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THE LITERARY RECEPTION OF THE SPIRITUALITY  
OF PHILLIS WHEATLEY (1753-1784):  
AN AFROSENSITIVE READING

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A Dissertation  
Presented to  
the Faculty of  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

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In Partial Fulfillment  
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Doctor of Philosophy

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by  
Curtis Anthony Woods  
May 2018

**APPROVAL SHEET**

THE LITERARY RECEPTION OF THE SPIRITUALITY  
OF PHILLIS WHEATLEY (1753-1784):  
AN AFROSENSITIVE READING

Curtis Anthony Woods

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John D. Wilsey

Date \_\_\_\_\_

In Memory of  
Napoleon “Nae” Jefferson  
(June 12, 1954 – November 18, 2010)

You were the wind beneath our wings. You gave birth to an amazing woman of God,  
Tracy Yvonne Woods, who consistently points our sons to the love and protection of the  
only Sovereign.

Psalm 127

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## PREFACE

The Lord saved me by His sovereign grace in 1994. I responded to the gospel after several years of deep rebellion against love and beauty. The evil one convinced me that there were certain image-bearers who had an innate desire to stifle the opportunities of African peoples worldwide. My entire family line were direct recipients of individual and institutional racism. I am only three grandfathers removed from slavery. My grandparents experienced a lot of shame growing up in the Jim Crow South—rural eastern Arkansas. My father and mother, like many African Americans in the South, learned survival techniques. They were on constant guard in the naked public square because they knew racial hierarchicalism negatively clothed the majority culture’s mental outlook concerning African American personhood. They still carry the scars of racial trauma.

Racism, sexism, and classism are demonic ideologies that defy the sovereignty of God and distort the *imago Dei*. For many years, professed evangelical Christians allowed these cancerous cells to poison their fellowships. Many used Scripture to perpetuate satanic myths rather than pulverize the serpent’s voice with exegetical skill and theological astuteness. Thus, a bifurcated evangelical church community in America has become our unfortunate reality. This dissertation seeks to honor the legacy of an African diasporic woman whose evangelical theological orientation and commitment to soul force transformed the ways in which an overtly racist society discussed the inherent abilities of African people groups.

I wish to thank my committee members for their help and counsel. Drs. Shawn D. Wright, Michael A. G. Haykin, and John D. Wilsey are true Christian intellectuals who pursue love and good deeds. Dr. Rynetta Davis, English professor at the University

of Kentucky, laid the intellectual foundation for better understanding Phillis Wheatley's literary plight as an enslaved African woman living in colonial New England. I am indebted to her.

I am extremely thankful for all the men and women who have shaped my will and passion for Christ and his church. The women and men who make up the staff at the Kentucky Baptist Convention (KBC) have been great encouragers as I struggled to balance full-time ministerial and academic work. Dr. Paul Chitwood, executive director-treasurer of the KBC, has been a good friend and mentor on many fronts. Words cannot express my gratitude for his servant-leadership in Kentucky and abroad. The professors at Southern Seminary and Boyce College have modeled spiritual friendship from the first day until now. Many have helped me think critically about the intersection of religion, race, class, politics, and gender in the making of American evangelicalism. I also wish to thank Dr. Matt Hall for his friendship, courage, and conviction to lead with integrity of heart and skillfulness of hands (Ps 78:72). Dr. Hall leveraged his institutional privilege to find monies that enabled me to make strides towards financial freedom early in the program.

I thank God for my friends: LaFayette Holland, Russell Whitfield, Kevin Jones, Jonathan Arnold, Steven Harris, Randy Stinson, Joseph Dicks, Jarvis Williams, Ben Maxie, Bernard Snowden, Jamaal Williams, Jimmy Carter, Nathaniel Bishop, and the Seven Chips of a Diamond.

When I became a Christian, the Lord instilled a passion to study hermeneutics, sociology, and African American religious history. He used three men to intensely mentor me towards that end: James Womack, Jackie Flake, and David Smith. They invested countless hours teaching me how to be and make disciples of Jesus Christ. They strengthen my resolve to pursue a mind for truth and a heart for God. We have laughed and lamented together for over two decades.

I would be remiss if I failed to thank my dad, mother, sister, and brother. I am



the youngest child. I have always felt loved by each of my family members. They all protected me from harm on many occasions. My dad has been such a great support. He paid half of my PhD tuition without ever being asked directly. I am humbled to have such a committed father. He modeled strength as a provider.

I want to thank God for our three sons, C. Anthony Woods II, Timothy Ivory Woods, and Tristan Gabriel Woods. I am honored to be your friend and father. You are tender-warriors. Thanks for doing life with me. You all know that we are nothing more than “decorated dust,” so never place your hope in temporary things. Keep your eyes on the eternal hope, Christ Jesus our Lord. He will bring each of you the true delight when you walk with Him. Live before his face with exceeding joy (Ps 16:11)!

I must save the best for last. Tracy Yvonne Woods, bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh. My college girl who has been with me every step of the way. The good, bad, and ugly. You knew me when I was wayward, and you were there to witness my conversion to Christ. God uniquely designed you to complement all my weaknesses. You are the only ONE for me. You serve our family with an indefatigable drive for excellence in ministry. You disciple young ladies in ministry and serve community friends as an academic mentor. Even though you are the smartest person in our home, you take greater delight in helping us develop intellectually, physically, spiritually, and socially (Luke 2:52). You are, and will always be, my greatest mentor, confidant, and best friend. Thank you for making my dreams come true! I am indebted to your love and kindness. Let's stay focused on building a family legacy that loves and fears the Lord (Ps 128).

Curtis Anthony Woods

Louisville, Kentucky

May 2018

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Phillis Wheatley birthed the Afro-American literary tradition.<sup>1</sup> African diasporic evangelicals after Wheatley personified her dissidence as they confronted societal maladies.<sup>2</sup> Wheatley, however, remained unique because she employed a distinctly Augustinian worldview coupled with a revised evangelical understanding of salvation. For example, Wheatley affirmed God’s sovereignty over good and evil, mankind’s need for redemption through the person and work of Jesus Christ, and evangelical activism as a means of grace that liberates both soul and body.<sup>3</sup>

Few evangelical scholars give serious attention to the sociopolitical realities that inform Wheatley’s theological and ethical preoccupations. She was, after all, an enslaved African woman in eighteenth-century colonial New England.<sup>4</sup> John C. Shields, a non-evangelical Wheatley scholar, implies that her narrative has been coopted by thinkers

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<sup>1</sup>Henry Louis Gates, Jr., foreword to *The Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, ed. John C. Shields, Schomburg Library of Nineteenth Century Black Women Writers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), vii.

<sup>2</sup>For more information, see Vincent Carretta, ed., *Unchained Voices: An Anthology of Black Writers in the English-Speaking World of the Eighteenth Century* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1996).

<sup>3</sup>Michael A. G. Haykin rightly understands the implications of grace on public witness. In his *The God Who Draws Near*, Haykin teases out how missions is the fruit of true spirituality, seeking to make disciples who live in communal equality under the Lordship of Christ. See Michael A. G. Haykin, *The God Who Draws Near: An Introduction to Biblical Spirituality* (Webster, NY: Evangelical Press, 2007), 85-93.

<sup>4</sup>See Thabiti Anyabwile, *The Decline of African American Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2007), 100-22. Anyabwile illustrates how an “ethical conclusion” results from a “theological supposition” when he connects social activism and spirituality to the lived experiences of early American black evangelicals (109). Black evangelicals consistently brought the Word of God to bear on societal problems. They refused to embrace the sacred/secular fallacy when doing theology.

with competing agendas. Some present Wheatley as the paragon of incipient feminism; others place Wheatley on an overtly religious plane. Shields disparages both readings because they end up saying more about the commitments of the interpreter than the life and thought of Wheatley. Russell Reising believes African-American literary scholars devalued her work on aesthetic grounds and then rejected it on political grounds in the late 1960s. These scholars pictured Wheatley as an early female example of the Uncle Tomism and accommodationism.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, I maintain that a distinctly theological reading of Wheatley reveals how she fashioned a new form of evangelical protest through an opaque lens of African identity formation. As Shields rightly argues, readers should avoid the conclusion that Wheatley's African mind had been completely eradicated through the stripping process.<sup>6</sup> Instead, Wheatley adopted and later adapted evangelical theology as an instrument of remonstrance that exposed the political and sociological tyranny wrought against African peoples in early America.

Kidnapped at the tender age of six or seven,<sup>7</sup> Wheatley arrived on the shores of New England famished and afraid after a treacherous six-month journey through the dreaded Middle Passage. Upon arrival, Wheatley and her caged cohorts entered a strange new world. Abject poverty and forced labor now characterized their existence as chattel.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Russell Reising, *Loose Ends: Closure and Crisis in the American Social Text* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 73-115.

<sup>6</sup>The "stripping process" refers to the erasing of one's African memory through terroristic threatening, beatings, rapes, and starvation. Slavers used these means to create a demeanor of docility before enslaved Africans were shipped to the colonial Americas. For more information on the significance of the stripping process in the transatlantic slave trade, see Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (New York: Penguin, 2007).

<sup>7</sup>Wheatley's exact origins are debated by scholars. For several years, many historians assumed it was Sengambia based on a memoir written by Margaretta M. Odell in 1838. See Margaretta M. Odell, "Memoir," in *Memoir and Poems of Phillis Wheatley: A Native African and a Slave* (Boston: Mnemosyne, 1969).

<sup>8</sup>Sharla M. Fett rightly articulates the chattel principle as "a principle that defined human beings as movable property in perpetuity through the mother's line of descent." This legal principle

European slavers considered their cargo “black gold” because of the lucrative slave market in colonial America.<sup>9</sup> Slavers and buyers severed African families long before they reached the shame-inducing auction block. Some of these ravished black bodies came with a hefty purse, especially if they were physically endowed. Small pre-pubescent children were less valuable. According to Vincent Carretta, John and Susannah Wheatley purchased the African child as a refuse slave on July 11, 1761.<sup>10</sup> As “refuse,” Wheatley brought little pecuniary value to the seller because of her frailness.<sup>11</sup>

During the auction, Susannah Wheatley laid eyes on the destitute child and, perhaps seeing her troubled lot, made a bid despite the obvious economic disadvantage. Some scholars assume Susannah was attracted to Wheatley because she reminded her of a daughter who had passed away.<sup>12</sup> Wheatley might become a viable replacement for the grieving mother. Once they owned the young girl, the Wheatleys redefined her African identity.<sup>13</sup> First, they renamed the child Phillis, after the schooner that imprisoned her.

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developed to protect the property and distribution rights of Anglo-male masters and overseers who impregnated enslaved African women. In the American political economy enslaved African men had no legal rights to their children. Fett explores how the aforesaid principle profoundly shaped the political economy of African American birth under slavery. Some object that Wheatley, who was trafficked into America as an African captive, does not fit the definition of chattel since she was born on African soil. The other nuance of chattel slavery was the absolute inability for enslaved Africans of any ilk to exercise personal autonomy. See Sharla M. Fett, “Consciousness and Calling: African American Midwives at Work in the Antebellum South,” in *New Studies in the History of American Slavery* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006), 65-86.

<sup>9</sup>For more information on the meaning of “black gold” in early American slave history, see Eddie B. Lane, *The African American Christian Man: Reclaiming the Village* (Dallas: Black Family Press, 2000), 3-12.

<sup>10</sup>Vincent Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 1-2.

<sup>11</sup>For more information, see Lorenzo J. Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England, 1620-1776* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1945), 34-35.

<sup>12</sup>Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley*, 14.

<sup>13</sup>Carretta rightly remarks, “The Wheatleys renamed their little purchase Phillis, after the slave ship that had brought her on the Middle Passage from Africa to America. Being renamed was one of the many acts of deracination suffered by enslaved people of African descent as whites sought to erase their African personal identities and redefine them as property.” Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley*, 14.

Second, they claimed her a household slave until her emancipation.<sup>14</sup> Shortly thereafter, Wheatley was adjudicated chattel, which meant her captors controlled every aspect of her mental and physical being.<sup>15</sup>

At the dawn of the American Revolution, several African diasporic voices combined a distinctly biblical worldview with an activist-oriented call for immediate emancipation of black bodies.<sup>16</sup> Others were more cautious. Wheatley, for example, balanced her veneration for the New Republic and vilification of Great Britain with extreme care. In the spirit of patriotism, which stands in contradistinction to philosophical nationalism, Wheatley called into question the hypocritical foundation of the American political economy. She exposed dual tyrannies against African flesh. Wheatley, on the one hand, chastised colonial oppression wielded at the hands of domestic and international slave traders. On the other hand, she criticized despotic edicts wrought by the British

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<sup>14</sup>For more information on the structural dynamics of the slave economy in pre-European Africa and the American West Indies, see Phillip S. Foner, *History of Black Americans: From Africa to the Emergence of the Cotton Kingdom* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1975), 92-154.

<sup>15</sup>W. E. B. Du Bois explained how the wheels of early American economics rotated on the backs of suffering African peoples. Du Bois argued that semiotics of race and classism in eighteenth-century New England built the American economy. Both the slavers and buyers supported human trafficking in defiance of a distinctly biblical understanding of the *imago Dei*. Children, as Wheatley will subversively indicate, were ripped from their mother's bosom in order to build the American economy. See W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade to the United States of America: 1638-1870* (New York: Longman, Green, and Co., 1904). I also recommend a contemporary history on slavery and American economics by Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2014).

<sup>16</sup>Evangelicalism supersedes race, class, and gender. Evangelicals have pursued justice on many fronts. African diasporic evangelicals, for example, rebut the myth that evangelicals were on the wrong side of slave history. Most critics do not realize their categorical error when such ideas are espoused. They envision evangelicalism in terms of the dominant "racial" class as opposed to theological orientation. Thus, scholars who criticize early American evangelicalism as virtually absent from social activism unwittingly commingle evangelicalism with a constituent part. These scholars fail to separate evangelicalism, the revival movement, from its predominantly Caucasian constituency. David Bebbington's quadrilateral provides a helpful redirection. Bebbington unearths the essential ingredients of evangelicalism without emphasizing race, ethnicity, social class, or gender. In so doing, Bebbington's taxonomy broadens the narrational contours of American evangelicalism. See David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to 1980s* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 13-16. Rita Roberts, for example, employs Bebbington's quadrilateral saying, "[Bebbington] is critical for understanding the Northern black reception and redefinition of Christianity." Rita Roberts, *Evangelicalism and the Politics of Reform in Northern Black Thought 1776-1863* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 2010), 43.

Crown and Parliament. Wheatley harnessed her intellectual prowess into rhetorical dexterity, knowing that every word spoken would find harsh criticism from those who were opponents of freedom.

Wheatley believed a proper reading of Scripture, undergirded by evangelical theology, catapulted one into the fray of cultural confusion. In Wheatley's world, Anglo imperialism was the most debilitating conundrum. Sylvester Johnson rightly explains that racial hierarchicalism moved chattel slavery forward.<sup>17</sup> Chattel slavery could not progress without the inherent belief of white supremacy and black inferiority in the minds of many evangelicals. Christianity, therefore, did not mitigate Wheatley's marginalization. And yet, despite the ubiquitously false examples of piety accosting Wheatley's lived experience, God's "frowning providence hid a smiling face" because Wheatley affirmed true Christianity.

Wheatley's socioeconomic plight is impossible for contemporary readers to comprehend without a rudimentary background in eighteenth-century mercantilism.<sup>18</sup> The colonial British-American economy thrived on imports and exports. Economists and historians illustrate how human chattel became a profitable market, appealing to the affinities of financially stable British-American families. These families purchased image-bearers who possessed absolutely no rights to life, liberty, and economic autonomy.<sup>19</sup> As readers of this dissertation will discover, the veil of economic oppression covered free people of color as well. And yet, undergirded by her evangelical and

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<sup>17</sup>Sylvester A. Johnson, *African American Religions, 1500-2000* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 13-55; see also, Walter Johnson, "The Pedestal and the Veil: Rethinking the Capitalism/Slavery Question," *Journal of the Early Republic* 24 (Summer 2004): 299-308.

<sup>18</sup>Greene, *Negro in Colonial New England*; Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

<sup>19</sup>The term "economic autonomy" accurately describes the meaning of "pursuit of happiness" in the New Republic. British-American citizens had freedom to make wealth for their progeny through land ownership whereas enslaved Africans lacked access to the free market since they were a marketable item (i.e., goods and services).

Calvinist worldview, Wheatley affirmed God's good providence in the shadow of this double-edged inferiority. In other words, Wheatley uncharacteristically acknowledged the mercy of God in bringing forth salvation through an instrument as horrific as the transatlantic slave trade.<sup>20</sup> Slavers envisioned Wheatley as meaningless cargo; but God, by his sovereign grace, lavished his love upon Wheatley as she states, making "[my] benighted soul to understand that there's a God, that there's Saviour too: Once I redemption neither sought, nor knew."<sup>21</sup>

## Thesis

Phillis Wheatley (1753–1784) embodied the theological and ethical preoccupations of an afrosensitive evangelical activist.<sup>22</sup> In colonial New England,

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<sup>20</sup>Wheatley was arguably a product of New Divinity ideas concerning slavery and providence even though she tempered their conclusions. In New Divinity anthropology and providence, according to John Saillant, proponents like "Samuel Hopkins, Levi Hart, and Jonathan Edwards, Jr., came to the conclusion that God had designed the enslavement of black men and women as a means of Christianizing 'Ethiopia' through expatriation of converted black Americans to Africa." John Saillant, "Slavery and Divine Providence in New England Calvinism: The New Divinity and Black Protest, 1775-1805," *New England Quarterly* 68, no. 4 (December 1995): 584-608. Wheatley repudiates the use of slavery for missional purposes when kidnapping and destruction of African civilization contradicts biblical Christianity.

<sup>21</sup>All poetry and prose for this dissertation will be adapted from *Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*. I retain original spellings and capitalizations. *Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, 18.

<sup>22</sup>The term "afrosensitive" reconceptualizes the theoretical formation of Afrocentrism. Afrosensitivity is an epistemological approach to African historiographical research. For more information on how to explain effectively the history of African peoples in continental and diasporic Africa, see Lerone Bennett, Jr., *Before the Mayflower: A History of Black America*, 8th ed. (Chicago: Johnson Pub., 2007), 3-52. Molefi Kete Asante popularized Afrology or Afrocentricity as "the Afrocentric study of African concepts, issues, and behaviors with particular bases in the African world, diasporan and continental." Molefi Kete Asante, *Afrocentricity* (Trenton, NJ: African World, 1988), 58. Winston Van Horne coined Afrology as "a more fluent term to describe the discipline" according to Asante. Van Horne employs Afrology as "transgenerational and transcontinental Afrocentric study of African phenomena," says Asante. Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987). Afrocentrists, therefore, believe African peoples are more qualified to study issues that face them on account of their presuppositional commitment to African agency. See Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*; Lucius Outlaw, "Critical Prelude: The Afrology Project and Normative Theory," in *African American Studies Reader*, ed. Nathaniel Norman, Jr. (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic, 2001), 550. In dialogue with Asante, I offer afrosensitivity to communicate a slightly different nuance. Afrosensitive hermeneutics involves reading African diasporic literature in its own voice without submitting biblical theology to personal experience. Afrosensitivity, unlike Afrocentricity, shows respect to the African perspective without enslaving one's hermeneutic to African agency. In so doing, Afrosensitivity avoids evaluating other worldviews on the basis of African agency but rather places all worldviews under Scripture. Wheatley

Wheatley rejected false notions of African inferiority and championed true patriotism despite her location as an enslaved African diasporic female. Prior to her emancipation, Wheatley used subversive poetic devices to protest the transatlantic slave trade and colonial slavery.<sup>23</sup> Wheatley's literary corpus challenged the pervasive racial hierarchicalism in British-America.<sup>24</sup> Few British-American evangelicals in eighteenth-century New England vied for the holistic liberation of enslaved African peoples.<sup>25</sup> Since few voices outside the black community contended for the ontological equality of African peoples, some blacks defended their own cause against pseudo-theological categories of race and personhood by any means necessary. Wheatley opposed the devilish *zeitgeist* of colonial New England racism through evangelical activism.<sup>26</sup>

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unequivocally affirmed a distinctly Christian worldview even though she utilized non-Christian poetic sages and Africanisms in her writings. John C. Shields, arguably the foremost scholar on Wheatley, would disagree with my assertion. Shields believes many students of Wheatley coopted her narrative to advance an agenda. She became a pawn in some socio-anthropological argument aimed at constructing a defensive or offensive front for or against racism. For more information, see John C. Shields, *Phillis Wheatley's Poetics of Liberation: Backgrounds and Contexts* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 2008), 1-42.

<sup>23</sup>See Shields, *Phillis Wheatley's Poetics of Liberation*, 97-123; John C. Shields, "Phillis Wheatley's Subversion of Classical Stylistics," *African-American Poetics Style* 27, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 252-70; John C. Shields, "Phillis Wheatley's Subversive Pastoral," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 27, no. 4 (Summer 1994): 631-47.

<sup>24</sup>Wheatley's letter to Samson Occom, a Mohegan minister and family friend, written February 11, 1774, was a frontal attack on American slavery. Wheatley no longer used subversive speech once she was manumitted. See, for example, *Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, 176-77; Phillis Wheatley, "Letter to the Rev. Samson Occom, February 11, 1774," in *American Antislavery Writings: Colonial Beginnings to Emancipation*, ed. James G. Basker (New York: Library of America, 2012), 56.

<sup>25</sup>The phrase "African peoples" will arise at critical junctures throughout this dissertation, referring to both continental and diasporic Africans who reside primarily in the United States. The African diaspora refers to the forced dispersion of African peoples across the globe during the transatlantic slave trade. For more information, see Peter J. Paris, *The Spirituality of African Peoples: The Search for Common Moral Discourse* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995).

<sup>26</sup>See Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of Afro-American People* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1983); James H. Evans, Jr., *We Have Been Believers: An African American Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992); Patrick Bascio, *The Failure of White Theology: A Black Theological Perspective* (New York: Peter Lang, 1994); Anthony T. Evans, *Are Blacks Spiritually Inferior to Whites: The Dispelling of An American Myth* (Wenonah, NJ: Renaissance Productions, 1992); Christopher Cameron, *To Plead Our Own Cause: African American in Massachusetts and the Making of the Antislavery Movement* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2014).



