class white women. But I am willing to be unsentimental about the inner dynamics of white middle-class women’s privilege if it means working (after the example of Jordan) toward a more accurate and complete accounting of the losses race slavery, its descendants, and its sentimental accomplices have incurred and toward the more “mature,” more “difficult” truths of U.S. literary history. Among the difficult scholarly truths this story reveals is the degree to which the sentimental formulas that structured Wheatley’s opportunities as a poet have embedded deep asymmetries of knowledge at the core of U.S. literary history. For the sentimental literary formulas that allowed the grief of white women to steal the scene while permitting Wheatley to say so little about her own must be counted, finally, like the loss of Wheatley’s second manuscript, as losses to literary history itself, asymmetries that more than two hundred years later scholarship is still learning to identify and scarcely beginning to comprehend.

It is rather desolating to work back through the U.S. literary archive and find the blockages and evasions of white female sentimentality structuring literary history not just from the nineteenth century but from the very beginnings of our literary traditions. And yet confronting the pervasiveness of this sentimental formula is work that still needs to be done. What does it mean when white women cry in pub-

lic? What does it mean when white female sentimentality steals the scene? This is a problem I have been trying to interrogate privately for almost twenty years, ever since I first read Gloria Anzaldúa's introduction to *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Women of Color* (1990). Anzaldúa describes her experiences teaching a "U.S. Women of Color" class at the University of California, Santa Cruz:

When whitewomen or Jewishwomen attempted to subvert the focus from women-of-color's feelings to their own feelings of confusion, helplessness, anger, guilt, fear of change and other insecurities, the women-of-color again and again redirected the focus back to *mujeres-de-color*. When several whitewomen stood up in class and either asked politely, pleaded, or passionately demanded (one had tears streaming down her face) that women-of-color teach them, when whitewomen wanted to engage women-of-color in time-consuming dialogues, *las mujeres-de-color* expressed their hundred years weariness of trying to teach whites about Racism.⁶¹

Reading this passage many times over the years, I have always experienced a mixture of identification, recognition, curiosity, and revulsion toward the white woman with "tears streaming down her face" Anzaldúa describes. I wish I did not encounter her again in the poems of Phillis Wheatley. But Wheatley's poems document to a large extent how through their sentimental scene-stealing her original white female audiences blocked the richer, more powerful story Wheatley might have been able to tell. Consequently, my narrative of Wheatley's career is neither a story of triumph nor an elegy. In the spirit of Berlant's call for a postsentimentality served by the motto "No more running—from nothing,"⁶² I am naming and confronting another instance of the crippling dynamic of white female sentimentality in the hopes it can be put to rest. For its loss I will shed no tears.

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Notes

- 1 Henry Louis Gates Jr., "Writing 'Race' and the Difference It Makes," *Critical Inquiry* 12 (autumn 1985): 7.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 7.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 8.