The main purpose of this dissertation is to answer the question: what is the meaning of afrosensitive evangelical spirituality? Other questions will also be considered: First, what role did double-consciousness and double-voicedness play in Wheatley's spirituality? Second, what biblical-theological factors encourage an ethical use of duplicity to expose evil and sustain life? Third, what impact did colonial slavery and evangelical theology have on Wheatley's politics of reform?<sup>27</sup>

This dissertation analyzes certain aspects of Wheatley's writings to determine the extent of her social activism to expand the literary scope of evangelical spirituality. John Shields thinks scholarship on Phillis Wheatley progresses in two directions. One stream is a "socioanthropological argument whose tenets justified or challenged the grievously erroneous notion of racial supremacy."<sup>28</sup> A second stream focuses on Wheatley as an eighteenth-century black who succumbed to white supremacy to survive. Shields, however, believes Wheatley's voracious consumption of works by eighteenth-century British and American poets shaped her unique voice.<sup>29</sup> Hence, he rightly argues for Wheatley's subtle confrontation of the slave system through veiled protest.<sup>30</sup> With

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<sup>27</sup>I borrow the "politics of reform" from Rita Roberts, who serves as Nathaniel Wright Stephenson Chair in History and Biography as well as professor of History and Africana Studies at Scripps College, Claremont, CA. Roberts wrote a provocative work on the political thought and social activism of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century black evangelicals. See Roberts, *Evangelicalism and the Politics of Reform in Northern Black Thought*.

<sup>28</sup>Shields, *Phillis Wheatley's Poetics of Liberation*, xxvii.

<sup>29</sup>Shields, *Phillis Wheatley's Poetics of Liberation*, xxix.

<sup>30</sup>Wheatley embodies the theological and ethical preoccupations of an afrosensitive evangelical activist. Within her literary corpus, Wheatley critiques false views of God and mankind through a sophisticated use of evangelical theology and neoclassical poetic devices. The sociopolitical yoke of New England patriarchalism engenders double-consciousness in the lives of many oppressed African peoples. Wheatley understands the contradictory status of person and property, seeking personal liberation through a subversively prophetic pen. Wheatley's captors, like most New England slave owners, balanced a form of kindness with exploitation. Wheatley's brilliance brought socialites from near and far to observe her uncanny penchant for the European classics and English Bible. Wheatley scholars, like Shields, rightly rebut the idea of New England sentimentalism and the good master appellation from the perspective of the enslaved. Shields thinks the most benevolent act for captives would be emancipation and socioeconomic assistance in the New World. Wheatley, unfortunately, remained a captive until her early twenties. This dissertation seeks to understand Wheatley's adherence to evangelical spirituality by analyzing her poetry and prose. My analysis is concerned primarily with how African enslavement and evangelical theology

afrosensitive poetic skill, Wheatley created a dialectic between neoclassicism and political philosophy as she championed the rights of her enslaved kindred.

### *Status Quaestionis of Wheatley Research*

One need only visit Washington University's online Phillis Wheatley bibliography to peruse the cornucopia of articles and monographs dedicated to her life and thought.<sup>31</sup> Despite her acclaim as a literary phenomenon in early American history, few evangelical historians have given Wheatley's contributions to evangelical thought any serious consideration.<sup>32</sup> When one travels outside the evangelical guild, however, Wheatley's intellectual heft is evident within broader academic conversations.<sup>33</sup> Shields says, "So frequent has been her [Wheatley's] appearance in critical discourse of this period [twentieth-century literary criticism] that we may declare Wheatley Studies have become a vogue."<sup>34</sup> Margaretta Odell penned the first memoir of Wheatley in 1837.<sup>35</sup> Odell wrote her biography based on questionable testimonies from distant relatives. Odell, according to Honoree Fanonne Jeffers, was a "collateral descendant" of Susanna

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coalesced to create afrosensitive activism as a form of subversive protest. Wheatley speaks against hypocrisy in American revolutionary rhetoric. She avoids demarcating spiritual and social inferences of the gospel. African diasporic evangelicals in the eighteenth century wedded evangelism and social justice. They championed the idea of saving the soul *and* delivering the body from unjust laws.

<sup>31</sup>See "Phillis Wheatley: Selected Bibliography," Washington State University, last modified December 30, 2012, accessed March 4, 2016, <http://public.wsu.edu/~campbell/amlit/wheatbib.htm>.

<sup>32</sup>For a concise literature review on the ways in which critics deemed Wheatley "intellectually impoverished for the first 190 years," see Shields, *Phillis Wheatley's Poetics of Liberation*, 43-96.

<sup>33</sup>See, for example, Arlette Frund, "Phillis Wheatley, a Public Intellectual," in *Toward an Intellectual History of Black Women*, ed. Mia Bay et al. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 35-52.

<sup>34</sup>Shields, *Phillis Wheatley's Poetics of Liberation*, 71.

<sup>35</sup>See Honoree Fanonne Jeffers, "'The Dead Pledges of Our Love': A Defense of Phillis Wheatley's Husband," in *The Fire This Time: A New Generation Speaks about Race*, ed. Jesmyn Ware (New York: Scribner, 2016), 63-82. I am indebted to Michael A. G. Haykin for making me aware of this timely essay. Margaretta Matilda Odell was a sentimental assimilationist, not an antiracist. She had a low view of blacks in general, appealing to the sentimental tradition of the nineteenth century. I will discuss New England sentimentalism in chap. 3.

Wheatley.<sup>36</sup> Jeffers explains that much of what we currently know about Wheatley was extracted from Odell's nineteenth-century biography "published fifty years after the poet's death."<sup>37</sup> Jeffers's essay goes against the grain of foundational Wheatley scholarship by questioning the legitimacy of Odell's historiography.

Most historians simply assumed Odell was correct. Jeffers, however, performed critical archival research at the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts, where she discovered some missing elements in Wheatley's life and thought. In so doing, Jeffers was aghast at what little evidence corroborated Odell's depictions of both Wheatley's childhood and her marriage to John Peters. This led Jeffers to conclude that our understanding of Wheatley could very well be firmly planted in midair, a result of "Odell's imaginary reflection." Nevertheless, as the nineteenth century's self-proclaimed authority on Wheatley, Odell offers at least one recognizable truth. Carretta describes Odell as the "great grandniece of Susanna Wheatley," which means she had a vested interest in protecting the testimony of her deceased relatives. This explains why she pictured John and Susanna's relationship with Wheatley in hagiographic as well as paternalistic terms. Most Wheatley scholars have since leaned heavily on Odell's perspective.

Because of Odell's work, subsequent scholars viewed Wheatley through the lens of New England Sentimentalism.<sup>38</sup> In other words, they viewed some slave owners as benevolent, not brutish. Benevolent owners, as the reasoning goes, treated their enslaved Africans with dignity, which invited later scholars to question chattel slavery's inherent contradiction of benevolence and bondage. In 1919, Gloster Herbert Renfro

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<sup>36</sup>Jeffers, *The Dead Pledges of Our Love*, 72.

<sup>37</sup>Jeffers, *The Dead Pledges of Our Love*, 72.

<sup>38</sup>For more information on New England Sentimentalism, see Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780-1860* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 26-31.

reasoned *against* sentimentalism by painting a vivid picture of the dreaded Middle Passage. To describe Wheatley's saga, Renfro employed words and phrases like "kidnapping," "dragged from her land," "mother was bereft," and "unhealthy and repulsive slave ship."<sup>39</sup> This illustrated the inhumanity of slave-market capitalism.<sup>40</sup> Its supply-demand managerial system, as James Melvin Washington explains, incubated the ongoing legacy of frustrated fellowship between African diasporic and Anglo-American evangelicals—from the late eighteenth century all the way to the eve of the latter-day Civil Rights Movement in 1965.<sup>41</sup>

In 1966, Julian Mason lamented that Wheatley was "too often overlooked, particularly by our contemporary literary historians and anthologizers of American literature."<sup>42</sup> Mason was generally good-natured towards Wheatley's oeuvre even though he felt she "was not a great poet."<sup>43</sup> Mason poorly judged Wheatley's poetry in comparison to her European poetical counterparts, and failed to evaluate how Wheatley's environment or lived experience shaped her writings. Sociologists label this evaluative process an "ecological perspective." We cannot disregard how one's biography shapes one's theology and social concerns.<sup>44</sup> This seems to be Mason's categorical error in

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<sup>39</sup>Gloster Herbert Renfro, ed., *Life and Works of Phillis Wheatley* (1916; repr., Miami: Mnemosyne, 1969).

<sup>40</sup>For more information on a comprehensive view of slavery in early American history, see David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1966); Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975); Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>41</sup>See James Melvin Washington, *Frustrated Fellowship: The Black Baptist Quest for Social Power* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986). In this work, Washington retells the historic relationship between black and white Baptists in both the antebellum and post-antebellum eras of American history. He illustrates how being a Baptist in theological identity did not produce Christian covenantal solidarity.

<sup>42</sup>Julian D. Mason, *The Poems of Phillis Wheatley* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1966), xi.

<sup>43</sup>Mason, *Poems of Phillis Wheatley*, xx-xxi.

<sup>44</sup>I borrow this phrase from an insightful article written by Greg Alan Thornbury titled "When

interpreting Wheatley's poetry and prose. He lacked the appropriate tools to engage Wheatley from an afrosensitive starting place, imbibing the cultural belief that nothing great finds its genesis in Africa. When Mason does give his modicum of laudation to Wheatley, it is because he says, "[Wheatley had] a favor for and a remarkable spontaneous ability to re-create the neoclassical poetic mode of Alexander Pope and his followers, in diction, meter, rhyme, and syntax."<sup>45</sup> In other words, Wheatley lacked imagination; she was capable only of imitation. This criticism, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. elucidates, comprised a customary attack against Wheatley's writings from academics on both sides of the Atlantic, from the eighteenth to the late-twentieth century.<sup>46</sup> Shields exposes the potential racist and sexist beliefs behind the many Anglo-American male scholars who repudiated Wheatley's poetics without ever "examin[ing] one of Wheatley's poems."<sup>47</sup>

Much of the major scholarship on Wheatley prior to the 1970s tended to sedate Wheatley's African memory. Many expressed admiration for her ability to combine Christian religion with neoclassicism.<sup>48</sup> Others, like Shields, countered the

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Biography Shapes Theology." Thornbury rightly explains that one's socio-cultural background greatly shapes one's theological commitments, saying, "The more I read the history of philosophy and theology, the more I become convinced that biography has a disproportionate—but all too often unacknowledged—effect on an individual's worldview." Greg Alan Thornbury, "When Biography Shapes Theology," *The Gospel Coalition Blog*, November 7, 2012, accessed April 14, 2014, <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/tgc/2012/11/07/when-biography-shapes-theology/>. In similar fashion, Anyabwile compares the life of two eighteenth-century theological juggernauts, Jonathan Edwards and Lemuel Haynes. Anyabwile, who holds professional degrees in community psychology, explicates the nexus between an ecological perspective in psychology and the shaping of Haynes's theological identity. Thabiti Anyabwile, Girardeau lectures, First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, South Carolina, accessed April 11, 2014, <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/thabitianyabwile/2014/03/04why-did-edwards-miss-it-and-haynes-get-it/>;

<sup>45</sup>Mason, *Poems of Phillis Wheatley*, xxii.

<sup>46</sup>For more information on the attacks against Wheatley poetry, prose, and personhood, see Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley: America's First Black Poet and Her Encounters with the Founding Fathers* (New York: Basic Books, 2003).

<sup>47</sup>Shields, *Phillis Wheatley Poetics of Liberation*, 58.

<sup>48</sup>See John C. Shields, "Phillis Wheatley's Use of Classicism," *American Literature: A Journal of Literary History, Criticism, and Bibliography* 52, no. 1 (1980): 97-111; Albertha Sistrunk, "The Influence of Alexander Pope on the Writing Style of Phillis Wheatley," in *Critical Essays on American*

aforementioned view with an appeal to intertextuality, because Wheatley possibly incorporated subtle Africanisms from a distant memory.<sup>49</sup> Carretta penned the only full-length biography on Wheatley to date in which he corrects hagiographical interpretations.<sup>50</sup> He notes that most scholarship on Wheatley's African past is speculative at best, and therefore cautions readers to avoid reading current understandings of African identity formation into what could very well be an idealized vision.<sup>51</sup>

These works will become significant dialogue partners throughout this dissertation. My hope is to set a new course for a theological reading of Wheatley as an enslaved African diasporic woman. I hope to do so through an afrosensitive and evangelical framework in order to better understand race, class, and gender in eighteenth-century New England.

### **Methodology**

To expand the intellectual scope of biblical spirituality with respect to race, class, and gender, I will examine Wheatley's writings and consider her social location to better elucidate the theological concerns of an afrosensitive evangelical activist. In much of her poetry, Wheatley employed an Augustinian view of anthropology, soteriology, providence, and theodicy. This project aims to demonstrate the relationship between racial hierarchicalism, Augustinian thought, and evangelical activism. In so doing, readers will discover Wheatley's unique contribution to African-American intellectual history in general and biblical spirituality in particular; they will also learn to interpret more wisely other eighteenth-century African diasporic evangelicals. Finally, readers will

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*Literature*, ed. William H. Robinson (Boston: Hall, 1982); Eric Slauter, "Neoclassical Culture in a Society with Slaves: Race and Rights in the Age of Wheatley," *Early American Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 2, no. 1 (2004): 81-122.

<sup>49</sup>Shields, *Phillis Wheatley's Poetics of Liberation*, 97-123.

<sup>50</sup>Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley*, 172-96.

<sup>51</sup>Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley*, 151-52.

appropriate African cultural agency, rather than eurocentrism, as a lens through which to understand African sources in colonial America.

As previously mentioned, Wheatley has been criticized by scholars on both sides of the Atlantic. Most criticisms commit the fallacy of presentism—that is, reading contemporary ethical understandings into a past narrative. As such, Wheatley is demeaned by African-American scholars, according to Gates, as early as the late nineteenth century.<sup>52</sup> By the late twentieth century, she is repudiated by scholars within Africological literary criticism. This is unfortunate, because Wheatley’s abolitionist intellectualism will be more readily appreciated when readers consider her status—race, class, and gender—in early American history. I will, therefore, employ principles of critical race theory to guide the conversation.

For this dissertation, Wheatley’s *Poems on Various Subjects Religious and Moral* will serve as the primary source material. In it, readers will find extant poems and prose produced by Wheatley.<sup>53</sup> Her poetry reveals much about the political atmosphere in revolutionary America, offering an example of how some enslaved Africans employed the semiotics of subversive speech as a form of protest. Jared Hardesty believes Wheatley exemplified the ability to master the captor’s language to subtly promote individual and corporate freedom: “Phillis Wheatley was brilliant at this, carefully imitating both contemporary and ancient European poets in structure, while using her poetry to gently chastise white readers and express her own opinions.”<sup>54</sup> Once Wheatley has been manumitted, readers will discover more explicit repudiations of the slave system.

The dissertation will interact with evangelical thought in the eighteenth

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<sup>52</sup>Gates, *Trials of Phillis Wheatley*, 68-89.

<sup>53</sup>*Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, 9-227; Phillis Wheatley, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (London: A. Bell, 1776).

<sup>54</sup>Jared Ross Hardesty, “Mastering the Master’s Language,” *African American Intellectual History Blog*, December 22, 2015, accessed March 12, 2016, <http://www.aaihs.org/mastering-the-masters-language/>.

century, biblical and Augustinian theology, African American literary criticism, and critical race theory. The goal is to chart a new course for reading Wheatley's spirituality from an Afrosensitive evangelical perspective. Wheatley incorporated both piety and protest without allowing the latter to obliterate the former. Take, for example, her aforementioned poem "On Being Brought from Africa to America," in which she reflects on God's ability to shape character amid the horrific ordeal of child kidnapping and trafficking from her native land. For Wheatley, America was not the land of the free nor home the brave; it instead became the chains that held her genius in bondage.<sup>55</sup> This is why Wheatley placed her hope on a better country, even as she challenged the hypocrisy of the fledgling American empire.

### **Personal Background**

I began my journey toward formal theological training at Dallas Theological Seminary in the spring of 2001. As a student, I often lamented the absence of African diasporic and continental voices in the curriculum. I rarely, if ever, received a syllabus with assigned readings by non-Caucasian scholars. This intellectual chasm in my theological development caused me to wonder if black evangelicals in early American history were only an elusive dream.

Several years later, I entered Southern Seminary for doctoral studies in biblical spirituality with an emphasis in church history. Once again, I experienced similar angst when the exemplars of evangelical spirituality, by and large, were Caucasian men. So instead of complaining about the paucity of people of color in the discipline, I decided to embark on the road less traveled—at least for many evangelicals. This academic path involved locating and explicating spiritual stories of African diasporic evangelicals. No longer could I wait for those within the field of evangelical spirituality to champion the

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<sup>55</sup>Ignatius Sancho, one of Wheatley's contemporary poets of African descent, knighted her a "genius in bondage." I discuss Sancho's laudation of Wheatley in chap. 2.



historic cause of African diasporic thinkers. I accepted the responsibility to plead my own cause.

James Gordon, for example, writes a thoughtful treatise on evangelical spirituality but includes no significant voices from the African-American religious experience. Unfortunately, this historical approach seems normative within the field.<sup>56</sup> Such short-sightedness lends weight to the idea that evangelical spirituality tacitly bolsters both racial hierarchicalism and Anglo-male hegemony. Critics typically chastise the “white gaze” found in evangelical literature.<sup>57</sup> For example, Frantz Fanon believed eurocentrism declared itself the transcendent overseer by subordinating alternative epistemologies.<sup>58</sup>

As an evangelical, I affirm the conceptual category of transcendence, but only when God is the agent. In this regard, Fanon correctly argues that eurocentrism distorts truth by embracing fictive constructions. As a humanist intellectual, however, he offers a befuddling analysis. He critiques Eurocentrism by employing humanism, which is arguably a subvariant ideology of the eurocentrism he seeks to upend. It is important to

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<sup>56</sup>James M. Gordon, *Evangelical Spirituality* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1991). For other examples of treatises on Christian, Reformed, or Evangelical spirituality that overlook African-American narratives, see Joel R. Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality: A Practical Theological Study from Our Reformed and Puritan Heritage* (Webster, NY: Evangelical Press, 2006); Evan B. Howard, *The Brazos Introduction to Christian Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008); Kenneth Boa, *Conformed to His Image: Biblical and Practical Approaches to Spiritual Formation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001); Bruce Demarest, *Four Views on Christian Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012); Timothy George and Alister McGrath, eds., *For All the Saints: Evangelical Theology and Christian Spirituality* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003); Urban T. Holmes III, *A History of Christian Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008); McGrath makes a passing mention of Martin Luther King’s use of biblical themes to emphasize spirituality in both social and political terms. See Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 78. Moreover, Richard Lovelace unwittingly dismissed Phillis Wheatley, Jupiter Hammon, Hannah More, and Lemuel Haynes, saying, “There were no Evangelical poets and novelists of major stature.” Richard F. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1979), 344-45.

<sup>57</sup>See, for example, Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Pragmatic Spirituality: The Christian Faith through an Africentric Lens* (New York: New York University Press, 2004); Kwame Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa: History and Experience* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004); Bediako, *Theology and Identity* (Oxford: Regnum, 1992); Flora Wilson Bridges, *Resurrection Song: African-American Spirituality* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001).

<sup>58</sup>Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grover, 1952).

note that the African-centered worldview disparages the humanist manifesto of both pragmatic individualism and rugged antisupernaturalism. For Christians, humanism distorts the *imago Dei* by divorcing image from its progenitor, God. Though Fanon's criticism against eurocentrism is correct, his humanistic solutions emanate from a eurocentric mind. In the end, both ideological constructs are found wanting.

To build a framework for doing afrosensitive evangelical spirituality, I will invoke, critique, and reinterpret the voices of the African diaspora through a biblically-informed lens. The more I read eighteenth-century African diasporic evangelicals like Wheatley, the clearer my path becomes.

### **Wheatley's Life and Cultural Context**

Phillis Wheatley was born free. She did not enter human history under the yoke of American slavery. She was kidnapped from her loving father and mother in Africa. As this dissertation demonstrates, contemporary readers are not without evidence that Wheatley's biological parents loved her well. One can only assume that her parents longed for their stolen child all the days of their lives.

Wheatley was born in Sengambia, West Africa, which is the area between modern-day Senegal and Gambia.<sup>59</sup> According to Carretta, "The Sengambia region was the primary source for the British transatlantic slave trade during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries because of its geographic proximity to Europe and the British American colonies."<sup>60</sup> The French and British fought long and hard to establish control over that region since it was the ideal location for shipping their goods and services through a mass distribution system.<sup>61</sup> Chained bodies and captured souls became the invaluable commodity for the warring nation's economic wellness.

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<sup>59</sup>Shields, *Phillis Wheatley's Poetics of Liberation*, 97-104.

<sup>60</sup>Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley*, 5.

<sup>61</sup>Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley*, 5.

The birth name of the enslaved female child who arrived in the Boston Harbor on the slave ship, *Phillis*, is unknown; she entered America draped in a dirty rug covering her physically emaciated frame on July 11, 1761. The cargo manifest for enslaved Africans lacked personal names, countries, or families of origin to create an ancestral narrative of dignity. Unlike many European immigrants who arrived to the New World with their familial heritage intact, race, gender, and class—black, female, slave—defined Phillis Wheatley. She remained in slave distribution cells for three weeks before being purchased by a wealthy merchant named John Wheatley who desired a bargain on an enslaved child for his wife, Susannah. Within God’s providence, he happened upon the disheveled child, offering a trifle payment to the seller before sealing her potentially perpetual fate. This sale made Wheatley something less than human in the early American political economy. She was ripped away from African communal personhood and interdependent dignity. Wheatley became chattel. In 1761, Boston, Massachusetts, was far from being a bustling metropolis. The population scale tipped a “little over fifteen thousand people” and “barely eight hundred of them were of African descent,” with twenty free blacks on record, explains Carretta.<sup>62</sup>

Revolutionary Boston expressed growing animus towards the British Crown. One could say that colonial Boston had a split personality insofar as one side of the Anglo-American population favored the King and Parliament while another group disdained the very nature of British rule, labeling the monarchy and magistrates tyrannical. Loyalists collided on a daily basis with patriots during the Revolutionary War era. Citizens volleyed political insults to stir the pot of dissension. Bostonians on the political fringes modeled pragmatic patriotism when said adulation was convenient; which is to say, whichever side increased their economic aspirations had their allegiance. As the years progressed, British-American political leaders began to question the

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<sup>62</sup>Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley*, 1.

covenantal commitments of the mother country towards colonial prosperity. These colonial elites convinced common people that Mother had forsaken her child, taxing her without properly caring for or representing the budding colonies.

In New England, many of these religio-political warriors drew their greatest swords behind the pulpit as well as in print media. Thus, Wheatley was arguably exposed to political rhetoric each time her Congregationalist minister stood behind the sacred desk to declare the unadulterated word of the Lord. Carretta rightly locates the religious climate of Wheatley's day saying that she came to Boston "during the transatlantic Great Awakening, which stressed conversion through spiritual rebirth and acceptance of Jesus Christ as a personal savior."<sup>63</sup> From an early age, Wheatley began to drink deeply from the well of evangelical theology and ethics. As I will argue in this dissertation, Wheatley embodied the theological and ethical preoccupations of an African diasporic evangelical activist in her poetry and prose, even though I will make my case primarily examining Wheatley's verse while pointing readers to letters that bolster Wheatley's staunch aversion to colonial slavery.

Eighteenth-century New England Congregationalism was divided by race and gender. Wheatley experienced a marginalized status within the religious gatherings each time they gathered in the name of Christ. She likely sat in the enslaved and free black section of the sanctuary which was typically located in the balcony area. In these religious denominations only Anglo-males "had the authority to choose their own minister," so Wheatley, in concert with every black soul, sat silently among the worshipers reflecting on a day when true liberty would become the lot for African people.<sup>64</sup>

Wheatley's imagination towards African freedom is best seen in a letter written

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<sup>63</sup>Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley*, 25.

<sup>64</sup>Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley*, 25.

to a Mohican minister named Samson Occom. On February 11, 1774, Wheatley criticized the colonial elites who limited the natural rights of African people groups. She praised God for utilizing suffering and the gospel to dispel the darkness of unbelief in Christ on African soil. She stated, “Those that invade them cannot be insensible that the divine Light is chasing away the thick Darkness which broods over the Land of Africa.”<sup>65</sup> Wheatley spoke of Africa in an overly generalized manner because she lacked exposure to the rich history of African Christianity in both northern and sub-Saharan Africa. Wheatley could only speak in the fashion of her Anglo-male tutor, Mather Byles, and female instructor, Mary Wheatley.<sup>66</sup> However, unlike her teachers, she made explicit references to African equality and dignity. Wheatley offered a brilliant juxtaposition between the Israelites who were subjected to Egyptian slavery and African dehumanization on a global scale. She averred, “[B]y no Means, for in every human Breast, God has implanted a Principle, which we call Love of Freedom; it is impatient of Oppression, and pants for Deliverance; and by the Leave of our Modern Egyptians I will assert, that the same Principle lives in us.”<sup>67</sup> In fell swoop, Wheatley shattered the idea of the content slave who either loves their bondage or is indifferent towards gradual emancipation. Wheatley believed that liberty and equal justice under the law dwelled in the hearts of black people just as it resided in the hearts of Euro-Americans.

The pressure of nonbeing squeezed Wheatley’s apologetic response to holistic marginalization of African peoples and women. Wheatley, however, was far from an evangelical feminist or an adherent to womanist theology.<sup>68</sup> Rather, she was a

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<sup>65</sup>*Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, 176.

<sup>66</sup>Shields, *Phillis Wheatley’s Poetics of Liberation*, 173-83; Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley*, 48-49, 104.

<sup>67</sup>Shields, *Phillis Wheatley’s Poetics of Liberation*, 177.

<sup>68</sup>Delores Williams, “A Crucifixion Double Cross? The Violence of Our Images May Do More Harm Than Good,” *Other Side* 29, no. 5 (September 1, 1993): 25-27; Williams, “A Womanist Perspective on Sin,” in *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering*, ed. Emilie Maureen

confessional complementarian who understood God’s good design for creation. In Wheatley’s mind, biblical complementarianism affirms rather than denigrates womanhood. In the following chapters, readers will discover a progressive commitment to African agency in Wheatley’s writings.

### **Summary of Contents**

The introduction frames the conversation around relevant research and states the thesis of the project. I defend Wheatley’s role as an exemplar of afrosensitive evangelical activism, a Christian intellectual, and the mother of Afro-American literature with transatlantic notoriety in eighteenth-century British-America. I will also explain how interdisciplinary scholarship in the intervening centuries has questioned Wheatley’s commitment to African intellectual formation and evangelical thought. This involves investigating why Wheatley seems virtually absent from contemporary discussions of evangelical spirituality.

Chapter 2 explains the meaning of an afrosensitive hermeneutic by exploring the epistemological development of Afrocentric thought. In so doing, readers receive rudimentary exposure to the ways in which Afrocentrism refutes Eurocentrism. I incorporate Bebbington’s quadrilateral as an exploratory portal into the theological commitments of African diasporic evangelicals in early America. Some African-American religious scholars, for instance, believe evangelicals jettisoned social activism because they have imbibed the belief that evangelicalism means “white.” Some do this because of a skewed—or limited—understanding of the fundamental ingredients of evangelical identity. Wheatley was distinctly evangelical in her theological orientation even though her sophisticated oeuvre crossed paths with alternative epistemologies. Until her death, she existed between the worlds of bondage and freedom. Moreover, this

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Townes (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 130-47; Williams, “Black Women’s Surrogacy Experience and the Christian Notion of Redemption,” in *Cross Examinations*, ed. Marit Trelstad (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 19-32.

chapter analyzes Wheatley’s controversial poem “On Being Brought from Africa to America” in order to frame her understanding of both God’s providence and theodicy. In so doing, readers develop a fuller understanding of how Wheatley theologically understood the ethical crisis of the transatlantic slave trade.

Chapter 3 assesses Wheatley’s critique of American exceptionalism.<sup>69</sup> I incorporate principles of critical race theory to elucidate her social location and identity formation. Wheatley writes several poems that speak to her identity as an enslaved black woman, and one cannot understand her spirituality without reckoning with how her environment informs her theological and ethical commitments. Wheatley, therefore, confronts the notion of an exemplary or open American exceptionalism by pinpointing despotic American beliefs and behaviors. Her inner dialogue, for example, will be read by many through the lens of a New England sentimentalism that will rationalize the perpetual captivity of black Christians by white Christians. Many captors used illiteracy to maintain docility among their enslaved Africans. To be sure, Wheatley’s captors uncharacteristically provided her with a strong academic, social, and religious experience that enhanced her literary and critical-thinking skills. This enabled Wheatley to adopt and later adapt John and Susannah Wheatley’s religious and moral commitments to advance personal and corporate liberation.

Chapter 4 creates a conversation on social justice and love between Wheatley

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<sup>69</sup>See Justin B. Litke, *Twilight of the Republic: Empire and Exceptionalism in the American Political Tradition* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2013), 8-10. In this work, Litke ferrets out new ways of understanding exceptionalism. He offers two main senses—comparative and unique—and three subsenses under unique category—exemplary, cultural, and imperial. Litke thinks the exemplary sense best fits the minds of the Puritans, Founders, and colonial patriots rather than the often promulgated imperial sense of exceptionalism by scholars within the broader academy. Litke engages primary source material (e.g., Mayflower Compact, Fundamental Orders of Connecticut, Massachusetts Body of Liberties, Declaration of Independence, Articles of Confederation and Constitution) in order to validate his construal. Moreover, John Wilsey provides a thoughtful criticism of American exceptionalism and civil religion. I lean heavily on Wilsey’s definition and delineation of the dominant streams of thought within American exceptionalism. See John D. Wilsey, *American Exceptionalism and Civil Religion: Reassessing the History of an Idea* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2015).

and the fifth-century African theologian, St. Augustine of Hippo. I examine Augustinian and Wheatleyan historiography to further explain Wheatley's posture of subversive protest, which seems to fit well with Augustinian spirituality. Shields is the only scholar, to my knowledge, who hints at an Augustinian overlap.<sup>70</sup> Many misidentify connections to Augustinianism in Wheatley, and this chapter will expose these missteps in greater depth.

Chapter 5 addresses Wheatley's staunch commitment to Christian orthodoxy, social activism, and spiritual friendship. She honored Christ as the exclusive way of salvation through literary apologetics in select poems. She also leveraged her privilege amongst societal influencers to advocate for the immediate emancipation of African peoples. Wheatley believed that enslavers lacked a comprehensive understanding of love. Hence, she confronted inconsistent religious and political leaders through her poetry and prose. By his grace, God enriched Wheatley's life through an ethnically diverse cohort of female and male friends. These friends championed her cry for personal emancipation.

Chapter 6 concludes the dissertation by demonstrating the theological and ethical commitments of a contemporary afrosensitive evangelical spirituality.

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<sup>70</sup>Shields, *Phillis Wheatley's Poetics of Liberation*, 132-33, 144-45, 202.



## CHAPTER 2

### ON AFRICAN DIASPORIC EVANGELICAL THOUGHT

Afrocentric spirituality diametrically opposes a broadly evangelical understanding of God's transformative work on both souls and societies. Afrocentric spiritualists sanitize the harsh realities of black existence within African social milieus by imagining continental Africa in utopian terms. African peoples, especially those categorized as diasporic in the United States, are in search of a religious experience that connects them with their ancestral past.<sup>1</sup> This search for African identity formation makes the ideology of Afrocentric spirituality even more attractive.<sup>2</sup>

Many black American Christians repudiate evangelical Christianity because of its European origins.<sup>3</sup> Others syncretize Afrocentric ideas with evangelical principles, making arguments for African origins rather than a historically European foundation. But one need not embrace the theoretical framing of ontological blackness or become an

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<sup>1</sup>The phrase *African peoples* arises at critical junctures throughout this paper to refer to continental as well as diasporic Africans who reside primarily in the United States. The African diaspora refers to the forced dispersion of African peoples across the globe during the Atlantic slave trade. See Peter J. Paris, *The Spirituality of African Peoples: The Search for Common Moral Discourse* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

<sup>2</sup>Flora Bridges, for example, argues that African peoples maintained a semblance of African culture through a vibrant spirituality that syncretized European religious ideas with Africanized understandings of the ultimate good. According to Bridges, the "organizing principle of African-American spirituality" includes "African retentions, slave religion, and Africanized appropriation of European-Christian language." Flora Wilson Bridges, *Resurrection Song: African-American Spirituality* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001), 4.

<sup>3</sup>See Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of Afro-American People* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1983); James H. Evans, Jr., *We Have Been Believers: An African American Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992); Patrick Bascio, *The Failure of White Theology: A Black Theological Perspective* (New York: Peter Lang, 1994).

ideological Afrocentrist to locate the origins of Christian orthodoxy on African soil before moving north to Europe.<sup>4</sup>

This section will assess the continuity and discontinuity between Afrocentric and Christian spirituality, arguing for a dialectical construct known as “afrosensitivity.” I demonstrate how Afrocentrism fails to provide an adequate footing for Christian spirituality. The first section explains the *sine qua non* of Afrocentrism—cultural agency—by interacting with the primary framers of Afrocentric thought. Second, I examine how Afrocentric spiritualists elevate an Afrocentric hermeneutic above a biblical one that understands the intersection of salvation and social justice. Third, I identify and interpret afrosensitive applications in Wheatley’s poems and prose to understand her theological and ethical priorities.

### **A Primer on Afrocentric Thought**

Bedtime rituals with my sons often engender a spirit of competition because without question the storyteller becomes the center of familial attention. In our family, storytellers have the privilege of sharing ideas without intrusions from outside speakers. Similarly, when one enters theoretical dialogue with Afrocentric thinkers, conversation partners discover that the *modus operandi* of Afrocentrism is philosophically wedded to self-determinative storytelling that cautiously questions and often repudiates assistance from perceived hegemonic interlocutors.<sup>5</sup> Simply put, at the heart of Afrocentric thought

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<sup>4</sup>See especially Thomas Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2007), 42-61. In this work, Oden argues that the transmission process of Christian orthodoxy traveled from South to North rather than North to South. Since Oden’s work is merely a survey, one could critique his thesis as being speculative without a huge amount of primary source evidence. For more information on the meaning of how ontological blackness relates to the semiotics of cultural criticism and racial apologetics, see Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 51-85.

<sup>5</sup>J. Deotis Roberts believes Afrocentric and Africentric are ideologically commensurate insofar as the terms are used interchangeably by scholars. I employ Afrocentrism unless otherwise noted. Roberts explains that many adherents are embracing the former term considering its etymological connection. He states, “The word ‘Afrocentric’ has currency in a wide range of activities and events among African Americans, and the word ‘Africentric,’ now often used instead of the former’s more etymologically correct

is the desire to “tell one’s own story.”<sup>6</sup> In Afrocentrism, this yearning is commonly referred to as a hermeneutic of cultural agency.

In this section, I explain the meaning and the development of cultural agency in Afrocentric thought by introducing the two key shapers of the Afrocentric idea.

## **Cultural Agency**

Theoretically, cultural agency sets out norms to guide African peoples’ thinking and living. As a form of intellectual empowerment, cultural agency demands rhetorical control over ancient and contemporary African diasporic and continental history.<sup>7</sup> African peoples devoid of proprietary rights to their own stories will likely receive an edited version. Stories told, for example, from the vantage point of the so-called unbiased observer exude the presuppositional standards of the story-teller.<sup>8</sup>

Afrocentric scholars like Peter J. Paris countered these edited versions by positioning Africa as an actor, not bystander, in its own storyline.<sup>9</sup> Paris and similar scholars

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connection to its roots, ‘Africa.’” J. Deotis Roberts, *Africentric Christianity: A Theological Appraisal for Ministry* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2000), vii. For more information on the historical context of African American religious experience and identity formation, see Anthony Pinn, *The African American Religious Experience in America* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2006).

<sup>6</sup>Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan, *Exorcizing Evil: A Womanist Perspective on the Spirituals* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997), 57-77.

<sup>7</sup>For more information on how to explain effectively the history of African peoples, see Lerone Bennett, Jr., *Before the Mayflower: A History of Black American*, 8<sup>th</sup> ed. (Chicago: Johnson Pub., 2007), 3-52; William Banks, *Black Intellectuals: Race and Responsibility in America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996); Olakunle George, *Relocating Agency: Modernity and African Letters* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2003).

<sup>8</sup>I borrow the idea of presuppositional standard from Cornelius Van Til. Greg Bahnsen rightly understands Van Til’s definition of a presupposition saying that presuppositions are personal commitments held at the base level of one’s network of beliefs. Moreover, Van Til thinks presuppositions supersede argumentative assumptions since a presupposition is the greatest authority in one’s thinking. Thus, an argument has an intended conclusion that Van Til labels the “presuppositional standard,” governing how one argues toward a proposed conclusion. See Greg Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings and Analysis* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Pub., 1998), 461-529.

<sup>9</sup>Paris believes that this pedagogical posture (i.e., the desire to tell one’s own story) was consistent among African religious scholars. He explains, “In their quest for scholarly authenticity independent of the colonial inheritance, African religious scholars have been in the vanguard of a veritable renaissance in African studies . . . . Their chief aims have been to make the hitherto silent African voice

reclaimed the personal narratives of African peoples without fear of intellectual reprisal from those within the broader academy. Carter G. Woodson, for example, observes how Western scholarship angrily rejects autodidactic, African-centered learning paradigms for uncritical adaptations of Eurocentric pedagogy.<sup>10</sup>

J. Deotis Roberts suggests, “Africentricity is a dynamic intellectual theory, not a system of thought but a philosophical and theoretical perspective. In the Africentric view the problem of location takes precedence over the topic under consideration.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, Afrocentricity compels African peoples to retell history as agents and actors, not subjects being acted upon by others. Lamentably, some scholars discount African retellings based on the professional historian’s intellectual priority.<sup>12</sup> This is a bias that John Hope Franklin thoughtfully corrects: “The professional historian can make no just claim to a monopoly of the field. Indeed, some of the great works of history have been written by persons who have been labeled lay historians. They have shown through their prize-winning books that the distinction between them and the so-called professional historian is, at best, unclear.”<sup>13</sup> Franklin’s admonishment recalls centuries of informal educational experiences of African peoples in America captured within slave narratives.<sup>14</sup>

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audible in the world of academic scholarship and to mine new empirical data by the rigorous study of their pre-colonial past.” Paris, *Spirituality of African Peoples*, 6.

<sup>10</sup>See Carter G. Woodson, *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (Trenton, NJ: African World Press, 1990). Although this work is deeply secular, presenting a convoluted view of Christian orthodoxy, the book’s strength revolves around his introductory statements that African peoples should embrace autodidactic learning.

<sup>11</sup>Roberts, *Africentric Christianity*, 3.

<sup>12</sup>In this regard, see Mary Lefkowitz, *Not Out of Africa: How Afrocentrism Became an Excuse to Teach Myth as History* (New York: Basic Books, 1996); Arthur Schlesinger, *The Disuniting of America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998).

<sup>13</sup>John Hope Franklin, *Race and History: Selected Essays 1938-1988* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 1.

<sup>14</sup>For example, the works of Frederick Douglass illustrate—even though he lacked formal education—how critical reflection is nurtured in the most unsuspected areas. Douglass’s polemical works broached the hypocrisy of slavery, piety of abolition, and the need for biblical Christianity to rise up out of the darkness. Douglass wrote three autobiographies: *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An*

He understands the gravity of saying “only professional historians have the right to do history.” If one contends that only professional historians have the password for writing history, a scholarly *shibboleth* of sorts, then America’s polyphonic voice is silenced.

In agreement with Franklin, Roberts offers a poignant principle that “a contradiction between history and intellectual perspective produces a kind of incongruity called decenteredness.”<sup>15</sup> Decenteredness occurs when dominant cultures advance ideas by epistemologically pillaging the frameworks of others. Roberts explains, “Continental Africans who accept David Livingstone’s naming of *Musi wa Tunya* [*sic*] as Victoria Falls are dislocated [decentered]. . . . Usually ‘the Continent’ refers to Europe, but Africa is also a continent. In reference to Africa the term needs to be recentered in a human context and allows for intellectual space to be shared.”<sup>16</sup> Lucius Outlaw, an African American religious philosopher at Vanderbilt University, makes a similar claim when he describes the implications of cultural agency within the normative gaze of Afrocentricity, saying, “Afrocentricity, which, together with its corollary ‘Eurocentricity,’ have come to have a pervasive life of their own . . . . Afrocentricity is offered as the name for a perspective that is centered on the African Cultural System in which all African people participate although it is modified according to specific histories and nations.”<sup>17</sup>

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*American Slave* (1845); *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855); and *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881). For a helpful source concerning how Douglass allowed his Christian imagination to further develop his unfolding literary narrative, see Eric J. Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1993), 285-312.

<sup>15</sup>Roberts, *Africentric Christianity*, 4.

<sup>16</sup>Roberts, *Africentric Christianity*, 4-5. In the text quoted above, Roberts misspells the original name of Victoria Falls, which is “Mosi-Oa-Tunya,” suggesting Zimbabweans have been decentered because they accept the renaming nomenclature, Victoria Falls. When I visited Mosi-Oa-Tunya in Zimbabwe, I discovered that the historic site renders the African and European name with an explanation of how they both came into existence on its national landmark signage. The original name is, in fact, situated above Livingstone’s “Victoria Falls,” which suggests a centered rather than a decentered worldview. Decentering is an important concept when we approach the identity formation or the “identity subjugation” of Phillis Wheatley.

<sup>17</sup>Lucius Outlaw, “Critical Prelude: The Africology Project and Normative Theory,” in *African American Studies Reader*, ed. Nathaniel Norman, Jr. (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2001), 550.

Outlaw projects the secondary goal of cultural agency, namely, the willingness to abandon ideas associated with the marginalization of African peoples to Europe.<sup>18</sup> Eurocentrism is no longer the epicenter of truth for Afrocentric thinkers.<sup>19</sup> African peoples who search for identity on the shores of Greece, rather than the banks of the Nile, will find their educational experience wanting and their psychological equilibrium in constant flux. According to the authors, the only way to counter this cognitive dissonance is for African peoples to critically engage sources from an African-centered worldview.<sup>20</sup> If a proposed educational process abandons the African-centered perspective, then an unrealized internal longing for home, which bell hooks calls “a culture of place,”<sup>21</sup> will create fragmented psychosis in the hearts of black students. Afrocentrists label this feeling of epistemological angst as “cultural misorientation (CM).”

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<sup>18</sup>Molefi Asante, who will be discussed at length below, believes marginalization is an inadequate descriptor. He avers, “Africans have been negated in the system of white racial domination. This is not mere marginalization, but the obliteration of the presence, meaning, activities, or images of the African. This negated reality, a destruction of the spiritual and material personality of the African person.” Molefi Kete Asante, “Afrocentricity: Notes on a Disciplinary Position,” in *Afrocentric Traditions*, ed. James L. Conyers, Jr. (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Pub., 2005), 2.

<sup>19</sup>Andrea C. Abrams does a fine job juxtaposing Afrocentrism and Eurocentrism. She rightly believes “Eurocentric thought, or Eurocentrism, is the practice, conscious or otherwise, of centering and privileging perspective. Eurocentrism judges other cultures by the values and standards of its own . . . . European ethnocentrism married to European political might result in the oppression of others through political and cultural imperialism.” Andrea C. Abrams, *God and Blackness: Race, Gender, and Identity in a Middle Class Afrocentric Church* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 10-11. Moreover, John D. Wilsey stealthily models an afrosensitive historiographical approach. He rightly understands how European educational paradigms often present unjust epistemological scales by ignoring non-European pedagogical frameworks. Wilsey, for example, utilizes the verbiage “Anglocentric paradigm,” which is synonymous with Eurocentric frameworks, to critique three primary texts used to *re-shape* the minds of many contemporary Christian and homeschool students in the United States toward closed American exceptionalism rather than a biblical worldview. John D. Wilsey, *American Exceptionalism and Civil Religion: Reassessing the History of an Idea* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2015), 191-216.

<sup>20</sup> According to Abrams an “ideology is a worldview or a shared set of beliefs, values, and attitudes . . . . Afrocentrism is also a worldview that provides adherents with explanations for the origin and the meaning of blackness, a shared interpretation of their racial and ethnic experiences, and a set of directions for living an authentic and meaningful African-centered life.” Abrams, *God and Blackness*, 16.

<sup>21</sup>Gloria Jean Watkins, a native Kentuckian, is a feminist scholar and social activist. Hooks does not capitalize her pen name: bell hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

## Cultural Misorientation

Afrocentric scholars Kobi K. K. Kambon and Reginald Rackley argue that the onset of African personality disorders derive from being overly exposed to European images and ideas without any positive portraits from African culture. This negative psychopathological dysfunction is remedied when African peoples consciously sever Eurocentric appendages from their body of knowledge. They state, “This condition [cultural misorientation] of cultural reality based disorder results from the protracted, institutionalized superimposition of European culture/the European worldview on the African community in America . . . . Succinctly, CM describes the widespread psychological condition among blacks reflecting an incorrect (contradictory) cultural orientation in African people that is ‘Eurocentric’ in its basic worldview framework.”<sup>22</sup> The authors proffer three levels of CM: minimal, moderate, and severe.<sup>23</sup> Each level represents the degree to which African peoples have been unconstructively shaped to think less of African cultural values when compared to European values. When African peoples allow Europe to set the academic standard, a dysfunctional psychosis results from misunderstanding African cultural history. In this milieu, Afrocentrism becomes the intellectual saving grace for African peoples.

For example, notice how Kambon and Rackley associate the African struggle

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<sup>22</sup>Kobi K. K. Kambon and Reginald Rackley, “The Cultural Misorientation Construct and the Cultural Misorientation Scale: An Africentric Measure of European Cultural Misidentification among Africans in America,” in *Afrocentric Traditions*, ed. James L. Conyers, Jr. (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Pub., 2005), 15.