- 4 Phillis Wheatley, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (London: Archibald Bell, 1773), vii. Unless indicated otherwise, further references to Wheatley's poems are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text as *P*.
- 5 The special issue of *Critical Inquiry* that featured "Writing 'Race' and the Difference It Makes" was republished as *Race, Writing, and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Kwame Anthony Appiah (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1986). Gates's article was also reprinted in Henry Louis Gates Jr., *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992), 43–70. Portions of the original essay were reincorporated in Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie McKay, "From Phillis Wheatley to Toni Morrison: The Flowering of African-American Literature," *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 14 (1996–1997): 95–100. Gates also uses the story of Wheatley under examination as the opening tableau in the essay "In Her Own Write," which first appeared as the foreword to the Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers edition of the *Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, ed. John Shields (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1988), vii–xxii. The piece subsequently reappeared as a foreword to more than twenty titles published in this series.
- 6 See, for example, Frances Smith Foster, *Written by Herself: Literary Production by African American Women, 1746–1892* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1992), 18; Katherine Clay Bassard, *Spiritual Interrogations: Culture, Gender, and Community in Early African-American Women's Writing* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1999), 58; Anne Elizabeth Carroll, *Word, Image, and the New Negro: Representation and Identity in the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 2005), 7; Nandini Bhattacharya, *Slavery, Colonialism, and Connoisseurship* (London: Ashgate, 2006), 142; and Colleen Glenney Boggs, *Transnationalism and American Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 42.
- 7 See Kirstin Wilcox, "The Body into Print: Marketing Phillis Wheatley," *American Literature* 71 (March 1999): 10.
- 8 Frances Smith Foster, "'Hurry Up, Please. It's Time,' Said the White Rabbit as S/he Followed Bre'r Rabbit into the Briar Patch," *Legacy* 2.2 (2007): 329 n. 1.
- 9 Mary McAleer Balkun, "Phillis Wheatley's Construction of Otherness and the Rhetoric of Performed Ideology," *African American Review* 36 (spring 2002): 121; G. Michelle Collins-Sibley, "Who Can Speak? Authority and Authenticity in Olaudah Equiano and Phillis Wheatley," *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 5 (winter 2004): 26.
- 10 Henry Louis Gates Jr., "Mister Jefferson and the Trials of Phillis Wheatley," National Endowment for the Humanities, 2002 Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities, www.neh.gov/whowere/gates/lecture.html (accessed 7 May 2009).

- 11 Henry Louis Gates Jr., "Phillis Wheatley on Trial," *New Yorker*, 20 January 2003, 82.
- 12 Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 5.
- 13 Robin Santos Doak, *Phillis Wheatley: Slave and Poet* (Mankato, Minn.: Compass Point Books, 2006); Catherine Clinton, *Phillis's Big Test* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008).
- 14 It appears that Gates gleaned the date "October 8, 1772" from William Robinson, *Phillis Wheatley and Her Writings* (New York: Garland, 1984). In this book, which is listed in the bibliography for Gates's *Trials of Phillis Wheatley*, Robinson states that the attestation appearing "in *Lloyd's Evening Post and British Chronicle* for September 10–13, 13–15 . . . is dated 'Boston. October 8, 1772'" (29). But this appears to be a typographical error, for a few pages later, Robinson states that the attestation appearing "in *Lloyd's Evening Post and British Chronicle* for September 10–13, 13–15, 1773 is dated 'Boston. Oct. 28, 1772'" (38), and the facsimile reprint of the advertisement included in the same volume clearly shows this date (404–5). Further references to Robinson's book will be cited parenthetically in the text as *W*. See also Mukhtar Ali Isani, "Contemporaneous Reception of Phillis Wheatley: Newspaper and Magazine Notices during the Years of Fame, 1765–1774," *Journal of Negro History* 8 (autumn 2000): 269.
- 15 *Boston News-Letter*, 29 October 1772, 3; *Boston Post-Boy*, 2 November 1772, 3. This meeting and its results are documented in *The Votes and Proceedings of the Freeholders* (Boston: T. and J. Fleet, 1772).
- 16 *Boston News-Letter*, 29 October 1772, 3.
- 17 See Donald Lord and Robert M. Calhoun, "The Removal of the Massachusetts General Court from Boston, 1769–1772," *Journal of American History* 55 (March 1969): 735–55.
- 18 *Votes and Proceedings*, 37.
- 19 *Ibid.*, iii, 1–2.
- 20 John Andrews to William Barrell, 24 February 1773, "Andrews-Eliot Correspondence," Special Collections, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston.
- 21 "Proposals for Printing by Subscription, A Collection of Poems," *Boston Censor* 1, 29 February 1772, 2.
- 22 "LONDON. May 25," *Boston News-Letter* 3490, 23 July 1772, 2. See also notices in the *Boston Post-Boy*, 27 July 1772, 1; *Essex (Mass.) Gazette* 5.210, 28 July 1772–4 August 1772, 1; *Connecticut Courant*, 30 July 1772, 1; and *Connecticut Journal*, 31 July 1772, 1.
- 23 *Essex (Mass.) Gazette* 5.214, 25 August–1 September 1772, 20; *Boston Post-Boy* 784, 31 August 1772, 2; *Boston Post-Boy* 785, 7 September 1772, 2; *Essex (Mass.) Gazette* 5.216, 8 September–15 September 1772, 25; *Boston*