<sup>23</sup>Minimal level refers to “a psychological orientation in Africans reflecting the presence of a European worldview orientation, but with some possibly anti-white along with the expected anti-black and possibly some pro-black content as well.” Moderate level entails “a psychological orientation in Africans that reflects many internalized Eurocentric cultural values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors, including the dominant manifestation of anti-black attitudes and behaviors (i.e., Anti-Self orientation), along with the entrenched and dominant individualism, materialism, integrationist, and Alien-Self orientations.” Severe level “reflects virtually a total dominance of European worldview content and extreme anti-Africanness/anti-blackness. Here the internalized Eurocentric cultural values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors are all manifested overtly and intensely.” Kambon and Rackley, “Cultural Misorientation Construct and Cultural Misorientation Scale,” 16-19.

for identity formation, which births psychological disorders, with the ubiquitous storyline of Europeanization as the ground of “civilized” being.<sup>24</sup> In their thinking, because Eurocentric domination excites societal ills among African peoples, Afrocentrism becomes an ideological catalyst for mental liberation and social transformation. Perhaps unbeknownst to these scholars is the distinctly religious and apologetic belief that Afrocentrism saves African peoples from holistic despair. The salvific implications of this are astounding. Afrocentric constructs, like many alien philosophies, combat moral evil (i.e., the bludgeoning of African minds and society) via the fourfold creation, fall, redemption, restoration schematic: (1) Africa was a land of communal bliss; (2) The Atlantic slave trade destroyed African identity formation and bolstered self-hatred; (3) Afrocentrism will deliver black minds from the fatal grip of Eurocentrism; and, (4) African peoples must propagate this message of deliverance to create a better society.<sup>25</sup>

This section has introduced two key principles within Afrocentrism. First, cultural agency is the presuppositional standard of Afrocentric thought. Second, it delineates what occurs when African peoples repudiate cultural agency. The next section presents the primary works of two fountainheads of Afrocentrism. These works explain the relationship between institutional racism and the development of Afrocentrism. Though there are multiple Afrocentric thinkers throughout U.S. history, most scholars

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<sup>24</sup>Dona Richards explains how seminal ideas that served as organizing principles in Western scientific thought cemented an ideological belief or ethos that Western European values became the standard by which to judge the societal mores of others. She argues, “The Western European ethos appears to thrive on the perception that those who are culturally and radically different are inferior. It relates to other cultures as superior or inferior, as powerful or weak, as ‘civilized’ or ‘primitive.’” Dona Richards, “The Ideology of European Dominance,” *Western Journal of Black Studies* 3, no. 4 (1979): 87.

<sup>25</sup>Frankly, Kambon and Rackley might rebut that I am reading an evangelical theological interpretation into their social scientific and psychological theory. This is understandable. However, as I am an evangelical Christian theologian, two undergirding principles guide my assessment. First, I believe Christian theology, as queen of the sciences, engages all worldviews from a transcendent starting place. Second, the objective source for interrogating alien philosophies for Christians of any hue is God’s inerrant Scripture. Ideas have consequences, not only for the demolition of Western civilization, but for the viability of sustaining a distinctly Christian mind. The Afrocentric idea, as we will soon discover, defies Christian orthodoxy, eradicating any potential for professed Christians to think biblically.



affirm three framers: W. E. B. Du Bois, Cheikh Anta Diop, and Molefi Kete Asante. For purposes of this dissertation, I need only highlight two—Du Bois and Asante.

### **Framing the Afrocentric Idea**

Situations in both the academy and society prompted two key intellectuals, Du Bois and Asante, to develop a pan-African worldview or philosophy of life. The dehumanizing factors of racism, classism, and pedagogical hegemony<sup>26</sup> made the ground fertile for planting an Afrocentric seed in the minds of African peoples. Although Du Bois was not an Africologist in a formal sense, his ideas served as scaffolding for the edifice of Afrocentrism and the Black social gospel.<sup>27</sup> Asante then became the formal architect of Afrocentric thought by conceptualizing the reflections of Du Bois and Diop. Asante is an astute scholar in both Eurocentric and African-centered literature. He interprets Du Bois's rhetorical posture prior to his maturation toward philosophical nihilism.<sup>28</sup> In so doing, Asante reveals Du Bois's motivation to liberate the shackled minds of his diasporic kindred. Du Bois was an academic pariah to many within the broader academy because of his unswerving commitment to racial uplift. Classically

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<sup>26</sup>Some find it hard to believe there were African Americans who received graduate and terminal degrees from Ivy League institutions in the late nineteenth century. These scholars offered the best in academic research and teaching process; however, they were still marginalized within the academy since they could not apply for teaching positions at their alma maters. William Banks speaks of the “rude awakening” this cadre of scholars felt when their African-centered ideas clashed with the provincial scholarship of American universities. He contends, “Although committed to freedom of inquiry and expression, American universities, like other institutions, generated a bureaucracy and culture that encouraged conformity. The standards for evaluating intellectual work and teaching competence were touted as objective, but no one denied that subjective factors played a role. For black scholars specializing in race and ethnic issues, those subjective factors were troublesome.” Banks, *Black Intellectuals*, 179.

<sup>27</sup>V. P. Franklin, editor of *The Journal of African American History*, acknowledges that Du Bois had a penchant for Afrocentric thought before it was in vogue, saying, “Du Bois’s ‘Afro-centric’ approach to the study of world history predated the scholarly preoccupations with Afrocentricity in the 1980s and 1990s, and manifested itself in Du Bois’s plans for the publication of the *Encyclopedia Africana*.” Derrick P. Aldridge, *The Educational Thought of W. E. B. Du Bois: An Intellectual History* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2008), xiii; Gary Dorrien, *The New Abolition: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Black Social Gospel* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015).

<sup>28</sup>Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1987), 120-26.

trained in sociology and philosophy, he took a doctorate of philosophy from Harvard in 1895.

**W. E. B. Dubois (1868–1963).** William Edward Burghardt Du Bois is relatively unknown in evangelical circles, even though many scholars within the broader academy regard him as one of the greatest activist intellectuals in American history.<sup>29</sup> Scholars outside of evangelicalism have engaged the works of Du Bois in multiple academic disciplines: literary criticism, psychology, sociology, history, philosophy, theology, and religious studies.<sup>30</sup> His musings became a bustling theoretical geyser for those interested in African-American intellectual history, and scholars continue to debate and reflect upon his many essays.<sup>31</sup> John Wilsey is an anomaly amongst evangelical historians; instead of overlooking the contributions of African-American intellectuals, he

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<sup>29</sup>Chukwuemeka Onwubu, an assistant professor of Sociology in the Department of Pan-African Studies at Temple University, conceives an intellectual as “one who, through formal education or training or otherwise, has been opportune to develop his intellect, thereby cultivating and accumulating special knowledge . . . . Thus, while it may be said of every intellectual that he is educated, it does not necessarily follow that every ‘educated’ person could assume the role of the intellectual. It could then be argued that the critical mark of the intellectual consists, not so much in the ‘special’ knowledge *per se* accumulated by him, as it inheres in the logic of its formulation and application.” Chukwuemeka Onwubu, “The Intellectual Foundations of Racism,” in *Africana Studies: Philosophical Perspective and Theoretical Paradigms*, ed. Delores P. Aldridge and E. Lincoln James (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 2007), 71-72. Du Bois was an activist intellectual because he used his intellect for the betterment of society, exposing the negative effects on racism on Anglo- and African-American citizens. In Du Bois’s writings, one readily discerns how activist intellectualism repudiates the notion of education for the sake of personal advancement in society. He often challenges anti-intellectualism in the lives of African peoples, believing that many have intellect, but only a few know how to hone their intellect in an intelligent manner to produce the appropriate results in the larger society. In a similar vein, Richard Hofstadter draws a distinction between intellect and intelligence, saying, “Intellect . . . is the critical, creative, and contemplative side of mind. Whereas intelligence seeks to grasp, manipulate, re-order, adjust, intellect examines, ponders, wonders, theorizes, imagines. Intelligence evaluates, and looks for the meaning of situations as a whole.” R. Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualization in American Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963), 25.

<sup>30</sup>Aldridge rightly envisions Du Bois as “a pragmatic educational theorist who developed original ideas and adopted and adapted many ideas of his time to forge educational strategies aimed at improving the social, economic, and political conditions of African Americans.” Aldridge, *Educational Thought of W. E. B. Du Bois*, 1.

<sup>31</sup>For a collection on Du Bois’s most insightful essays within his vast corpus, see *W. E. B. Du Bois: A Reader*, ed. David Levering Lewis (New York: Henry Holt, 1995).

courageously goes against the contemplative grain by presenting Du Bois as an ethical exemplar. Wilsey rightly describes Du Bois as “one of the most prolific writers and profound thinkers in American history,” referring to Du Bois as “a black Aristotle” because of his profound intellectual musings.<sup>32</sup>

Du Bois proposed a racialized theory that an intellectual “Talented Tenth” would deliver African peoples from dire straits.<sup>33</sup> He was an advocate for pragmatic social change through scholarship and rhetoric in contradistinction to Booker T. Washington who embraced a grass-roots approach of changing the social dynamics of African peoples through industrial-educational institutes.<sup>34</sup> Du Bois became a household name amongst learned African Americans after publishing *The Souls of Black Folk*.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>Wilsey, *American Exceptionalism and Civil Religion*, 225. I highly recommend a thorough reading of Wilsey’s view of open exceptionalism and civic engagement (215-31). I deal more fully with Wheatley’s posture towards American exceptionalism in chap. 3 of this dissertation.

<sup>33</sup>According to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Du Bois adapted the phrase “Talented Tenth” from “Henry Morehouse, who coined the term in 1896, one year after Booker T. Washington delivered his famous speech enunciating the tenets of political and social accommodation at the Atlanta Exposition, the year of *Plessy v. Ferguson*.” Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “W. E. B. Du Bois and the Talented Tenth,” in *The Future of the Race*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Cornel West (New York: First Vintage Books, 1996), 125. According to Aldridge, “The talented tenth was Du Bois’s ideal of a black leadership cadre consisting of the most educated and intellectually gifted. Classically trained, they would become the standard-bearers of the race and lead African Americans to the promised land of equality.” Aldridge, *Educational Thought of W. E. B. Du Bois*, 6.

<sup>34</sup>For more information on the biography of Booker T. Washington, see Booker T. Washington, *Up from Slavery* (1901; repr., New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2003). Moreover, it is difficult to monolithically locate Du Bois’s educational philosophy, and the reader should note that Du Bois, who believed in classical/liberal education, eventually proffered an integrated approach to education and social uplift. For example, Aldridge makes the point that during Du Bois’s early years he supported the classical/liberal model, believing that training in the humanities, law, and science bolsters confidence to engage cultural leaders without fear. Du Bois firmly believed that individuals who purchased land, without understanding “deed law,” would be victimized by mendacious practices in the rural South. Aldridge states, “Du Bois believed, classical education would give African Americans the wherewithal to dismantle segregation, elevate black culture, and refute view of black inferiority. Eventually, however, Du Bois revised his view and concluded that a synthesis of classical and vocational education would provide the optimal educational strategy for black advancement.” Aldridge, *Educational Thought of W. E. B. Du Bois*, 6.

<sup>35</sup>In 1903, Du Bois wrote his perennial best-seller *The Souls of Black Folk*, which has become a key text towards understanding the lives of African peoples behind the veil. The veil refers to the systemic chains of racialized thinking in the American psyche. Scholars within African diasporic studies spill considerable ink interpreting Du Bois’s works, in general and *The Souls of Black Folk*, in particular (e.g., Hazel Carby, Cornel West, Henry Louis Gates, Gary Dorrien, Arnold Rampersad, J. Cameron Carter,

Henry Louis Gates says, “Du Bois’s emergence as a dominant figure in the Afro-American community is without parallel in the history of black leadership, because his vehicle to prominence was not the deed, or the spoken word; it was the written word.”<sup>36</sup> As a prolific philosophical sage, Du Bois embraced the self-appointed mantle of philosopher-king over the dispossessed masses. Unfortunately, the masses were concerned about daily survival, which often stymied the pursuit of formal education.

Meanwhile, the dominant societal class in America despised Du Bois’s desire to deracinate hagiographical historical roots, so much so that Du Bois lived under constant suspicion from within and without. On the one hand, African Americans questioned Du Bois’s motives because he was a learned man. On the other, European Americans, by and large, refused to learn from a person of color despite his academic pedigree and intellectual acuity. In Du Bois’s essays, one discerns how American racism and cultural rejection from his kindred created what he called “double consciousness” or the feeling of twoness—one American and the other African.

Farah Jasmine Griffin describes double-consciousness as “a psychological sense experienced by African Americans whereby they possess a national identity, ‘an American,’ within a nation that despises their racial identity, ‘a Negro.’”<sup>37</sup> Vincent Wimbush thinks double-consciousness more accurately reflects challenges faced by Blacks who have Du Bois’s sociocultural space, namely, exposure to higher education on graduate and post-graduate levels as well as multiple cultural experiences outside the United States.<sup>38</sup>

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Eric Sundquist, Houston Baker, etc.).

<sup>36</sup>Gates, *Future of the Race*, 116.

<sup>37</sup>Farah Jasmine Griffin, introduction to *The Souls of Black Folk*, by W. E. B. Du Bois (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2003), xvi.

<sup>38</sup>Vincent L. Wimbush, “We Will Make Our Own Future Text: An Alternative Orientation to Interpretation,” in *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary*, ed. Brian

Furthermore, Wimbush summarizes Du Bois's treatment of the "Veil" as an "attempt to define the existence of black folks in the United States as those forced into divided consciousness."<sup>39</sup> If this construal is accurate, then double-consciousness is the existence of two souls or identities in the inner recesses of black American psychology: one soul—African—and the other soul—American. These two souls, explains Du Bois, are at constant war.<sup>40</sup> Wheatley certainly embodied this. Will Harris avers, "The African American consciousness," a la Du Bois, "implies both an identification with mainstream culture (American-ness) and with constructed difference within that culture (African extraction)."<sup>41</sup> Kathryn Seidler Engberg makes a similar point about Anne Bradstreet (1612–1672) and Wheatley.<sup>42</sup> Both Bradstreet and Wheatley shared similar dilemmas as women living in a male dominated world. Wheatley, however, lacked the plausibility of goodness attached to whiteness, and therefore had compounded relational pains that Bradstreet did not. Bradstreet could escape one aspect of alleged inferiority (gender) by championing whiteness (ethnicity). Wheatley, however, contended against a negative view of both her ethnicity and gender, which meant being a black woman in a racist and sexist nation required a kind of spiritual stealth.

Centuries of African chattel slavery birthed a nation of African Americans who rightly questioned American freedom and political justice, especially since enslaved

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K. Blount et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 45.

<sup>39</sup>Wimbush, "We Will Make Our Own Future Text," 45.

<sup>40</sup>Du Bois was critical of white supremacy, which aided and abetted white Christianity. Du Bois believed that the creation of *twoness* could not be separated from the interconnected realities of religion and race in America. See Edward J. Blum, *W. E. B. Du Bois: American Prophet* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

<sup>41</sup>Will Harris, "Phillis Wheatley, Diaspora Subjectivity, and the African American Canon," *MELUS* 33, no. 3 (Fall 2008): 29-43.

<sup>42</sup>See Kathryn Seidler Engberg, *The Right to Write: The Literary Politics of Anne Bradstreet and Phillis Wheatley* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2010), 65-67.

Africans were considered a disposable commodity by the hands of their Euro-American captors.<sup>43</sup> African peoples found little solace in their newly sanctioned American identity even though many were born on American soil.<sup>44</sup> One need not conjecture an inner war at play in the African-American psyche. Contemporary sociologists, psychologists, and educators often note the effects of this tug-of-war in the communal lives of African Americans; and yet, these observable points of political protest are not new realities for African Americans involved in a consistent fight of freedom within a racialized veil of existence.

Wimbush sagaciously explicates, “This division [double-consciousness] was for Du Bois the deep internal psychologically felt reflection of the external social-political existence of black folks as the *chronic persistent other* [emphasis added], as the subaltern, as the enslaved/colonized living next to, and reduced to looking at themselves through the gaze of, the enslaver/colonizer.”<sup>45</sup> In other words, racial oppression evaluated the worth of black people through the socially-constructed lens of whiteness.

Du Bois knew double-consciousness firsthand since Anglo imperialism created a bifurcated identity into the chambers of his heart and mind. Consider the elegiac prose in his essay, “Of the Passing of the First Born.” In this heart-wrenching piece, Du Bois describes how blackness precipitated the death of his son when physicians refused to give aid to his physically ill toddler. Anglo-American southern doctors disavowed the oath to “do no harm” to save this black. Du Bois knew the horrific realities of racial hatred toward African peoples in America as he watched his son’s small chest expand and

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<sup>43</sup>Sylvester A. Johnson, *African American Religions, 1500-2000* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 56-106.

<sup>44</sup>For a provocative essay on the idea of modernity’s negative effects on creating spiritual and geographical formational bonds within American citizenry, see Mark T. Mitchell, “The Homeless Modern,” *Intercollegiate Review* 13 (Spring 2006): 13-22.

<sup>45</sup>Wimbush, “We Will Make Our Own Future Text,” 45-46.

descend for the last time. Du Bois's educational pedigree and social status in the North had no bearing behind the racialized veil of the American South.

Racism compounded Du Bois's remorse since *de jure* segregation made treating the pneumonia-like symptoms of his dying child off-limits.<sup>46</sup> Du Bois, without the regenerating power of the gospel, attempted to make sense of the frowning providence of American racism. In a sense, he rejected the supposition that "behind a frowning providence God hides a smiling face" because the devilish ethos of white supremacy in the American South ushered in his son's untimely death. As such, Du Bois pursued the gospel of social activism through a pan-Africanistic worldview.<sup>47</sup> He believed unaided reason had the potential to rid the world of the social evils incubated by racial hatred. Like many African-American intellectuals before him, Du Bois believed positive information about African peoples could change the social imaginaries of racist Anglo-Americans.

Unfortunately, global history proves prosocial information about different people groups does not necessarily engender ethical change. When people affirm a certain vision of the good life, they pursue habits that reinforce said apparitions. American racism was undergirded by the deeply ingrained idea of white supremacy within the American sociopolitical experience. Sadly, Du Bois never realized his dream of racial reconciliation. He became so embittered with American racism that he relinquished U.S. citizenship prior to permanently settling in Ghana. He lived there until his death on August 27, 1963. Du Bois's narrative explained why Afrocentrism became attractive to oppressed blacks in search of justice and liberation. This was a tragic end to one of America's greatest intellectuals. But what seems to be more catastrophic is how a biblically-uninformed grappling with theodicy delegitimized God's absolute sovereignty

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<sup>46</sup>Wimbush, "We Will Make Our Own Future Text," 147-52.

<sup>47</sup>For more information, see Dorrien, *The New Abolition*; Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (New York: Nation Books, 2016).

and goodness in a fallen world.

The writings of eighteenth-century afrosensitive diasporic evangelicals shed new light on the path toward reconciliation. These writers confronted wickedness without losing the gospel of Jesus Christ. Wheatley in particular exemplified how one's spirituality can rightly chastise hegemonic worldviews through evangelical theology and biblical ethics.

**Molefi Kete Asante.** *The Afrocentric Idea* is invariably the most significant text of the late twentieth century concerning Afrocentric thought.<sup>48</sup> Asante is considered by his peers as one of the most distinguished contemporary Africological scholars. He has published well over seventy books on multifaceted issues pertaining to continental and diasporic Africa. Asante believes African pedagogy is an interdependent conversation between the living and the dead. In so doing, he pours out mental libations to the intellectual giants upon whose shoulders he stands: Du Bois, Diop, David Walker, Ida B. Wells, and George James.<sup>49</sup> Asante acknowledges these academicians with the words "Ashe," which has multiple meanings within the West African dialect but commonly refers to "creative power." In this sense, Asante lauds the ability to create transformative knowledge in conversation with his ancestors. Paris, quoting John S.

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<sup>48</sup>Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*.

<sup>49</sup>In Afrocentric thought the phrase "pour out mental libations" honors ancestral contributions to one's current ideas since all thinking is interdependent as opposed to independent. Thinkers are in constant dialogue with their ancestors. Thus, David Walker authored a famous diatribe known as "David Walker's *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (1830)." This speech served as a Christian polemic against the inhumane system of colonial slavery. In this respect, J. Cameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), prosecutes the truncated understanding of Walker's *Appeal* in Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., *Exodus! Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000). Glaude envisions the *Appeal* solely as "pragmatic historicism" says Carter. Whereas Carter prioritizes the Christian theological underpinnings of the *Appeal*, stating, "Glaude does not address the explicitly theological discourse that foregrounds Walker's jeremiad and that gives voice to his arguments. Walker frames his *Appeal* in this way: "These positions I shall endeavor, by the help of the Lord, in the course of this Appeal, to the satisfaction of the most incredulous mind—and may God Almighty who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, open your hearts to understand and believe the truth." Carter, *Race*, 457.



Mbiti, aptly describes the familial aspect of libation pouring as “tokens of the fellowship, communion, remembrance, respect and hospitality, being extended to those who are the immediate pillars or roots of the family. The living-dead solidify and mystically bind together the whole family.”<sup>50</sup> In Afrocentric thought, Paris explains, the term *living dead* is favored because it “conveys both continuity with and transition from temporal life.”<sup>51</sup> Asante honors the binding together of the intellectual contributions or collective insights of both the living and dead when he writes or speaks.

Asante was trained in rhetoric at traditionally white academic institutions during the height of civil rights and black consciousness movements in America. The latter-day Civil Rights era offered a time of self-discovery and self-expression for many black Americans. In terms of identity formation, this introspective reality cannot be overstated since, as Aldridge counsels, “Historical events and social context play an important part in shaping any individual’s thinking.”<sup>52</sup> For the first time in American history, African peoples came together *en masse* to demand full citizenship based on ontological solidarity. As Asante studied rhetoric, he observed how perspectives of African peoples were intentionally or unintentionally dislocated from academic discussions. Asante, therefore, devised a universal framework by which African peoples could engage texts,<sup>53</sup> even as he avoided phraseology like “universal framework.” In

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<sup>50</sup>Paris, *Spirituality of African Peoples*, 83.

<sup>51</sup>Paris, *Spirituality of African Peoples*, 52.

<sup>52</sup>Aldridge, *Educational Thought of W.E.B. Du Bois*, 4.

<sup>53</sup>Asante rightly understood that many Eurocentric epistemologies inadvertently have a stranglehold on the interpretation of data. Once again, the reader should not take this as tacit endorsement of a *hermeneutic of suspicion*. Rather, this affirmation involves the need for African peoples to understand and engage “uninspired texts” from the tertiary place of cultural agency. For instance, Asante explains that his “work has increasingly constituted a radical critique of the Eurocentric ideology that masquerades as a universal view in the fields of intercultural communication, rhetoric, philosophy, linguistics, psychology, education, anthropology, and history. Yet the critique is radical only in the sense that it suggests a turnabout, an alternative perspective on phenomena . . . . The inability to ‘see’ from several angles is perhaps the one common fallacy in provincial scholarship.” Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*, 3. Moreover, Afrocentric thought should not be used as a specific literary device, but it can—and should—help to distill

Asante's thinking, Afrocentrism does not reject Eurocentrism, per se, if Eurocentrism is not universal.<sup>54</sup> Some of Asante's ideological followers, like J. Deotis Roberts, have taken his concepts further down the theoretical path of essentialism, which means an African-centered worldview holds a dominant place in one's pedagogical development as a proper defense *against* intellectual Europeanization.<sup>55</sup>

In spirituality, African-centered theological anthropology dismantles evangelical Christological and soteriological categories. Jawanza Eric Clark, for example, renounces the doctrine of original sin and the exclusivity of Christ.<sup>56</sup> Clark states, "The doctrine of original sin, particularly as articulated by nineteenth-and twentieth-century American evangelicals, greatly restricts the Christian's agency pre-and post-conversion."<sup>57</sup> Moreover, Clark intends to "redefine the doctrine of salvation, connecting it with the doctrine of humanity, and positing the exemplary life, or a life worthy of emulation, as the standard for reimagining salvation." In other words, Clark thinks the life of Christ presents a great spiritual model to emulate once evangelical understandings of the person and work of Jesus Christ have been deconstructed. Clark suggests that a "radical reconstruction of three doctrines [original sin, Jesus Christ, and salvation] central to Christian theology" must take place to ameliorate the "anthropological poverty of

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some perspectives in various categories of life and learning. Afrocentric thought is a powerful evaluative tool in aesthetics, ontology, axiology, and deontology when employed as a tertiary interlocutor. The primary voice of Christian spirituality, however, must be the Bible and the secondary voice is historic Christian tradition taught by faithful preachers and teachers of the faith once for all entrusted to the saints.

<sup>54</sup>Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*, 160-72.

<sup>55</sup>J. Deotis Roberts tersely summarizes the dominant themes of Afrocentric thought, saying, "We need to begin our cultural view of Africa with a study of Egypt, Nubia, Cush, and other ancient African cultures . . . . We need to be Africa-oriented in our study of data . . . . We need to lay claim to our culture . . . . Africentrists accept the multiplicity of cultural centers . . . . One is to accept the Africentric outlook as a means for both belief and practice." Roberts, *Africentric Christianity*, 14.

<sup>56</sup>Jawanza Eric Clark, "Reconceiving the Doctrine of Jesus as Savior in Terms of the African Understanding of an Ancestor: A Model for the Black Church," *Black Theology and International Journal* 8, no. 2 (Spring 2010): 140-59.

<sup>57</sup>Clark, "Reconceiving Doctrine of Jesus as Savior," 143.

African peoples.”<sup>58</sup> Clark borrows the idea of “anthropological poverty” from Engelbert Mveng, a Cameroonian liberation theologian. According to Clark, Mveng envisions anthropological poverty of Africans as “the cultural and religious desecration and exploitation of African identity.”<sup>59</sup> In typical Afrocentric fashion, Clark establishes a belief system based on a “respect for diversity, plurality, and multiplicity as norms for theological construction” as long as an African-centeredness is the conceptual epicenter.<sup>60</sup>

Du Bois and Asante hoped pan-Africanistic thought would dismantle Eurocentric cultural brainwashing. In so doing, they revised traditional approaches to Christian theology and spirituality within their own intellectual systems. Du Bois and Asante rejected the authenticity of Christianity because Caucasian adherents abdicated their responsibility to treat African peoples with dignity. In reaction to this travesty against humanity, Afrocentrism became the foil to Eurocentric constructs. Eurocentrism would no longer siphon the intellectual lives of African peoples. Unfortunately, Afrocentric interpretations mishandled Scripture in their attempt to protect black personality development. The next section offers an evangelical assessment of Afrocentric spirituality.

### **An Evangelical Assessment of Afrocentric Spirituality**

Can evangelical Christians remain faithful to Scripture while employing the dominant principle of Afrocentric thought? Is Afrocentric spirituality a consistent ideological construct for those who hold a high view of Scripture? Is it appropriate for

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<sup>58</sup>Clark, “Reconceiving Doctrine of Jesus as Savior,” 141-43.

<sup>59</sup>Clark, “Reconceiving Doctrine of Jesus as Savior,” 141.

<sup>60</sup>Clark, “Reconceiving Doctrine of Jesus as Savior,” 147.

Christians of African descent to incorporate a racialized worldview into their understanding of spirituality? This section seeks to answer why Afrocentric thought, which undergirds Afrocentric spirituality, ultimately abandons the authority of Scripture in its pursuit to maintain cultural identity.

### **Evangelicalism and Afrocentric Spirituality**

African diasporic evangelical Christians affirm the core essentials of evangelical theology while weaving the untold stories of African peoples into the tapestry of evangelical thought. In a later section, I will discuss this weaving process or dialectical synthesis via a pedagogical posture titled “afrosensitivity.”<sup>61</sup> For now, however, I will interact with evangelical historians who examine the meaning of evangelicalism before discussing the counterfactual relationship between evangelicalism and Afrocentric spirituality.<sup>62</sup> To do this, I provide general identification markers of evangelicalism espoused by David Bebbington.<sup>63</sup> Once these evangelical ingredients are clear, I evaluate the consistency of Afrocentric spirituality through Bebbington’s quadrilateral. Obviously, as discussed above, Afrocentric intellectuals will disqualify my evaluative approach based on cultural agency. They will envision the language, attitude, and direction of my analysis as ill-conceived since, in their thinking, Afrocentric spirituality is properly

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<sup>61</sup>I borrow the term “Afrosensitivity” from Kirk-Duggan, *Exorcising Evil*, 58-61.

<sup>62</sup>See David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (New York: Routledge, 1989); Mark A. Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield, and the Wesleys* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003); Derek Tidball, *Who Are the Evangelicals? Tracing the Roots of the Modern Movements* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1994); Timothy Larsen, “Defining and Locating Evangelicalism,” in *Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology*, ed. Timothy Larsen and Daniel J. Treier (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); John Coffey, “Puritanism, Evangelicalism, and the Evangelical Protestant Tradition,” in *The Advent of Evangelicalism: Exploring Historical Continuities*, ed. Michael A. G. Haykin and Kenneth J. Stewart (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2008), 252-77; Catherine A. Brekus, “The Evangelical Encounter with the Enlightenment,” in *Turning Points in the History of American Evangelicalism*, ed. Heath W. Carter and Laura Rominger Porter (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2017), 19-43.

<sup>63</sup>Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 2-16.

understood through a distinctly African-centered worldview, not a Eurocentric framing.

Nevertheless, in terms of explaining evangelicalism, Mark Noll agrees with Bebbington who envisioned “a consistent pattern of convictions and attitudes that have remained over the centuries since the 1730s.”<sup>64</sup> Bebbington summarizes these convictions and attitudes into “four key ingredients of evangelicalism”: conversionism, biblicism, crucicentrism, and activism.<sup>65</sup> Conversionism affirms a regenerate church membership. Biblicism rests on the authority of Scripture as the final arbiter of truth. Crucicentrism makes Christ’s death the preeminent principle in determining one’s relationship to a holy God. Activism refers to believers who live in service to God (evangelism and mission).

Historians debate the credulity of this summation. Some think many British and British-American evangelicals had more in common with Enlightenment thinkers than with historical evangelical scholarship.<sup>66</sup> Some historians expand Bebbington’s ideas concerning the historic complexity of evangelical thought by engaging his colossal monograph. Michael A. G. Haykin, for example, reassesses the Enlightenment’s role in shaping evangelical ideas. He agrees with Bebbington’s thesis that “eighteenth-century evangelicalism has close ties to the Enlightenment and should actually be considered its creation.”<sup>67</sup> Haykin then illustrates how Enlightenment thinkers and evangelicals used terms like “light” and “natural rights” in similar, but clearly revised ways.<sup>68</sup> On the one hand, “light” connotes special revelation for evangelicals; for Enlightenment thinkers it connotes unaided reason. On the other hand, natural rights concern human dignity and

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<sup>64</sup>Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism*, 19.

<sup>65</sup>Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism*, 19.

<sup>66</sup>Michael A. G. Haykin and Kenneth J. Stewart, eds., *The Advent of Evangelicalism: Exploring Historical Continuities*, ed. Michael A. G. Haykin and Kenneth J. Stewart (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2008).

<sup>67</sup>Haykin, “Evangelicalism and the Enlightenment,” in *The Advent of Evangelicalism*, 35-60.

<sup>68</sup>Haykin, “Evangelicalism and the Enlightenment,” 35-60.

freedom based on personhood. Evangelicals nuance this meaning of natural rights so that the *imago Dei* is paramount.

Some historians like Noll argue that “[e]vangelicalism is too loose a designation ever to have produced a tidy historical record.”<sup>69</sup> Noll’s statement grapples with the density of the evangelical story beginning first in Great Britain before making its transatlantic voyage through the preaching ministry of George Whitefield. Even though Noll acknowledges the pronounced presence of evangelicalism on the two continents, which makes for difficult historiographical work, he later says, “Difficulties in controlling the subject [evangelicalism] notwithstanding, it is still possible to present a coherent history of evangelicalism as defined by genealogy and by principle.”<sup>70</sup> In terms of genealogy and principle, he concedes “the flexibility of evangelicalism means that evangelical groups appear in different shapes depending on where they are found.”<sup>71</sup> These different shapes came to the fore as they “adapted themselves to the circumstances of their own locales.”<sup>72</sup>

Despite the circumstantial gradations in different social milieus, evangelicals remained true to the aforesaid quadrilateral. Biblical authority was the rule and guide to a distinctly evangelical faith and practice; and yet, one should dismiss the belief that evangelicals somehow performed their theological task outside cultural influence. Like all religious movements, evangelicals brought cultural blinders to the text. Unlike Afrocentric spiritualists, however, evangelicals asserted the authority of Scripture in principle even as many denied its sufficiency in practice. Afrocentric spiritualists refute the authority of Scripture to protect the emotional well-being of African peoples even if

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<sup>69</sup>Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism*, 20.

<sup>70</sup>Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism*, 20.

<sup>71</sup>Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism*, 20.

<sup>72</sup>Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism*, 20.

this requires an anthropocentric redaction of Scripture to meet certain psychological needs. In so doing, protection becomes a form of theological displacement.

### **“The Caged Bird”**

In 1969, Maya Angelou wrote a poem called “Caged Bird” which eventually became a best-selling book entitled *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.<sup>73</sup> In the poem, readers are struck by Angelou’s empathy for a caged bird whose bondage allays the freedom of individual expression. Angelou explores how the bird’s musical genius counterintuitively limited its liberation in a racialized society by playing on the relationship between bondage and freedom for black and white citizens in America. She laments the spectator’s false admiration for the bird’s uncommon skill by exposing how one’s social location determines one’s ability to use knowledge for amusement by manipulating the faculties of an oppressed class.<sup>74</sup>

In similar fashion, Wheatley’s poetic sagacity captivated the minds of her captors who never imagined that a “genius” could be held “in bondage,” to borrow a phrase from Wheatley’s contemporary, Ignatius Sancho.<sup>75</sup> Sancho’s ridicule of the unlawful use of God-ordained authority against innocent Africans was normative among

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<sup>73</sup>Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (New York: Bantam Books, 1993).

<sup>74</sup>To be clear, the caged bird imagery should not conjure up the derogatory comments of Imamu Amiri Baraka against Phillis Wheatley. Engberg explains that some scholars accused Wheatley of lacking imagination, imitating Alexander Pope, and assimilating into white culture without taking a stand on behalf of her oppressed kindred. She states, “Some scholars have a disdain for her poetry, calling audiences, fashioning herself and her subject matter to eventually gain access to readers through popularly distributed print media . . . Baraka indicts her for ‘evincing gratitude for slavery.’” Engberg, *The Right to Write*, 36-38. I argue, however, that Wheatley has gratitude for salvation, not the sinful means by which she came to know the Lord. Wheatley seems to believe that salvation could have been wrought by God’s kind hand without the frowning providence administered through the hands of sinful men by the Father’s permissive will. Wheatley, therefore, is wise not to “judge the Lord by feeble sense, but trust him for his grace.” William Cowper, “God Moves in a Mysterious Way” (1779).

<sup>75</sup>For more information on Ignatius Sancho, and other eighteenth-century transatlantic African diasporic evangelicals, see Vincent Carretta, *Unchained Voices: An Anthology of Black Authors in the English World of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1996).

African diasporic evangelicals.<sup>76</sup> These gospel-centered liberators challenged the conscience of British-American Christianity by exposing, through logical entailment, how holistic injustice in cahoots with economic rapaciousness strengthened race-based prejudice throughout the New World.<sup>77</sup> Carretta, in conversation with Sancho, highlights the detrimental effects of paternalistic New England sentimentalism in Wheatley's life: "Wheatley's enslavement exposed the hypocrisy of slave owners who called themselves Christians, and who used Wheatley's talent as an excuse for self-congratulation on the 'wanton power' they exercised over 'a genius superior' to themselves."<sup>78</sup> Carretta further believes that Sancho may have been "the first person of any ethnicity known to have questioned the motives of Wheatley's owner and other whites who helped get her book published."<sup>79</sup> If we consider the implications of property rights in the contract clause of the *Constitution*, we might recall that many political leaders viewed property rights in an absolute sense.<sup>80</sup> As she was an enslaved being, Wheatley's slavers owned everything she produced intellectually or physically. Therefore, one could plausibly argue that the owners' motives were bathed in self-interest or, from a marketing perspective, they used Wheatley's genius to create personal wealth. They had little interest in emancipating the black poet. She became an instrument for economic well-being, used by an oppressive family unit.

Phillis Wheatley initiated the bartering of her own emancipation while on

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<sup>76</sup>See Adeleke Adeeko, "Writing Africa under the Shadow of Slavery: Quaque, Wheatley, and Crowther," *Research in African Literature* 40, no. 4 (Winter 2009): 1-24.

<sup>77</sup>Adeeko, "Writing Africa under the Shadow of Slavery," 1-24.

<sup>78</sup>Vincent Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 170-71.

<sup>79</sup>Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley*, 170-71.

<sup>80</sup>See Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), 32-37.



furlough in Great Britain. John and Susannah Wheatley seemed unconcerned about her freedom. There are no extant records, to my knowledge, to prove familial benevolence on Wheatley's behalf by her captors. Familial benevolence is arguably the declaration of freedom and access to the family's inheritance. Once Wheatley stood on her own two feet, explains Carretta, she no longer found wealthy Anglo males in New England coming to her entrepreneurial aid.<sup>81</sup> She was labeled a *persona non grata* in the eyes of New England gentry. Despite her manumission and independent innovation, the sociopolitical imperialism in a racist society made securing an American publisher virtually impossible. Jared Hardesty rightly believes that freed people of color in eighteenth-century Boston experienced "unfreedom," namely, former owners felt no obligation to provide aid or opportunities to create independent wealth. They could not stomach interacting with their former captives as equals. Hardesty explains, "[T]he legacy of unfreedom did not disappear after the American Revolution. In this new world of freedom, old obligations and duties fell to the wayside, leaving newly freed slaves out in the cold, without a safety net, and unprepared to confront the racial structures formed around emancipation."<sup>82</sup>

As such, early historians who benevolently interpreted Wheatley's kidnappers missed the supply-and-demand management principle of the transatlantic slave trade. Both the supplier and buyer participated in moral evil against humanity.<sup>83</sup> Sowande' M. Mustakeem's book *Slavery at Sea* details the manufacturing program of the transatlantic

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<sup>81</sup>Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley*, 137-71.

<sup>82</sup>Jared Ross Hardesty, "Slavery, Freedom, and Dependence in Pre-Revolutionary Boston, 1700-1775" (PhD diss., Boston College, 2014), 19.

<sup>83</sup>We should rethink the categories of financiers within the slave market economy. Not only were wealthy Anglo-male merchants guilty of funding the mass incarceration of black bodies in the deadly bowels of slave ships, but purchasers were equally complicit insofar as their thirst for harvesting a free labor force motivated each purchase. For more information, see Anne Farrow, Joel Lang, and Jenifer Frank, *Complicity: How the North Promoted, Prolonged, and Profited from Slavery* (New York: Ballantine, 2005).

slave trade in extremely graphic terms. She annihilates ideas supporting the moral fitness of American slavery as a missional tool for enslaved Africans. Scholars who argue otherwise typically support the proslavery theory of “slavery in abstract,” rather than the counterfactual belief that the spirit of Scripture renounces all forms of slavery—which is to say, some scholars jettison the slave-making process.<sup>84</sup> Mustakeem, however, is not of this scholarly ilk. She interprets the Atlantic slave trade as an operational system of human trafficking.<sup>85</sup> Historians often overlook, says Mustakeem, the tripartite manufacturing elements—warehouse, transport, and delivery—when recounting the life cycles of the enslaved. Perhaps these historians of yesteryear were unaware of Sancho’s courageous criticism, which Carretta brings to our attention: “To Sancho, although Wheatley’s status may have been privileged in relation to that of other slaves, it was nonetheless disgraceful because powerful whites who were willing to praise her while she was a slave refused to help her gain freedom.”<sup>86</sup>

Contemporary historians also sanctify Wheatley’s kidnapping, presenting her as an employee for hire in British-America. Take, for example, Arlette Frund who states, “[Wheatley] was purchased by John Wheatley, a wealthy merchant, who employed her as a domestic servant.”<sup>87</sup> Wheatley was not simply a hired hand. She was a victim of

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<sup>84</sup>See Luke E. Harlow, *Religion, Race, and the Making of Confederate Kentucky, 1830-1880* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2014), 3-5. Although Harlow’s work “sheds new light on the role of religion in the nineteenth century slavery debates,” Harlow’s understanding of the intersection of religion and race provides a necessary scaffolding to better understand eighteenth-century slave economies in early America.

<sup>85</sup>For more information on tracing the history of the commercial sale of black bodies, see Sowande’ M. Mustakeem, *Slavery at Sea: Terror, Sex, and Sickness in the Middle Passage* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2016).

<sup>86</sup>Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley*, 170-71.

<sup>87</sup>Frund interacts judiciously with Wheatley’s prose and poetry, arguing that Wheatley’s “communicability,” namely, “her display of performative competence in the public sphere” gave her a voice in the chambers of unexpected elites. Arlette Frund, “Phillis Wheatley, a Public Intellectual,” in *Toward an Intellectual History of Black Women*, ed. Mia Bay et al. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 35-52.

legalized child kidnapping for economic gain. Frund, who is no friend of racialized thought, unwittingly subjugates Wheatley's narrative by injecting such an insensitive phrase into veins of our current social imaginary. Frund essentially advances the myth that slave trafficking can be humane. Wheatley confronts this myth in her poem "On Being Brought From Africa to America."<sup>88</sup> Du Bois believed the ethic of abolitionism did not manifest until the slave labor force was stabilized: "Slaves as article of commerce were shipped as long as the traffic paid. When the Americans had enough black laborers for their immediate demand, the moral action of the eighteenth century had a chance to make its faint voice heard."<sup>89</sup>

### **Jeffersonian Racism**

Wheatley's identity as a young-adult African female skewed the ways in which many Anglo male observers viewed her poetry and prose. In fact, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., makes the point that Thomas Jefferson, in his *Notes to the State of Virginia (1784)*, castigated Wheatley with these words, "[R]eligion, indeed, has produced a Phillis Whately [*sic*], but it could not produce a poet. The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism."<sup>90</sup> Betsy Erkkila locks on to Jefferson's potential motivation in casting Wheatley aside like an intellectual dilettante. Elsewhere in his *Notes*, Jefferson had a "suspicion" that blacks were innately "inferior to the whites in the endowments of both mind and body."<sup>91</sup> Erkkila further explains that Jefferson observes the "potential danger of Wheatley's poems as proof against [his] 'suspicion' of racial

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<sup>88</sup>*The Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, ed. John C. Shields, Schomburg Library of Nineteenth Century Black Women Writers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 18.

<sup>89</sup>"The Negro Problems," in *W. E. B. Du Bois: A Reader*, ed. David Levering Lewis (New York: Henry Holt, 1995), 49.

<sup>90</sup>Gates, *Trials of Phillis Wheatley*.

<sup>91</sup>Betsy Erkkila, "Revolutionary Women," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 6, no. 2 (Autumn 1987): 210.

inequality” by singling Wheatley’s oeuvre out for criticism.<sup>92</sup> Furthermore, Erkkila contends that Jefferson *intentionally* “transmutes [Wheatley’s] name from ‘wheat’ to ‘what’” to denigrate her poetic contribution.<sup>93</sup>

Jefferson’s racist comment would have inflicted more pain on the emotional psyche of the young poet had she been alive to read them. But she died the year of publication and was therefore delivered from the shame of reading Jefferson’s vituperative statements against her “visionary poetics.”<sup>94</sup> Nonetheless, throughout her life, Wheatley solicited a sympathetic hearing from potential critics: “As [Wheatley’s] Attempts in Poetry are now sent into the World, it is hoped the Critic will not severely censure their Defects; and we presume they have too much Merit to be cast aside with Contempt, as worthless and trifling Effusions.”<sup>95</sup> Jefferson’s racist, and plausibly sexist, ideas against black intelligentsia and women could have crushed Wheatley’s aspirations to be taken seriously. His racist biases simply could not envision a black woman as an intellectual equal. Jefferson was known to view black women sexually, not intellectually.<sup>96</sup> Erkkila states, “Jefferson’s comment on the issue of race represents one of

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<sup>92</sup>Erkkila, “Revolutionary Women,” 210.

<sup>93</sup>Erkkila, “Revolutionary Women,” 210.

<sup>94</sup>Erkkila, “Revolutionary Women,” 207-9.

<sup>95</sup>Phillis Wheatley, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (London: A. Bell, 1776).