- News-Letter* 3497, 10 September 1772, 1; *Boston Gazette* 911, 21 September 1772, 2.
- 24 Robinson, *Critical Essays*, 20–21; James Rawley, “The World of Phillis Wheatley,” *New England Quarterly* 50 (December 1977): 670.
- 25 The exchange between Calef and Huntingdon is recorded in a letter from Susannah Wheatley to Samson Occom, 29 March 1773, “Samson Occom Papers,” Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford. See also Rawley, “The World,” 675.
- 26 John Andrews to William Barrell, 28 January 1774, “Andrews-Eliot Correspondence,” Special Collections, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston.
- 27 Deborah Cushing to Thomas Cushing, 19 September 1774, “Cushing Family Papers II,” Special Collections, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston.
- 28 Vincent Carretta, introduction to *Complete Works: Phillis Wheatley* (New York: Penguin, 2001), xv. On Boston’s culture of domestic literary performance, see Mary Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak: Women, Education, and Public Life in America’s Republic* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2006); Mary Kelley, “‘A More Glorious Revolution’: Women’s Antebellum Reading Circles and the Pursuit of Public Influence,” *New England Quarterly* 76 (June 2003): 163–96; and Mary Kelley, “Reading Women/Women Reading: The Making of Learned Women in Antebellum America,” *Journal of American History* 83 (September 1996): 401–24.
- 29 *The Poems of Phillis Wheatley*, ed. Julian Mason (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1989), 146 n. 26; Robinson, *Phillis Wheatley and Her Writings*, 381 n. 1.
- 30 Karin Wulf, *Not All Wives: Women of Colonial Philadelphia* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 2000), 45–46.
- 31 In 1970, several manuscript poems by Wheatley were located among the Rush family papers at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, leading librarians to believe that Julia Stockton Rush was one of Wheatley’s patrons; see Robert Kuncio, “Some Unpublished Poems of Phillis Wheatley,” *New England Quarterly* 43 (June 1970): 288 n. 7; see also David Grimstead, “Anglo-American Racism and Phillis Wheatley’s ‘Sable Veil,’ ‘Length’ned Chain,’ and ‘Knitted Heart,’” in *Women in the Age of the American Revolution*, ed. Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1989), 343 n. 12. In the late 1970s, a manuscript copy of the poem “Deism” written in Wheatley’s hand was discovered among the papers of Philadelphia naturalist Pierre Eugene du Simitiere at the Library Company of Philadelphia; see Phil Lapsansky, “‘Deism’: An Unpublished Poem by Phillis Wheatley,” *New England Quarterly* 50 (September 1977): 517–20. On the manuscript circulation culture of Griffitts’s Philadelphia circle, see Catherine La Courreye Blecki and Karin Wulf, *Milcah Martha Moore’s Book: A Commonplace Book from*