<sup>96</sup>Jefferson, for example, had a sexual relationship with Sally Hemings, an enslaved African-American. Jefferson impregnated Hemings when she was sixteen years old. Kendi notes Jefferson was in his forties at the time of conception (Kendi, *Stamped from The Beginning*, 118). This is not solely an indictment against Jefferson’s age, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status *per se*, since older men frequently married younger women in this era of American history. What I find problematic is that historic records suggest that Hemings, whose father was white and mother black, had little choice in the matter as chattel. Some historians label Hemings as Jefferson’s mistress, which is not a fitting title for an enslaved African woman because “mistress” connotes mutual consent. Hemings was a victim of early American forced concubinage or rape. Hemings became Jefferson’s concubine from her teenage years into adulthood. For orientation, see Joseph J. Ellis, *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing, 1997); Joshua D. Rothman, *Notorious in the Neighborhood: Sex and Families across the Color Line in Virginia, 1787-1861* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning*, 79-143.

the first attempts of the founding father to counter revolutionary discourse of equality with postrevolutionary discourse of racial and sexual difference.”<sup>97</sup> And yet, never hearing the heartless criticisms of the constitutional framer, Wheatley submitted her poems for public scrutiny at the non-negotiable behest of her “best and most generous friends.”<sup>98</sup>

In the preface to her work, Wheatley highlights several specific words. For example, she lacked a desire to publish her own poetry even though she made it known to others. She writes that she “had no Intention ever to have published them [poems]; nor would they have made their Appearance, but at the *Importunity* [emphasis added] of many of her best, and most generous friends.”<sup>99</sup> Wheatley’s word choice is insightful. She describes her publishing ambitions with the word “importunity,” revealing how those who held power over her encouraged or coaxed outward submission. This seems to be the first instance of subversive speech in Wheatley. She used the terms “best,” “generous,” and “friends” to sedate her inability to function as a free moral agent. Wheatley was not at liberty to say “no” to the persistent demands of her so-called “friends.” She understood her role in society, so she consented to their demands while dispatching hints toward indirect protest. As such, Engberg correctly exposes Wheatley subterfuge when she uses the “third person instead of the traditional first person” in her preface.<sup>100</sup> Engberg states, “Referring to herself as ‘her’ and ‘she,’ Wheatley creates a schism between the self who wrote the poem and the image of herself.”<sup>101</sup> This allows Wheatley, according to Engberg, to “subordinat[e] herself to her readers, who have the ability to claim the ‘I’

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<sup>97</sup>Erkkila, “Revolutionary Women,” 210.

<sup>98</sup>*Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, iv.

<sup>99</sup>*Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, iv.

<sup>100</sup>Engberg, *The Right to Write*, 41.

<sup>101</sup>Engberg, *The Right to Write*, 41.

pronoun as free citizens.”<sup>102</sup> Moreover, Engberg explains that Wheatley’s entire preface is fashioned to embrace the “ideology that constrains her as a slave, that she is not capable of writing.”<sup>103</sup> Wheatley takes this approach so “there is no reason for readers to feel threatened by her ability to challenge their expectations.”<sup>104</sup>

Moreover, Engberg reasons that Wheatley wanted her poetry published, but she could not instigate the matter since such actions by a woman were socially uncouth. Wheatley plays the pied piper of sorts, giving her friends access to the poems with knowledge that they could not resist the sound of her melodious verse. This led her hearers to demand publishing. Engberg compares Wheatley’s subtle promotional influence with Ann Bradstreet’s similar affirmation that “her best and most generous friends” gave publishing impetus.<sup>105</sup> Engberg rightly believes that eighteenth-century women utilized self-deprecation to avoid upsetting the patriarchal fabric of their day. In so doing, Anglo-American women exercised extreme care, sedating their public intellect to quell potential scrutiny from Anglo-male leaders.

Nevertheless, Engberg’s comparison has a fatal flaw. It misses the important variable that makes Bradstreet and Wheatley drastically different. Simply put, Wheatley was an enslaved black woman who lacked both privacy and personal agency. Bradstreet, on the other hand, lived as a free Anglo-American female with both personal privacy and the right to write poetry at her leisure.

Wheatley battled racialized thinking in America with the stroke of every pen. One observes the subtle chastisement of sexism and racism in Wheatley’s lamentation insofar as she expected intellectual contempt against her oeuvre. No matter how much

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<sup>102</sup>Engberg, *The Right to Write*, 41.

<sup>103</sup>Engberg, *The Right to Write*, 42.

<sup>104</sup>Engberg, *The Right to Write*, 42.

<sup>105</sup>Engberg, *The Right to Write*, 42.

prowess she showed to the watching world, she lived under the veil of color-based scorn. Her economic opportunity, therefore, was a moot issue; she had no economic autonomy. In fact, her very existence was in constant flux as New England lawmakers eradicated blackness from the prescribed personhood handed down by the Creator of the universe.<sup>106</sup> Natural rights theory and true republicanism, therefore, were used to expose the hypocrisy of high sounding Christian dogma and the ways in which Americans really behaved *a la* Alexis de Tocqueville. Although Wheatley was not living in post-revolutionary America, Erkkila helps us understand the “repressive atmosphere” of pre- and post-revolutionary America. She contends, “[W]omen continued to write and aspire, but, like Phillis Wheatley, they learned to speak with a double-tongue” by “manipulating the language of republicanism” to their political advantage.<sup>107</sup>

Wheatley’s enslaved status caused her to accommodate her voice to navigate the double-edged sword of racialization and sexism in patriarchal New England.<sup>108</sup> She knew her audience extremely well, and wrote with their presuppositions and prejudices at the forefront of her mind. Mary McAleer Balkun makes this point in a provocative essay entitled, “Phillis Wheatley’s Construction of Otherness and the Rhetoric of Performed Ideology.” Balkun contends that Wheatley exerted “irony, doubling, internal stress

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<sup>106</sup>Nicholas Guyatt, *Bind Us Apart: How Enlightened Americans Invented Racial Segregation* (New York: Basic Books, 2016).

<sup>107</sup>Erkkila, “Revolutionary Women,” 219.

<sup>108</sup>The Bible does not condone slavery and sexism. Articles that employ a redemptive-historical hermeneutic, paying attention to the grammatical-historical-literary-theological meaning of biblical text, are most helpful when contemplating the slavery and sexism question. See, for example, James M. Hamilton, Jr., “Does the Bible Condone Slavery and Sexism,” in *Defense of the Bible: A Comprehensive Apologetic for the Authority of Scripture*, ed. Steven B. Cowan and Terry L. Wilder (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2013), 335-48. Moreover, I reject William J. Webb’s idea of “redemptive-movement hermeneutic” because it seems to disregard a closed canon and privileges reader-response hermeneutics. For more information, see William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 30-66. For a helpful rejoinder to Webb’s thesis, see Thomas R. Schreiner, review of *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals* by William Webb, *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 6 (2002): 46-64, accessed March 24, 2017, [http://d3pi8hptl0qhh4.cloudfront.net/documents/tschreiner/6.1\\_article.pdf](http://d3pi8hptl0qhh4.cloudfront.net/documents/tschreiner/6.1_article.pdf).

patterns, and puns” to move her audience from a privileged position to a confused learner. She states, “[Wheatley] takes the audience from a position of initial confidence and agreement, to confusion and uncertainty, to a new ideological position after each poem.”<sup>109</sup>

### **The Implausibility of Slavery**

Wheatley, as an African diasporic evangelical, brought different questions to the problem of slavery.<sup>110</sup> In the spirit of Tocqueville, she rightly dismissed arguments that used Scripture to defend slavery. For example, Thomas Thompson, an eighteenth-century religious thinker, saw no problem with Christianity’s involvement in slavery. In 1772, he wrote a short treatise entitled, “The African Trade for Negro Slaves, Consistent with Humanity and Revealed Religion.” Wheatley, however, ridiculed the “scornful eye” many British-American evangelicals held against the “sable race.”<sup>111</sup> Afrosensitive evangelicals lambasted any social construction that made African subservience compatible with God’s sovereignty and providential goodness.

Wheatley’s worldview was informed by a Calvinistic vision of God’s sovereignty and human responsibility.<sup>112</sup> Wheatley’s theological moorings can be attributed to her captors’ ecclesiological beliefs. Carretta provides the best explanation

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<sup>109</sup>Mary McAleer Balkun, “Phillis Wheatley’s Construction of Otherness and the Rhetoric of Performed Ideology,” *African American Review* 36, no. 1 (2002): 122.

<sup>110</sup>I highly recommend David Brion Davis’s trilogy on the problem of slavery: Davis, *Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*; Davis, *Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*; Davis, *Inhuman Bondage*.

<sup>111</sup>See Adeeko, “Writing Africa under the Shadow of Slavery,” 14.

<sup>112</sup>I first became aware of Wheatley’s Reformed theological leanings reading these works: Thabiti Anyabwile, *Decline of African American Theology: From Biblical Faith to Cultural Captivity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2007); Anthony J. Carter, *On Being Black and Reformed: A New Perspective on the African-American Christian Experience* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Pub., 2003), 77. John Saillant, *Black Puritan, Black Republican: The Life and Thought of Lemuel Haynes, 1753-1833* (London: Oxford University Press, 2003), 4.



regarding Wheatley's indoctrination process. John and Susannah's introduction into a New England Congregational church marked their theological orientation and practice. He states, "[They were] married in the Congregationalist New South Church on December 25, 1741. All of their children were baptized there."<sup>113</sup> Like many professed Christians in New England who enslaved Africans, John and Susannah felt obligated to proselytize young Wheatley. Because they both adhered to Reformed theology, it is likely Wheatley developed her understanding of God's working throughout human history from this theological vantage point.<sup>114</sup>

Unfortunately, Carretta both presents a myopic understanding of Wheatley's Calvinism and distorts Congregational polity. For example, Carretta contends, "Like Anglicans, they [Congregationalists] were Protestants who rejected the authority that the Roman Catholic Church claimed for the Pope *and* [emphasis added] the teachings of medieval theologians (the 'Church Fathers')." <sup>115</sup> Carretta misrepresents how some Congregationalists approached patristic theology. Many Congregational ministers appealed to the writings of John Calvin who drank deeply from patristic wells without apology. As we shall see, this is why Wheatley's political theology is fruitfully likened to Augustinian ideas on social justice.

Wheatley also challenged eighteenth-century British-American notions concerning the inferior roles of women and Africans. New England's sociopolitical structure advanced the idea that African peoples—as well as females of any ethnicity—were intellectually inferior to Anglo males. As both an African and a female, Wheatley endured a double-edged inferiority. Most Anglo-Britons rejected the notion that blacks had a capacity for elevated thought. As mentioned above, they believed African peoples

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<sup>113</sup>Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley*, 24.

<sup>114</sup>Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley*, 24.

<sup>115</sup>Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley*, 24.

were worthy only of imitation, not intellectual imagination.

Like many enslaved Africans, Wheatley's intellect was marginalized by the masses. She became a bystander—not an actor—in her own narrative. Remarkably, with the help of friends associated with her captors, Wheatley became adept in mastering ancient and contemporary languages. When she mastered Greek and Latin, as well as other forms of religious literature amid bondage, she inherently linked freedom of thought and freedom of body, giving evangelical activism a pronounced African diasporic exemplar in eighteenth-century Boston. Despite her dehumanized existence, Wheatley developed an unassailable confidence in the sovereignty and trustworthiness of God. Carretta, for example, reveals the subversive protest found even in Wheatley's picture in the book's opening. Carretta contends Wheatley's scholarly image was encased in an oval cell by the young African-American painter, Scipio Moorehead, as a sign of subversive protest.<sup>116</sup>

In his biography, Carretta exposes the sociocultural subtleties in Wheatley's dress and posture in order to refurbish our understanding of the frontispiece portrait. Carretta states, "A frontispiece depicting an eighteenth-century black woman capable of writing poetry had revolutionary implications . . . . The frontispiece emphasizes Wheatley's African heritage and her inferior social status by containing her likeness within an oval whose framing words appear to restrict the extent of her gaze . . . . The dark string around Wheatley's neck subtly reminded viewers of her enslaved colonial status."<sup>117</sup> If contemporary evangelicals observe this picture without knowledge of the consistent use of duplicity and subversive speech within the pedagogy of the oppressed,

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<sup>116</sup>Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley*, 100-1. Some might find Carretta's interpretation suspect since ovals were sometimes used in other frontispiece images during the eighteenth century. However, the ownership verbiage that is incased within the oval's borders makes a plausible argument for subversive protest in agreement with Carretta.

<sup>117</sup>Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley*, 101.

they will quickly bypass its seemingly opaque polemical nuances. Moreover, Carretta draws insight from Beth Tobin's work, *Picturing Imperial Power*, which revisions Wheatley beyond the oft-repeated contemplative who sits thoughtfully in an unhindered position with the Bible at her side and pen in her hand, gazing into a world filled with justice and equality.<sup>118</sup> Instead, explains Carretta, Moorehead brilliantly limits Wheatley's potential by placing her owners' name in an arch above her entire person.<sup>119</sup>

Some historians, sociologists, and theologians estimate that around 50 to 100 million African peoples were, according to Richard Bullard, "lost through mass murder, kidnapping, the brutal shipping of Africans and the destruction of their families and nations."<sup>120</sup> These evils were perpetrated by European people in collusion with African traffickers. In 1772, the Mansfield Decision legally manumitted enslaved Africans from British colonies upon arrival to Great Britain.<sup>121</sup> England abolished slavery ninety years before America, and without the mass shedding of blood. In 1750, there were at least 250,000 enslaved Africans on American soil, most of whom lived in Southern states. Enslaved Christian Africans in both the North and South were included in this number, the vast majority of whom were owned by *Christian* captors.

When Wheatley arrived on British-American shores—likely with ornaments of bondage festooning her naked frame—she entered a strange world steeped in theological and ethical crisis. Many British-American evangelicals bifurcated spirituality and social justice by supporting the kidnapping and enslaving of African peoples through

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<sup>118</sup>See Beth Fowes Tobin, *Picturing Imperial Power: Colonial Subjects in Eighteenth-Century British Painting* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).

<sup>119</sup>Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley*, 101.

<sup>120</sup>See Richard D. Bullard, *Tellin' It Like it Is: An African Centered Christian Interpretation of Black Life and Issues* (Pine Bluff, AR: Vision Impact, 1995), 55-66.

<sup>121</sup>For more information on the Mansfield ruling, see Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley*, 120-28.

purchasing power; others fell into complicit silence.<sup>122</sup> Some Christians relied on pseudo-theological arguments that found their genesis in eisogetical understandings of the so-called “Hamitic Curse.”<sup>123</sup> As such, some British-Americans believed God cursed the Hamites, whose progeny became African peoples. This curse meant Africans were expected to serve in perpetuity the descendants of Japheth—who are Caucasian. Other evangelicals, however—not to mention other Quakers, deists, and agnostics—arrived at a different conclusion regarding the transatlantic and domestic slave trade.<sup>124</sup> Without question, evangelicals volleyed the question of slavery back and forth throughout the middle and late-eighteenth century; but Wheatley, only six or seven years of age when she arrived, could not fully comprehend the disjointed ethic of chattel slavery in the sociopolitical British-American economy.

One cannot appreciate Wheatley’s poetry without understanding her social location, especially how it engendered intrinsic trepidation. Mustakeem counters euphemized understandings of the transatlantic slave trade by highlighting the normative nature of terror, sex, and sickness aboard these vessels of mayhem. African females, for example, were often gang raped by mariners who arguably possessed pedophilic behaviors—the average age of an enslaved African female was between twelve and

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<sup>122</sup>See Farrow, Lang, and Frank, *Complicity*. African-American religious scholars as well as some non-evangelical religious historians rightly criticize the hypocrisy of men like Jonathan Edwards who, many years prior to Wheatley’s arrival in British-America, “owned a succession of slaves, beginning with Venus,” explains Kenneth Minkema. Edwards observed African people serve the dominant class in British-America from childhood which advanced the common belief that African peoples were ordained by God to serve the needs of elite classes. For more information, see Kenneth P. Minkema, “Jonathan Edwards’s Defense of Slavery,” *Massachusetts Historical Review* 4 (Race and Slavery ed., 2002): 23-59.

<sup>123</sup>For more information on the ways in which nineteenth-century theologians contemplated the foundational ideas of their forebears regarding race, see Sylvester A. Johnson, *The Myth of Ham in Nineteenth-Century American Christianity: Race, Heathens, and the People of God* (New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2004).

<sup>124</sup>For more information, see Louis Ruchames, *Racial Thought in America: From the Puritans to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: The Universal Library, 1970). I highly recommend this work. Ruchames collates original source material on the slavery question from a myriad of thinkers involved with transatlantic racial discourse.

fifteen. Mustakeem recreates the dreaded voyage by examining travel journals and cargo manifestos. In her introduction, she dialogues with one the most astute treatises on the transatlantic slave trade by Du Bois, *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade to the United States of America, 1638-1870*, in which Du Bois focused on how the economic motivation of supply and demand management bolstered the slave system.<sup>125</sup> Mustakeem, however, “explores the social conditions and human costs embedded in the world of maritime slavery . . . reconceptualiz[ing] the Middle Passage as central to the operation of the Atlantic human manufacturing process.”<sup>126</sup>

There is nothing explicit in Wheatley’s writings to suggest molestation during her aquatic toil. Yet contemporary readers should remember Wheatley’s writings were censored. We can never be sure of the potential pains that remained dormant in her soul. She could never say everything because her audience desired felicitous poetry and prose. In this era, few women had opportunities to speak truth to power in literature or within the public square, so Wheatley acted wise as a serpent and gentle as a dove.<sup>127</sup> As a public intellectual, Wheatley could not hide behind pseudonyms like some female writers who used their pens to confront bigotries in the patriarchal New England economy.<sup>128</sup> On the contrary, she used her poetic genius to capture their minds while subtly confronting their hearts.

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<sup>125</sup>See Mustakeem, *Slavery at Sea*, 3, 14.

<sup>126</sup>Mustakeem, *Slavery at Sea*, 9-10.

<sup>127</sup>For an excellent overview on the role of women in Christian history, I recommend Diana Lynn Severance, *Feminine Threads: Women in the Tapestry of Christian History* (Glasgow: Bell and Bain, 2011). A weakness of the work is Severance’s inability to highlight the contributions of African and African diasporic sisters of color in advancing the Christian gospel worldwide. Severance does acknowledge Wheatley’s contribution with a trite introduction before posting the popular poems “On being bought from AFRICA to AMERICA” and “On the Death of the Reverend George Whitfield.” One wonders if Severance had a thorough grasp of eighteenth-century African diasporic protest hermeneutics prior to writing her short biographical sketch because she fails to interpret either poem.

<sup>128</sup>Frund, “Phillis Wheatley, a Public Intellectual,” 35-52.

## Prisoner of War

Wheatley was a prisoner of economic war. In her poem “On Being Brought from Africa to America,” Wheatley cautiously interprets her kidnapping through God’s providence without ascribing positivity to the debased process of human trafficking. Afrosensitive evangelicals, like Wheatley, refused to eradicate God’s good hand amid such unthinkable atrocities against black minds, bodies, and souls. Non-evangelical scholars, however, take a libertarian view of providence and human freedom.<sup>129</sup> They perceive God’s involvement on peripheral grounds because they find it inconceivable that God could work, either by decree or by permission, within such an uncivilized, pervasive system of black exploitation. Afrosensitive evangelicals partially agree insofar as they avoid using the language of “decree” with respect to slavery since Scripture neither endorses nor absolutely discounts all forms of slavery. Christian orthodoxy, therefore, requires afrosensitive evangelicals to affirm the permissive will of God—no matter how grotesque the situation is “under the sun,” to borrow Qoheleth’s language. Ultimately, Wheatley refuses to diminish God’s transcendent nature in an effort to make sense of moral evils.

Some adherents of American evangelical spirituality, especially those who have an affinity for Wheatley’s poetry and prose, uncritically utilize “On Being Brought

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<sup>129</sup>This includes James Cone, J. Deotis Roberts, Deloris Williams, Cornel West, Howard Thurman, Anthony Pinn, Cheryl Kirk-Duggan, and Allen Boesak. See James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997); James H. Cone, “Calling the Oppressors to Account for Four Centuries of Terror,” in *Currents in Theology and Mission* 31, no. 3 (June 2004): 179-86; Reginald F. Davis, “African-American Interpretation of Scripture,” *Journal of Religious Thought* 57-58 (2001-2005): 93-105; *Black Religion, Black Theology: The Collected Essays of J. Deotis Roberts*, ed. David Emmanuel Goatley (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003), 169-78; Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995); Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982); Howard Thurman, “Suffering,” in *Moral Evil and Redemption Suffering: A History of Theodicy in African-American Religious Thought*, ed. Anthony B. Pinn (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2002), 225-45; Anthony B. Pinn, *Why, Lord? Suffering and Evil in Black Theology* (New York: Continuum Pub., 1995); Kirk-Duggan, *Exorcising Evil*, 38-132; Allen A. Boesak, “Theodicy: ‘De Lawd Knowed How it Was’: Black Theology and Black Suffering,” in *Cambridge Companion to Black Theology*, ed. Dwight N. Hopkins and Edward P. Antonio (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 156-68.

from Africa to America” to support a pragmatic view of American slavery.<sup>130</sup>

Philosophically, pragmatism finds its ideological origin in the early American mind, even though it was not formally conceptualized until the late-nineteenth century. At the risk of being slightly reductionistic, pragmatism means any hypothesis can be justified by its practical consequence. Put another way, the end does justify the means, so long as the end is successful or positive. The most prominent figures or, perhaps, framers of pragmatism are William James, Charles Sanders Peirce, John Dewey, and Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.<sup>131</sup>

Christian apologist Nancy Pearcey has described the core assumption of philosophical pragmatism this way: “[If] life has evolved, then the human mind has evolved as well—and the human sciences must be rebuilt on that basis: psychology, education, law, and theology.”<sup>132</sup> In other words, humankind is in an ethical flux because the progress toward maturity never ends. Human beings, then, should utilize any means necessary to build civilizations if the greatest number (majority culture) experiences the greatest good (economic success). Wheatley’s journey to America, in the thinking of some white evangelicals, had a positive effect. They put a positive spin on Wheatley’s horrendous life experience by assuming that her knowledge of Christ came only through the comfort of a pristine New England family.

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<sup>130</sup>Carretta, who wrote the only full-length biography of Phillis Wheatley, contends, “‘On Being Brought from Africa to America,’ which according to Wheatley’s 1772 ‘Proposals’ was written in 1768, has been called ‘the most reviled poem in African American literature.’ The poem’s notoriety understandably but unfairly derives from Wheatley’s apparent acceptance of contemporaneous justifications for the transatlantic slave trade.” Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley*, 60.

<sup>131</sup>See Steven B. Cowan and James S. Spiegel, *The Love of Wisdom: A Christian Introduction to Philosophy* (Nashville: B & H Pub., 2009), 41-45.

<sup>132</sup>See Nancy Pearcey, *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 228-32. Pearcey writes a comprehensive approach to worldview studies from a presuppositional apologetic framework. She models a theological interrogation of competing worldviews via the creation, fall, and redemption schematic. The weakness of the work, for African American readers, is that Pearcey seldom engages the African American experience, except for three pejorative examples: Pearcey, *Total Truth*, 251-54; 337; 444n45.