- Revolutionary America* (University Park: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1997), especially 25, 28–31; and *Only for the Eye of a Friend: The Poems of Annis Boudinot Stockton*, ed. Carla Mulford (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1995).
- 32 MS 975A, Quaker Collection, Haverford College Library Special Collections. I thank Caroline Wigginton for bringing this to my notice.
 - 33 See Mary Beth Norton, “‘My Resting Reaping Times’: Sarah Osborn’s Defense of Her ‘Unfeminine’ Activities, 1767,” *Signs* 2 (winter 1976): 515–29; Charles Hambrick-Stowe, “The Spiritual Pilgrimage of Sarah Osborn, 1714–1796,” *Church History* 61 (December 1992): 400–421.
 - 34 Phillis Wheatley to Obour Tanner, 30 October 1773, Special Collections, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston.
 - 35 Phillis Wheatley to Obour Tanner, 21 March 1774, Special Collections, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston.
 - 36 Phillis Wheatley to Obour Tanner, 6 May 1774, Special Collections, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston.
 - 37 Phillis Wheatley to Mary Clap Wooster, 15 July 1778, Special Collections, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston.
 - 38 Phillis Wheatley, “On Recollection,” *London Magazine*, March 1772, 134. See also William Robinson, *Phillis Wheatley in the Black American Beginnings* (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1975), 44; William Robinson, *Critical Essays on Phillis Wheatley* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1982), 22; and Isani, “Contemporaneous Reception,” 267.
 - 39 Margaretta Matilda Odell, *Memoir and Poems of Phillis Wheatley, a Native African and a Slave. Dedicated to the Friends of the Africans* (Boston: George W. Light, 1834), 14.
 - 40 *W*, 390 n. 1; Wheatley, *Poems*, ed. Mason, 140 n. 23.
 - 41 On merchant-class expansion and commodity consumption in New England, see T. H. Breen, “‘Baubles of Britain’: The American and Consumer Revolutions of the Eighteenth Century,” *Past and Present* 119 (May 1988): 78. See also E. A. Johnson, “Some Evidence of Mercantilism in the Massachusetts-Bay,” *New England Quarterly* 1 (July 1928): 371–95; T. H. Breen, “An Empire of Goods: The Anglicization of Colonial America, 1690–1776,” *Journal of British Studies* 25 (October 1986): 467–99; T. H. Breen, “Narrative of Commercial Life: Consumption, Ideology, and Community on the Eve of the American Revolution,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 50 (July 1993): 471–501; S. D. Smith, “The Market for Manufactures in the Thirteen Continental Colonies, 1698–1776,” *Economic History Review* 51 (November 1998): 676–708; Mary Louise Roberts, “Gender, Consumption, and Commodity Culture,” *American Historical Review* 103 (June 1998): 817–44; and T. H. Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004). On the socioliterary configurations of mercantilism and commodity cultures, see David S. Shields, *Oracles*

- of Empire: Poetry, Politics, and Commerce in British America, 1690–1750* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1990); and David S. Shields, *Civil Tongues and Polite Letters in British America* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1997), 106–7.
- 42 On the role of emotion and sentiment in late-eighteenth-century U.S. culture, see Marshall Smelser, “The Federalist Period as an Age of Passion,” *American Quarterly* 10 (winter 1958): 391–419; Julia Stern, *The Plight of Feeling: Sympathy and Dissent in the Early American Novel* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1997); Andrew Burstein, *Sentimental Democracy: The Evolution of America’s Romantic Self-Image* (New York: Hill and Wang Press, 1999), 3–21; Julie Ellison, *Cato’s Tears and the Making of Anglo-American Emotion* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1999); Lori Merish, *Sentimental Materialism: Gender, Commodity Culture, and Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 2000); Peter Coviello, “Agonizing Affection: Affect and Nation in Early America,” *Early American Literature* 37.3 (2002): 439–68; Martha Tomhave Blauvelt, *The Work of the Heart: Young Women and Emotion, 1780–1830* (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 2007); and Nicole Eustace, *Passion Is the Gale: Emotion, Power, and the Coming of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2008). On woundedness, grief, and the fashioning of liberal subjectivity, see especially Lauren Berlant, “Poor Eliza,” *American Literature* 70 (September 1998): 635–66; Ellison, *Cato’s Tears*, 1–22; and Coviello, “Agonizing Affection,” 457.
- 43 On sentimentalism and commodity consumerism, see G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1992), 199, 205.
- 44 See, for example, the letter Deborah Cushing wrote to her husband Thomas on 19 September 1774: “I hope there are none of us but should sooner [wrap] themselves in sheps and goats skins than bye English goods of a people that have insulted them in such a scandalous manner” (referenced in n. 27). See also Phyllis Whitman Hunter, *Purchasing Identity in the Atlantic World: Massachusetts Merchants, 1670–1780* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 2001), 147, 151, 159; Rolla Tyron, *Household Manufactures in the United States, 1640–1860* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1917), 106; Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty’s Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750–1800* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1996), 167.
- 45 Eustace, *Passion Is the Gale*, 265; Blauvelt, *Work of the Heart*, 33.
- 46 *Monthly Review* 49, December 1773, 458–59.
- 47 James Baldwin, “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” in *Collected Essays of James Baldwin* (New York: Library of America, 1998), 11–18; Berlant, “Poor Eliza;” Merish, *Sentimental Materialism*, 1–87; Karen Sánchez-Eppler, *Dependent States: The Child’s Part in Nineteenth-Century American Culture* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2005), 101–48.

- 48 John Bullit and Jackson Bates, "Distinctions between Imagination and Fancy in Eighteenth-Century English Criticism," *Modern Language Notes* 60 (January 1945): 8–15.
- 49 Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace, *Consuming Subjects: Women, Shopping, and Business in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1997), 77.
- 50 Berlant, "Poor Eliza," 646.
- 51 Dana Luciano, *Arranging Grief: Sacred Time and the Body in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 2007), 21.
- 52 Eustace, *Passion Is the Gale*, 360; Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, ed. William Peden (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1955), 139. Carolus Linnaeus characterizes "Homo sapiens afer" as "impassive" in the tenth edition of his *Systema Natura* (1758); his racial taxonomy is reprinted in Winthrop Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes towards the Negro* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1968), 220–21.
- 53 Paula Bennett, "Phillis Wheatley's Vocation and the Paradox of the 'Afric Muse,'" *PMLA* 113 (January 1998): 69.
- 54 On eighteenth-century protocols of mourning, see Eustace, *Passion Is the Gale*, 293.
- 55 Ellison, *Cato's Tears*, 114.
- 56 Karla F. C. Holloway, "The Body Politic," in *Subjects and Citizens: Nation, Race, and Gender from Oroonoko to Anita Hill*, ed. Cathy Davidson and Michael Moon (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 1995), 481, 492. Holloway revisits this comparison in her essay "Now We See . . . Face to Face," in *Codes of Conduct: Race, Ethics, and the Color of Our Character* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1996), 21–29.
- 57 Nellie McKay, "Naming the Problem That Led to the Question 'Who Shall Teach African-American Literature?'; or, Are We Ready to Disband the Wheatley Court?" *PMLA* 113 (May 1998): 360. This essay was reprinted in *White Scholars/African-American Texts*, ed. Lisa Long (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2005), 17–26.
- 58 Russ Castronovo, "Theme for African American Literature B," *White Scholars/African American Texts*, ed. Lisa Long (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2005), 32. Ross Posnock also reiterates the image of Wheatley on trial in "How It Feels to Be a Problem: DuBois, Fanon, and the 'Impossible Life' of the Black Intellectual," *Critical Inquiry* 23 (winter 1997): 326; and *Color and Culture, Black Writers and the Making of the Modern Intellectual* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1998), 5. Philip Richards has criticized the mythos making surrounding the imagined Wheatley trial in his essay "Henry Louis Gates, Sterling Brown, and the Professional Languages of African American Literary Criticism," in *Reconstructing History: The Emergence of a New Historical Society*, ed. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese (New York: Routledge, 1999), 128.

- 59 Wendy Kline, "'Please Include This in Your Book': Readers Respond to *Our Bodies, Ourselves*," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 79 (spring 2005): 101-3; Kathy Davis, *The Making of "Our Bodies, Ourselves": How Feminism Travels across Borders* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 2007).
- 60 June Jordan, "The Difficult Miracle of Black Poetry in America; or, Something Like a Sonnet for Phillis Wheatley," *Poetry Foundation Online Journal: Features*, poetryfoundation.org/features/feature.onpoetry.html?id=178504 (accessed 7 May 2009).
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