Even her biographer Caretta falls victim to this false supposition: “[Wheatley] can say without *irony* [emphasis added], ‘Father of mercy, ‘twas thy gracious hand / Brought me in safety from those *dark bodies* [emphasis added].”<sup>133</sup> This offers a correct understanding of God’s omniscience, omnipotence, and benevolence, but it draws the wrong conclusion. To the contrary, enslaved Africans *often* spoke about God’s sovereignty and chattel slavery *with* irony. Subversive and properly duplicitous speech was commonplace among oppressed Africans. Furthermore, like any oppressed class, language was often accommodated to keep oppressors at bay. Erkkila points to this truth for people “who have lived and written in a dangerous social environment.” Make no mistake about it: Wheatley lived under the yoke of patriarchal privilege and nationalistic terrorism against black and brown bodies. Thus, as Erkkila makes plain, “Phillis Wheatley knew the art and necessity of speaking with a double tongue.”<sup>134</sup>

Shields rightly argues for Wheatley’s subtle confrontation of the slave system through veiled protest in co-belligerency with Moorehead, the young painter: “What Wheatley essentially does, then, is to decide that this world, which allows slavery to remain legitimate, is unsatisfactory to her; so, she manipulates the conventions of neoclassicism to build in her poems another, acceptable world.”<sup>135</sup> Several scholars are quick to note Wheatley’s masterful manipulation of the master’s language to create space for, not against, her ideas.<sup>136</sup> Such polemical postures, in any dispensation, take uncanny

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<sup>133</sup>Caretta. *Phillis Wheatley*, 58-61.

<sup>134</sup>Erkkila, “Revolutionary Women,” 205.

<sup>135</sup>*Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, xxix.

<sup>136</sup>Russell Reising, *Loose Ends: Closure and Crisis in the American Social Text* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 73-115; Jeffrey Bilbro, “Who Are Lost and How They’re Found: Redemption and Theodicy in Wheatley, Newton, and Cowper,” *Early American Literature* 47, no. 3 (2012): 562-65; Robert L. Kendrick, “Re-Membering America: Phillis Wheatley’s Intertextual Epic,” *African American Review* 30, no. 1 (1996): 71-88; Kendrick, “Other Questions: Phillis Wheatley and the Ethics of Interpretation,” *Cultural Critique*, no. 38 (1997): 39-64; Kendrick, “Snatching a Laurel, Wearing a Mask: Phillis Wheatley’s Literary Nationalism and the Problem of Style,” *Style* 27, no. 2 (1972): 222-51; Dorothy Mains Prince, “Phillis Wheatley: The Duplicity of Freedom,” *Maryland Humanities*, no. 78



intellectual skill and emotional well-being. Nevertheless, Carretta correctly challenges misplaced judgments against Wheatley, saying, “Modern critics have accused Wheatley, or at least the primary voice in her poem, of rejecting her African heritage and engaging racial self-hatred. But such critics confuse accommodation with appropriation.”<sup>137</sup>

Erkkila makes a similar point against Leroi Jones’s assault on Wheatley’s perceived anti-black presuppositions. Jones, explains Erkkila, believed Wheatley made a “ludicrous departure from the huge black voices that splintered southern nights.”<sup>138</sup>

Erkkila shows that Jones forgets Wheatley’s enslaved status and womanhood. The mere fact that she writes neoclassical poetry is an affront to the universal belief in black inferiority. Erkkila is exactly right about Wheatley’s very presence exploding the social order insofar as the common reasoning from the white imperial intelligentsia typically asked the question: “Can anything good come out of Africa?” Wheatley proves that not only is there good in her native land, but there is also brilliance and beauty. In her above commentary, Erkkila captures the essence of afrosensitive evangelicalism in New England. She integrates the complex hermeneutic of race, class, and gender into her evaluation, and in doing so, she avoids an Afrocentric and Eurocentric approach to Wheatley.<sup>139</sup>

Wheatley’s organization of the poems that incase “On Being Brought from AFRICA to AMERICA” hint at protest. As Russell Reising suggests, “Wheatley’s subtle

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(2001): 21-24; John C. Shields, “Phillis Wheatley’s Use of Classicism,” *American Literature: A Journal of Literary History, Criticism, and Bibliography* 52, no. 1 (1980): 97-111; Shields, “Phillis Wheatley’s Subversion of Classical Stylistics,” *African American Poetics Style* 27, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 252-70; Shields, “Phillis Wheatley’s Subversive Pastoral,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 27, no. 4 (Summer 1994): 631-47; Jared Ross Hardesty, “Mastering the Master’s Language,” *African American Intellectual History Blog*, December 22, 2015, accessed March 12, 2016, <http://www.aaihs.org/mastering-the-masters-language/>.

<sup>137</sup>Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley*, 61.

<sup>138</sup>Erkkila, “Revolutionary Women,” 202.

<sup>139</sup>Erkkila, “Revolutionary Women,” 207-10.

arranging of the poems in her book responds both to a poem's manifest content and also to its printed milieu."<sup>140</sup> Reising notes that the "political disruption is veiled within the poem, but heightened by its position, while in the other, the published order of the two odes deflects the explosive potential of their mutually constitutive political commentary."<sup>141</sup> In other words, Wheatley found it necessary to arrange the poems in such a manner that one would not deeply sense a black revolutionary spirit against American slavery. Perhaps analyzing this controversial poem from an afrosensitive framework will provide us a different reading:

'T WAS mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land,  
Taught my benighted soul to understand  
That there's a God, that there's 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.

Afrosensitive evangelicals will typically employ some form of subversive speech in the public square. Therefore, modern readers should remain keenly aware of literary cues used to critique oppressive epistemologies. Mary Catherine Loving, for example, pays close attention to Wheatley's use of words by acknowledging the impact of Wheatley's paternalistic and racialized social milieu. Loving contends that readers who excise the sociopolitical implications from their literary analysis of Wheatley miss significant allusions she makes against British-America's culture of eighteenth-century slave Christianity. Loving observes, "Careful textual analysis begins with a reader's awareness of a writer's engagement within the norms of her period, norms which are, in fact, 'forms which can be filled in different fashions.'"<sup>143</sup> Loving argues Wheatley "fills

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<sup>140</sup>Reising, *Loose Ends*, 106.

<sup>141</sup>Reising, *Loose Ends*, 106.

<sup>143</sup>Mary Catherine Loving, "Uncovering Subversion in Phillis Wheatley's Signature Poem: 'On Being Brought from AFRICA to AMERICA,'" *Journal of African American Studies* 20 (Spring 2016):

in the strict forms of iambic pentameter and the octave with observations regarding the movement of her body from one port to another.”<sup>144</sup> In other words, Wheatley rides the lyrical waves of kidnapping, captivity, and spiritual deliverance while chiding those who hold Christianity and chattel slavery in concert. To be sure, she avoids blatantly implicating all who support the economic system of human trafficking—a list that includes both John and Susanna Wheatley and Boston’s male elites who endorsed her poetry on behalf of John Wheatley. Colonial elites advocated for the patriarchal rule of white men over every person of color, as well as over white women and children.<sup>145</sup>

When we examine the above text, Wheatley gives attention to key terms in her title. According to Loving, each term indirectly chastises the slave system.<sup>146</sup> Wheatley, for example, titles the poem in both lowercase and capital letters. Writers and editors often used this stylistic technique for dramatic effect. As such, Balkun surmises one cannot steadfastly argue that Wheatley punctuated the text herself.<sup>147</sup> If this was Wheatley’s doing, however, it highlights the theodical nature of her journey from “AFRICA” to “AMERICA.” Like many enslaved Africans, Wheatley presents a title that, according to Anthony Pinn, “faced the classic difficulty of reconciling God with the

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67-74.

<sup>144</sup>Loving, “Uncovering Subversion in Phillis Wheatley’s Signature Poem,” 69.

<sup>145</sup>Erkkila, “Revolutionary Women,” 211-19. Erkkila’s essay on revolutionary women connects female uprisings to revolutionary war rhetoric. She compares the works of Abigail Adams and Phillis Wheatley. The former was the wife of Continental delegate and future president, John Adams (1797-1801), and the latter an enslaved African who had a shattered familial identity. Adams was a staunch advocate for women’s rights, considering slavery a wicked and abominable act that contradicted the rhetorical ideals of the American Constitution’s preamble. Erkkila examines Adams Family Correspondence between Abigail and John. In it, she discovers Abigail’s unrelenting criticism of the contradiction between slavery in America and the rhetoric of liberty. The framers of the Constitution lacked concern for universal liberty of all peoples, but rather promulgated colonial freedom from the bonds of a merciless father (Great Britain) against his sons (Colonial Americans). Abigail, according to Erkkila, could not stomach the nauseating tropes of family and slavery while Africans were being ripped from real families to become literal slaves of white upper-class males in the colonies.

<sup>146</sup>Loving, “Uncovering Subversion in Phillis Wheatley’s Signature Poem,” 69-70.

<sup>147</sup>Balkun, “Phillis Wheatley’s Construction of Otherness,” 129.

experience of evil.”<sup>148</sup>

Loving makes good sense in arguing for Wheatley’s subversive protest. She notes five rules of punctuation in her interaction with an early-nineteenth-century grammar by Joshua Bradley titled “A Brief, Practical System of Punctuation To Which are added Rules Respecting the Uses of Capitals, Etc. also Observation on English Versification, Etc. for the Use of Schools.”<sup>149</sup> Loving illustrates how Wheatley used three of these rules in her writings. Most importantly, for this conversation, is the rule concerning the capitalization of “principal words in the title of a book or essay.”<sup>150</sup> Unlike many evangelicals, Loving grasps the fact that Wheatley employs “a rhetoric of capitalization to position *AFRICA* [emphasis added] and *AMERICA* [emphasis added] as equal.” In so doing, she opposes both nativism and nationalism before the audience discerns the punch of this literary pugilist.<sup>151</sup>

Wheatley writes that the Lord’s mercy delivered her from paganism. But notice, in the original text, how she spells “*Pagan*.”<sup>152</sup> She italicizes the term as if to say,

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<sup>148</sup>Pinn, *Why Lord?*, 14.

<sup>149</sup>Loving, “Uncovering Subversion in Phillis Wheatley,” 69.

<sup>150</sup>Loving, “Uncovering Subversion in Phillis Wheatley,” 69.

<sup>151</sup>Loving’s astute interpretation deserves elongated attention. She states, “[Wheatley] acknowledges, certainly, the influence of American culture on her African sensibility, but she also rejects the notion of American superiority over her African self. Wheatley’s choice of title is significant as well in that it provides an early frame of reference for the movement about to be more fully described. The protagonist’s movement was not merely to AMERICA; it originated in AFRICA, suggesting the protagonist’s cognizance of her life before such movement.” In other words, Loving correctly avers that Wheatley foreshadows the current ethnic appellation “African American” which, unknown to most, describes the forced dispersion of black souls and bodies worldwide via the dreaded middle passage. African Americans are descendants of an oppressed and forgotten people who became instruments used to build the economic stability of America through centuries of blood, sweat, and tears. Loving, “Uncovering Subversion in Phillis Wheatley,” 69-70.

<sup>152</sup>Loving interacts with Bradley’s grammar text saying, “Bradley’s rules are no less important to deconstructing the emphasis or lack of emphasis Wheatley has given words in the poem. Bradley (1815) states that ‘Emphatic words are usually Italicized or expressed emphatically, by means of a horizontal stroke drawn under them with a pen.’” Loving, “Uncovering Subversion in Phillis Wheatley,” 20. I agree with Loving’s belief that Wheatley deploys five words in ON Being Brought from AFRICA to AMERICA to “underscore the poet’s subversive intent, an intent more developed fully in the poem” (20).

“I only employ this language to fit your [British-American racialized] sentiments.” Wheatley, therefore, highlights five words—*Pagan*, *Saviour*, *Christians*, *Negroes*, and *Cain*—to judge tacitly the audience’s ethical preoccupations.<sup>153</sup> In terms of Wheatley’s audience, Balkun, in conversation with Stephen Railton, reminds us “we use the term ‘reader’ for anyone who at any time opens a book and begins processing a text. ‘Audience,’ on the other hand, could be reversed to designate the specific group, the contemporary reading public, to whom an author originally addresses the text.”<sup>154</sup> In a similar fashion, Loving advises modern-day readers to focus on the racial biases Wheatley’s audience likely held against African peoples in order to better understand her poetical subversion.<sup>155</sup>

In dialoguing with Wheatley, Erkkila references Maya Angelou’s “Principle of Reverse”: “Anything that works for you can also work against you.”<sup>156</sup> Erkkila seems to use this maxim to illustrate Wheatley’s ability to provoke streams of thought that are often contrary to African agency and then redirect them toward principles that honor black humanity. She layers her verse with both commendation and condemnation—all unbeknownst to her hearers. Erkkila argues, “Speaking as a black woman slave, Wheatley turns the racial codes of the dominant culture back upon themselves, giving them an ironic inflection. What appears to be repetition is in fact a form of mimesis that mimics

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<sup>153</sup>Balkun writes, “Wheatley relies on indirection and the principle of association. This strategy is also evident in her use of the word *benighted* to describe the state of her soul. While it suggests the darkness of her African skin, it also resonates with the state of all those living in sin, including her audience. To be ‘benighted’ is to be in moral or spiritual darkness as a result of ignorance or lack of enlightenment, certainly a description with which many of Wheatley’s audience would have agreed. But, in addition, the word sets up the ideological enlightenment that Wheatley hopes will occur in the second stanza, when the speaker turns the tables on the audience. The idea that the speaker was brought to America by some force beyond her power to fight it once puts her in an authoritative [teaching] position [over her audience].” Balkun, “Phillis Wheatley’s Construction of Otherness,” 129.

<sup>154</sup>Balkun, “Phillis Wheatley’s Construction of Otherness,” 133n10.

<sup>155</sup>Loving, “Uncovering Subversion in Phillis Wheatley,” 73-74.

<sup>156</sup>Erkkila, “Revolutionary Women,” 206.

and mocks in the act of repeating.”<sup>157</sup>

Wheatley likely heard hundreds of sermons at the Old South Church in Boston; she was baptized there in 1771.<sup>158</sup> In these sermons, Wheatley was made aware that Euro-American evangelicals often viewed Akebulon (Africa) with disdain, so she calls Africa *pagan* to win a hearing before she rhetorically questions the very salvation of her oppressors. Gates believes some African-American thinkers despise Wheatley because they assume she naïvely accepted slavery without reservation.<sup>159</sup> But Loving refutes the possibility that Wheatley acquiesced to hateful epistemologies against black people, expositing each line with text critical care.<sup>160</sup>

For example, Loving contends “the closing line of the first couplet is a transition into the second couplet’s” rendition of the dreaded six-month transatlantic voyage, a voyage which left the poor child emaciated and clinging for life.<sup>161</sup> I disagree, however, with Loving’s next assertion that Wheatley boldly rebukes Christianity in the following line: “That there’s a God, that there’s a Saviour too.” Loving conjectures a closer connection to Islam in Wheatley’s religious imagination.<sup>162</sup> Although Loving correctly locates potentially subversive speech here, Wheatley attacks *slave-holding* Christianity, not orthodox Christian belief. She’s not decrying Christianity as such, but pointing to the incredulity of placing image-bearers in bondage in order to save their

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<sup>157</sup>Erkkila, “Revolutionary Women,” 206.

<sup>158</sup>Christopher Cameron performed extensive archival research on Wheatley. He located Wheatley’s baptismal record in the Old South Church Records, microfilm reel 4, Congregational Library. See Christopher Cameron, *To Plead Our Own Cause: African Americans in Massachusetts and the Making of the Antislavery Movement* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2014), 31, 143n12.

<sup>159</sup>Gates, *Trials of Phillis Wheatley*, 71.

<sup>160</sup>Loving, for example, shows that the term “benighted” refers to Wheatley’s “abduction by slave traders, her movement across the Atlantic Ocean, and last but certainly not least, the ‘horrors of the Middle Passage.’” Loving, “Uncovering Subversion in Phillis Wheatley,” 71.

<sup>161</sup>Loving, “Uncovering Subversion in Phillis Wheatley,” 71.

<sup>162</sup>Loving, “Uncovering Subversion in Phillis Wheatley,” 71.

souls. Wheatley seems to say, “I did not know the Savior because no one shared the gospel with me. Therefore, I could not seek the Savior until he was made known to me by a herald.” As argued above, Wheatley disparages evangelistic slavery. In afrosensitive evangelical thought, British-American evangelistic redemption came with an extremely heavy price. Africans were abducted, loaded onto a ship, starved, and purchased—under the guise of world evangelization, while shackled to commercial chains.<sup>163</sup> Loving questions any interpretation of Wheatley’s “On Being Brought from AFRICA to AMERICA” that silences the wickedness of slavery. There are few essays in Wheatley scholarship that offer stronger interpretative insights than Loving’s revisionist interpretation.<sup>164</sup>

As stated in the introduction, many scholars accuse Wheatley of cultural misorientation. But Balkun disagrees: “Although Wheatley has long been criticized for her inattention to public matters, especially slavery and racial issues, recent scholarship has demonstrated that she was indeed a socially aware poet.”<sup>165</sup> Wheatley understood her audience, and like an astute afrosensitive evangelical, she manipulated her pen to casually antagonize their prejudices without stifling an opportunity to be heard by the broader public.<sup>166</sup> Public square conversations for oppressed peoples in eighteenth-century Boston

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<sup>163</sup>Loving states, “Taken together, lines three and four, the beginning and ending of the second couplet, reveal that speaker’s knowledge regarding the existence of a ‘Saviour’ has been to her detriment, rather than her remedy.” Loving, “Uncovering Subversion in Phillis Wheatley,” 72.

<sup>164</sup>The term “revisionist” can be used positively since historians are recreating potential realities based on the most reliable sources available. No one has a transcendental purview over past events. Therefore, all historians should give their best efforts to provide the most probable account of a given historical moment.

<sup>165</sup>Balkun, “Phillis Wheatley’s Construction of Otherness,” 121-35.

<sup>166</sup>Wheatley’s literary manipulation fashions Mark Antony’s subtle castigation of Julius Caesar’s murderers saying, “They are honorable men.” With his constant refrain that insinuates these men lacked nobility and honor, Antony overwhelms the audience’s emotions with a benevolent picture of a priestly ruler who was taken out by an envious and beastly senatorial. See William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar: Oxford School Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), xv.

took courage and oratorical dexterity.<sup>167</sup>

Afrosensitive evangelicals revere first-order doctrines. Wheatley admits her need for salvation in Christ alone, and her inability to save herself apart from the self-revelatory nature of the gospel and the Holy Spirit's regenerative work. In this sense, Wheatley remains committed to Christian orthodoxy. Some scholars, like Shields, question the notion that Wheatley was a committed Calvinist who affirmed the exclusivity of Jesus Christ.<sup>168</sup> He believes Wheatley was first and foremost a daughter of the European Enlightenment, possessing a syncretistic metaphysical worldview.<sup>169</sup>

The above section defined evangelicalism through Bebbington's quadrilateral and discussed Haykin's reassessment of evangelicalism and the Enlightenment with hopes of challenging Shields's supposition that Wheatley modeled syncretistic beliefs, rather than embodying the theological and ethical preoccupations of an afrosensitive evangelical. Theologically, Wheatley affirmed limited theodicy because of her commitment to the *imago Dei*.<sup>170</sup> Ethically, she repudiated slave trafficking as an honorable strategy for world evangelization, and rejected any notion that chattel slavery had a legitimately redemptive *telos*. As a result, her poetry subversively accused those who supported slavery's economic system—hunters, gatherers, transporters, sellers, and buyers—as lacking true knowledge of God and biblical conversion.

The next chapter engages Wheatley as a theopolitical abolitionist intellectual who incorporates Revolutionary War tropes to chastise the new republic's uncritical

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<sup>167</sup>Hardesty, "Slavery, Freedom, and Dependence in Pre-Revolutionary Boston," 65-111.

<sup>168</sup>John C. Shields, *Phillis Wheatley's Poetics of Liberation: Backgrounds and Contexts* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 2008), 140, 153-55, 173.

<sup>169</sup>Shields, *Phillis Wheatley's Poetics of Liberation*, 95-148.

<sup>170</sup>Bilbro, "Who Are Lost and How They're Found," 565-66. The term *imago Dei* is Latin for the image of God. In Christian theology, it connotes the idea that humankind is the crowning jewel of God's creation, being created in the divine image of God (c.f., Gen 1:26, 27; 5:1, 3; and 9:6; 1 Cor 11:7; Col 3:10; and James 3:9 for explicit references to the phrase). However, Ps 8 implicitly mentions the idea.



adherence to closed American exceptionalism.<sup>171</sup> In this sense, readers will further comprehend the theological and ethical preoccupations of afro-sensitive evangelical activism in colonial New England.

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<sup>171</sup>John Wilsey has a correct understanding of closed and open American exceptionalism. Wilsey explains that “when American exceptionalism calls for a God-ordained empire, then it leads to idolatry and injustice. When American exceptionalism points to moral and civil example, then it leads to compassion, justice and general human flourishing.” Wilsey refers to the “former as *closed* and the latter as *open* American exceptionalism.” John D. Wilsey, *American Exceptionalism and Civil Religion: Reassessing the History of an Idea* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2015), 19.

CHAPTER 3  
WHEATLEY ON AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

**American Exceptionalism Revised**

Phillis Wheatley, an ideological product of America’s Revolutionary War rhetoric, weaved together Protestant Christian theology and Enlightenment philosophy to create a distinctly afrosensitive evangelical critique of closed American exceptionalism.<sup>1</sup> Wheatley’s political theology is most explicit in her emancipated prose, but readers can discern hints of protest in her elegies dedicated to American patriots. Wheatley affirmed the American ideals of liberty and virtue while exposing the unbalanced application of “justice for all” within the American political economy.

American racism debilitates arguments for American exceptionalism on some levels.<sup>2</sup> In political theory, according to Justin Litke, exceptionalism has multiple senses.<sup>3</sup> One sense is known as “exemplary exceptionalism” which refers to the idea that

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<sup>1</sup>John D. Wilsey, *American Exceptionalism and Civil Religion: Reassessing the History of an Idea* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2015), 37-63.

<sup>2</sup>Wilsey offers a sound admonishment to distinguish open and closed exceptionalism. As we will discover, Wheatley affirmed various aspects of open exceptionalism in her poetry and prose while rejecting all forms of closed exceptionalism, which supported institutionalized racism. Wilsey explains that exclusivist models of American identity gave birth to racism, calling for a “Christian conception of justice as objective, universal and theistically framed” to “ethical[ly] critique of national/ethnic election, and closed exceptionalism.” Wilsey, *American Exceptionalism and Civil Religion*, 113.

<sup>3</sup>See Justin B. Litke, *Twilight of the Republic: Empire and Exceptionalism in the American Political Tradition* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2013), 8-10. In this work, Litke offers two main senses—comparative and unique—and three subsenses under each unique category—exemplary, cultural, and imperial. Litke thinks the exemplary sense best fits the minds of the Puritans, Founders, and colonial patriots rather than the often-promulgated imperial sense of exceptionalism. Litke engages primary source material (e.g., Mayflower Compact, Fundamental Orders of Connecticut, Massachusetts Body of Liberties, Declaration of Independence, Articles of Confederation, and Constitution) to strengthen his argument.

American excellence will become the envy of all nations. Because ranges of American exceptionalism exist, Litke says that “wide and seemingly interminable disagreements are prominently on display nearly any time the words American exceptionalism are uttered.”<sup>4</sup> When emotions are charged, conversations about American exceptionalism often produce more heat than light. This is readily observed, explains Litke, when conversationalists disdain domestic or foreign interlocutors because they believe America is “not subject to criticism or constraint.” In this conception, America acts as the exemplary leader of the nations; therefore, all nations must keep silent when the bastion of universal liberty speaks.<sup>5</sup>

Thankfully, not all scholars are willing to keep silent. Some scholars boldly proclaim that racial inequality clouds the political memory of the American dilemma. Others contend that exceptionalism is characteristically supported by conservative political theorists and historians. This assertion lacks credence because some historians rightly criticize closed appropriations of American exceptionalism. Daniel Walker Howe, for example, explains how European visitors evoked public criticism concerning the treatment of African peoples, whether slave or free. These Euro-American conversationalists perceived, and eventually decried, the hypocrisy of national leaders who were hypocritical in their application of natural rights. In their thinking, the dehumanization of African peoples shatters any semblance of exceptionalism, therefore rejecting both Anglocentric and Eurocentric readings of American history.<sup>6</sup> The British

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<sup>4</sup>Litke, *Twilight of the Republic*, 5.

<sup>5</sup>Litke, *Twilight of the Republic*, 5.

<sup>6</sup>Wilsey stealthily models an afrosensitive historiographical approach. He rightly understands how European educational paradigms often present unjust epistemological scales by ignoring non-European pedagogical frameworks. Wilsey, for example, utilizes the verbiage “Anglocentric paradigm,” which is synonymous with Eurocentric frameworks, to critique three primary texts used to *re*-shape the minds of many contemporary Christian and homeschool students in the United States toward closed American exceptionalism rather than a biblical worldview. See Wilsey, *American Exceptionalism and Civil Religion*, 191-216.

and French empires, for example, led the way for African equality under the law decades before American political and economic elites. In both cases, citizens ushered in ethnic abolition on a national level without shedding their kindred's blood. Abolition, without civil war, is an exceptional feat. To this end, one could plausibly view Great Britain as the New Republic's tutor, not vice versa.<sup>7</sup>

Some might mistakenly question this illustration, seeing a relegation of exceptionalism to the comparative sense. But I use the comparative sense to assess America's ostensible exemplary character above other nations in relation to its simultaneous and systematic stripping of African diasporic personhood through American slavery.<sup>8</sup> It seems threading African dehumanization through the contemplative fabric of closed American exceptionalism curtails uncritical praise of American salvation history.

Some surmise the journey toward American exceptionalism began when John Winthrop used "a city set upon a hill" in the Mayflower Compact.<sup>9</sup> With those perennial

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<sup>7</sup>Howe states, "American opposition to slavery owed a good deal to encouragement overseas . . . . When the British Empire abolished slavery in 1833, and the Second French Republic followed suit in 1848, their actions served as encouraging examples to antislavery Americans. This was not the way American exceptionalism was supposed to work; Americans expected to set the example." See Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 311-12.

<sup>8</sup>Peter Kolchin describes the stripping process of African personhood as nurtured on the bottle of violence. There was constant tug-of-war between master and slave. The former wanted absolute submission; the latter desired freedom from perpetual bondage. He states, "Born in violence, slavery survived by the lash. Beginning with the initial slave trade that tore Africans away from everything they knew and sent them in chains to a distant land to toil for strangers, every stage of master-slave relations depended either directly or indirectly on physical coercion . . . . Slave owners directed especially repressive measures against Africans, for newly imported slaves offered pervasive resistance to the conditions under which they found themselves. They ignored the Anglicized names their owners awarded them; they refused to perform new tasks they were assigned; they ran away; and they sometimes lashed out in anger at their oppressors, inflicting injury and even death . . . . Slaves who transgressed could look forward to a wide range of gruesome punishments—most imposed informally by owners and overseers but some officially meted out upon sentence by special slave courts that existed in all the Southern colonies—including branding; nose slitting; amputation of ears, toes, and fingers (and less often hands and feet); castration; and burning at the stake." Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery 1619-1877* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 57-58.

<sup>9</sup>Apart from Wilsey, I have come across few evangelical historians who openly repudiate the

words of Jesus, Winthrop frames the identity and influence of the new nation on global politics and “public spirituality.”<sup>10</sup> In Winthrop’s mind, submission to covenantal theology and mutual trust will create an exceptional community, a light shining in the darkness. Winthrop seems to pass the baton of exemplary exceptionalism to his future patriotic forebears.<sup>11</sup> But is this recapitulation true?

Winthrop’s sermon, according to Litke, does not contain a shred of evidence that supports imperial exceptionalism. Litke rightly questions the legitimacy of scholars who believe Winthrop desired “an autonomous and independent country on the western shores of the Atlantic Ocean.”<sup>12</sup> It seems inconceivable that an insignificant group of

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idea of stainless Christian America without providing provisos concerning presentism. It seems Wilsey rightly believes historians have the right to adjudicate right and wrong in American history as long as the arbiter is a transcendent objective source, namely, the inerrant Word of God. Historians of any hue who employ afrosensitive historiography will often present competing narratives of American history. Westenley Alcenat, for example, contends, “The story of American freedom and racism is, in this sense, a twinned legacy of a dual consciousness: on one side is the story of Euro-America, of building the proverbial city on a hill, one that cast its light throughout the land of dispossessed Native Americans and towards a manifested destiny, looking towards the darker people of the Pacific. On the other side are African-Americans, who were often the casualty of Manifest Destiny, not its beneficiaries. These two narratives stand in contradistinction: while the white working-class pin their hopes on the populism of a northeastern, Ivy League-educated real-estate billionaire, many African-Americans, especially the younger generation, struggle to unpin their freedom hopes from the Democratic Party, which, to them, has failed to deliver on the American gospel of prosperity. Neither side is wrong, of course, to hold two different interpretations of America. In hindsight, many whites have had the inherited privilege of being born white, a racial-historical affirmative action that made America exceptional—hard work paid off for many generations of Euro-Americans. The nostalgia for a bygone era is not unfounded in this sense. Many Blacks, on the other hand, experienced a side of America where the dream realized for whites was a dream deferred for many in their communities. In spite of this, it is remarkable that no one group has been more systematically wronged by America, but insists on realizing its promise, as have African-Americans.” Westenley Alcenat, “The Racial Fault Lines of American History in Trump’s America,” Black Perspectives, February 10, 2017, accessed February 16, 2017, <http://www.aaihs.org/the-racial-fault-lines-of-american-history-in-trumps-america/>.

<sup>10</sup>I like Thomas Kidd’s provocative use of the terms “public” and “civic” spirituality to describe the impact of religion on American politics and on Revolutionary War rhetoric. Kidd states, “*God of Liberty* will explore those principles of public spirituality and their essential connection to the success of American civil society,” Thomas Kidd, *God of Liberty: A Religious History of the American Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 2012), 9-10.

<sup>11</sup>For more information, see Wilsey, *American Exceptionalism and Civil Religion*, 16, 39-48. Wilsey also references two critical histories on Winthrop’s idea of “City Set on a Hill” (246n6,7).

<sup>12</sup>Litke, *Twilight of the Republic*, 19.

Puritans would possess such lofty inclinations. Litke illustrates how political biases have produced such historical anachronisms. Wilsey partially agrees, noting Winthrop's English rather than American identity. According to Wilsey, Winthrop wanted their colony to "set an example of righteousness and God-blessedness that would make Englishmen back home desirous of moral, civil and theological reform."<sup>13</sup> Both Litke and Wilsey's interaction with the origins of American exceptionalism will aid my investigation of Wheatley and the plausible germ of her exceptionalism rhetoric.

In the last chapter, I laid the foundation for an afrosensitive hermeneutic by identifying subversive speech in Wheatley's poetry. In this chapter, I demonstrate how Wheatley, an afrosensitive theological and ethical activist, rejects exemplary or closed American exceptionalism because of the dehumanization of African peoples. Despite this, she does affirm open exceptionalism. Wheatley's double-consciousness disturbed her soul each time she heard an Anglo-American patriot prosecute the British crown while plundering the lives of Native American and African peoples.<sup>14</sup>

I will also interact with the so-called "Negro problem" found in eighteenth-century New England sentimentalism, examining Wheatley's academic, religious, and social life while interpreting the politics of modern racial reasoning through three literary pieces written between 1768 and 1784.<sup>15</sup> This chronological gap is significant because readers observe Wheatley's maturation from opaque opprobrium to overt sociopolitical protest.

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<sup>13</sup>Wilsey, *American Exceptionalism and Civil Religion*, 16.

<sup>14</sup>For more information on why one should not abandon all forms of exceptionalism, see Wilsey, *American Exceptionalism and Civil Religion*, 115-17. Moreover, the phrase "African peoples" arose at critical junctures of this dissertation referring to continental as well as diasporic black Africans. Paul Gilroy employs the verbiage "the Black Atlantic" to describe the same phenomenon. See Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

<sup>15</sup>These pieces include "To the King's Most Excellent Majesty," "Liberty and Peace," and a February 11, 1774 correspondence to Samson Occom.

## **The Negro Problem and the Politics of Modern Racial Reasoning**

W. E. B. Du Bois simplifies the meaning of the so-called “Negro problem” with a provocative question, “What is to be the future relations of the Negro race to the rest of the world?”<sup>16</sup> In other words, Africans trapped in America negotiated their identity through the veil of Anglo-American, upper-class, and male hegemony. These political leaders gave legal definition to the personhood of African peoples. In colonial New England, for example, some of the most financially endowed men, as noted above, served to credit or discredit the work of Phillis Wheatley because her ethnicity and gender made her a social problem. Wheatley’s blackness branded her as inferior; her femaleness branded her as insignificant. Jennifer Thorn is befuddled by the “pervasive inattention of Wheatley scholarship to the contexts of gender, both racially and regionally inflected, in which she lived and worked.”<sup>17</sup>

Throughout Wheatley’s poetry, one discerns a complex interplay between race, class, and gender. According to Adeleke Adeeko, Wheatley as “a literate, Black, Christian speaker ventriloquizes the illiterate, enslaved African’s voice and positions herself as an incarnation of that body.” She does this both to advocate on behalf of her voiceless kin and to locate herself as one and the same with these oppressed peoples. For example, in her poem “To the University of Cambridge in New England,” she identifies her “ethnicity as an exiled Egyptian and ‘Ethiop.’”<sup>18</sup> Wheatley communed with oppressed Africans in the New World by acknowledging the racist idea that blackness was a problem in need of repair. She aligns her soul with oppressed blacks, regardless of the sanitized and sentimentalized “family” offered by many New England slave-owners.

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<sup>16</sup>W. E. B. Du Bois: *A Reader*, ed. David Levering Lewis (New York: Henry Holt, 1995), 48.

<sup>17</sup>Jennifer Thorn, “Phillis Wheatley’s Ghosts: The Racial Melancholy of New England Protestants,” *Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation* 50, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 73-99.

<sup>18</sup>Adeleke Adeeko, “Writing Africa under the Shadow of Slavery: Quaque, Wheatley, and Crowther,” *Research in African Literatures* 40, no. 4 (Winter 2009): 14-15.

Wheatley never forgot her enslavement. For Wheatley, spirituality required honoring the souls and bodies of African peoples. Therefore, she castigated proclaimers of freedom who appropriated the belief in a “disposable physical body.” As Adeeko explains, the soul’s security in heaven was more important, but this does not mean the body’s existence on earth became somehow unimportant.<sup>19</sup>

Lorenzo Greene wrote the definitive work on African diasporic people in colonial America from 1620 to 1776. Greene explains how theology, politics, and economics informed the power dynamics involved with the European American oppression of Africans—what he calls “black merchandise.”<sup>20</sup> New England slavery, according to Greene, commenced between the years 1624 and 1638. He based his understanding on documents that showed a man named Samuel Maverick owned two slaves before John Winthrop arrived on the *Arbella* in 1630.<sup>21</sup> Greene also notes that New England set the bar in utilizing the free press to advertise black flesh: “The New Englanders were the first to employ the newspaper for this purpose, and the *Boston News Letter*, the first permanent newspaper published in America, almost from its beginning on April 24, 1704, carried advertising of slaves.”<sup>22</sup> Wheatley’s unfortunate arrival in Boston was heralded long before she stepped off the ship.<sup>23</sup>

Unlike British-American immigrants who arrived with the hope of a better life, enslaved Africans had no other choice but to take on a new identity characterized by

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<sup>19</sup>Adeeko, “Writing Africa under the Shadow of Slavery,” 16.

<sup>20</sup>Lorenzo J. Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England, 1620-1776* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1945), 15-49.

<sup>21</sup>Greene, *Negro in Colonial New England*, 16.

<sup>22</sup>Greene, *Negro in Colonial New England*, 33.

<sup>23</sup>Robinson mentions the advertisement in the Boston newspapers announcing the arrival of the schooner named *Phillis*, which housed its “parcel of likely Negroes, imported from Africa.” William H. Robinson, *Phillis Wheatley and Her Writings* (New York: Garland Press, 1984), 3-5.



pragmatism and survival techniques. Wheatley mastered the master's language of exceptionalism—not out of sincere admiration for the great lights of American patriotism but rather because she knew freedom came at the behest of wealthy politicians, clergy, merchants, landowners, and businessmen.<sup>24</sup> This is evident as Wheatley's verse and prose progress from an uninformed servant girl to—eventually—an abolitionist intellectual who openly attacks the racialized establishment of white supremacy.<sup>25</sup>

Within the politics of modern racial reasoning, it is worth noting that Wheatley confronts structural whiteness and not white people as such. As Carter articulates, whiteness is rightly understood “not merely and banally as pigment but as a structural-aesthetic order and as a sociopolitical arrangement.”<sup>26</sup> Thus, Wheatley could have genuine love and compassion for John and Susanna Wheatley without accepting their skewed interpretation of Scripture's view on race, class, and gender. The structural-aesthetic of whiteness aided and abetted Wheatley's captivity through the complicit hands of her “adoptive” captors who possessed the legal right to “terrorize enslaved men, women, and children in the northern colonies.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Rita Roberts notes, “The northern colonial slave codes were similar to those of the southern colonies. They detailed the responsibilities of whites to keep all blacks under the supervision of whites. The codes revealed not only colonists' determination to create a stable labor force, but also their interest in maintaining white supremacy . . . . While patriots often used the trope of slavery to unite against Britain, Revolutionary ideals of freedom and equality also factored into the decline of northern slavery. Increasingly likening their subordinate status in the empire to that of slaves, patriots contended that Parliament would reduce them to slavery” Rita Roberts, *Evangelicalism and the Politics of Reform in Northern Black Thought 1776-1863* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 2010), 16, 18-19. These slave tropes were ubiquitous in revolutionary rhetoric, so Wheatley capitalized on the majority culture's political aspirations for a separate nation while championing the cause of the “sable race” whose “monarch smile can set the captives free.” See, for example, the poem “To The King's Most Excellent Majesty,” in *Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, 17.

<sup>25</sup>I borrow the concept of an “abolitionist intellectual” from J. Cameron Carter's work, *Race: A Theological Account*, where—in an interlude on Christology and race—Carter reads the fourth-century theologian, Gregory of Nyssa, under an admittedly anachronistic, but veridical, framework. J. Cameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 229-51.

<sup>26</sup>Carter, *Race*, 89.

<sup>27</sup>Roberts, *Evangelicalism and the Politics of Reform*, 16.

So how did Wheatley learn to use her oppressor's words against them? Her slaveholders favored her once they discovered her uncanny ability to consume large amounts of new information at a moment's glance. In the eyes of paternalistic powerbrokers, Wheatley's intellect meant increased profit margins. Joseph Watkins makes a similar point about the ethics of identity for enslaved peoples in colonial America. He envisages "instrumentalization" as "the totalization of those subjects for economic gain at the expense of other forms of value, a process that necessarily restricts freedom by limiting human potential to ideological, and, by extension, aesthetic, poverty."<sup>28</sup>

In other words, Wheatley could not exercise absolute freedom of expression without dire consequences, so she utilized "polysemic verse" for public consumption. I borrow the idea of poetical polysemy from Watkins who explains the "disjunct[ion] between presence and representation."<sup>29</sup> Watkins states, "[P]olysemy entails the potential for various people to imagine a different referent when interpreting the same word." This explains the subtle protest in Wheatley's sagacious speech patterns. Further, Watkins makes an important note that "if representation were coextensive with presence, this simply wouldn't be possible—we would always know exactly what everyone means."<sup>30</sup>

### **New England Sentimentalism**

The silver lining of God's providence exposed Wheatley to classical educational training in New England through the tutelage of Mary Wheatley, the daughter of Susanna, and possibly, Mather Byles.<sup>31</sup> Wheatley's classical education was

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<sup>28</sup>John David Watkins, "Literary Subversions: The Enlightenment Subject in Wheatley and Melville" (MA thesis, San Francisco State University, 2016), 4.

<sup>29</sup>Watkins, "Literary Subversions," 6.

<sup>30</sup>Watkins, "Literary Subversions," 6.

<sup>31</sup>Shields believes that Mather Byles was likely the most astute tutor of Wheatley since he was trained in Classics at Harvard. Shields states, "As the congregational minister and Harvard graduate,

dominated by Eurocentric thought and Enlightenment rhetoric. This necessarily placed more emphasis on the ways in which Europeans perceived aesthetic values over and against African axiological systems.<sup>32</sup> Because of this, many African-American scholars reject Wheatley's contribution to the intellectual lives of African diasporic people because they assume she had been lost to cultural misorientation and sociopolitical brainwashing against all things African, continental, and diasporic. Shields notes this tragedy in two of his published works, and takes Eurocentric essentialism to task by introducing opaque Africanisms in Wheatley's work to readers.<sup>33</sup>

Ibram X. Kendi, for example, narrates Wheatley's story through a pejorative assimilationist perspective, even though he accurately repudiates the racist offer of New England benevolence that nurtured a psychological misalignment *against* Wheatley's given African identity.<sup>34</sup> Lamentably, like scholars of old who either supported or shunned Wheatley, Kendi forsakes primary source analysis. He expends little energy critically analyzing Wheatley's oeuvre to better understand how and why she accommodated her voice in a racialized society. Kendi's generally astute treatise on the history of racist ideas in America unwittingly prejudices readers against Wheatley as an afrosensitive evangelical activist because Kendi provides only *prima facie* interaction with her life and thought. In fact, Shields dismisses scholars who viewed Wheatley as a "typical eighteenth-century black who sold [her] blackness for a pottage of white

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Mather Byles, lived across the street from the Wheatley mansion, he was certainly among the clergy who called on the prodigy; Byles had inherited what was for the times a huge library (one of the largest in the Colonies, containing well over two thousand volumes) of his uncle, Cotton Mather, for whom he was named, and was therefore well equipped to loan her books and to offer her intellectual and spiritual counsel." Shields, *Phillis Wheatley's Poetics of Liberation*, 127.

<sup>32</sup>For more information *The Cornel West Reader* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1999), 51-67.

<sup>33</sup>*Cornel West Reader*, 51-67.

<sup>34</sup>Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (New York: Nation Books, 2016), 92-103.

acceptability.”<sup>35</sup> According to Shields, “Practically all commentators quoted a few lines from Wheatley’s poetry (while ignoring her letters), but hardly one, like Kendi demonstrates, indicated that he or she ever took seriously the content of her words.”<sup>36</sup>

Nevertheless, Kendi’s work is phenomenal because he deftly incorporates critical race theory, theology, anthropology, sociology, and philosophy in narrating the history of racist ideas in America. Kendi does good historiography on his primary characters—Cotton Mather, Thomas Jefferson, William Lloyd Garrison, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Angela Davis—but misaligns Wheatley’s story by relying on previous biographies as opposed to utilizing appropriate hermeneutic principles for examining eighteenth-century British-American poetry and prose.

In so doing, Kendi jettisoned three of the fundamental principles for historiographical thinking—complexity, contingency, and causality—to bolster his case against certain African Americans like Wheatley whom Kendi feels assimilated racist ideas. Perhaps Wheatley presented deeply racist sentiments against Africa in order to galvanize a listening audience before she championed African dignity in succeeding lines of the same allegedly resentful poems.<sup>37</sup> And yet, before Wheatley could write with an elusively abolitionist pen, she experienced a virtually unprecedented opportunity for an enslaved child by receiving advanced homeschool training within the Wheatley household.

### **Train Up A Child: Wheatley’s Classically-Educated Mind**

Classical education is a science and an art. As a science, educators use the

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<sup>35</sup>*The Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, ed. John C. Shields, Schomburg Library of Nineteenth Century Black Women Writers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), xxviii.

<sup>36</sup>*Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, xxviii.

<sup>37</sup>See chap. 2 of this dissertation for a thorough discussion on assimilation and accommodation within the pedagogy of the oppressed.

trivium method to transfer ideas to their students. The trivium method integrates three primary stages of learning—grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric—which are crafted to help learners memorize and manipulate vast amounts of information into oratory or literary forms.<sup>38</sup> As a classically educated child, Wheatley read secular literature—Homer, Virgil, Ovid—and memorized Scripture in conversation with the *Westminster Catechisms*. The combination of sacred and secular literature likely filled Wheatley’s imagination with perplexed thoughts of God and social justice, especially since her tutors were culpable enslavers who claimed familial love and benevolence.

Obviously, Wheatley avoided revealing her ambivalence toward becoming John and Susanna’s enlightenment project. Like most of the British-American gentry, they arguably questioned African peoples’ learning capacity because Lockean Enlightenment ideas proposed a *tabula rasa* that hypocritically marked blackness as lesser than or, to put it another way, as an ontological problem.<sup>39</sup> The common assumption was that blacks were like animals who functioned only according to their most basic instincts. Therefore, they could not be intellectually on par with Caucasians.<sup>40</sup> Nonetheless, Wheatley associated with her slavers, and even referred to some as her

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<sup>38</sup>For more information on classical education training methods, see Harvey Bluedorn and Laurie Bluedorn, *Teaching the Trivium: Christian Homeschooling in a Classical Style* (Muscatine, IA: Trivium Pursuit, 2001); Classical Conversations Multimedia, *Classical Christian Education Made Approachable* (West End, NC: Classical Conversations Multimedia, 2011); Leigh A. Bortins, *The Core: Teaching Your Child the Foundations of Classical Education* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2010); Bortins, *The Questions: Teaching Your Child the Essentials of Classical Education* (West End, NC: Classical Conversations Multimedia, 2013); Bortins, *The Conversation: Challenging Your Student with a Classical Education* (West End, NC: Classical Conversations Multimedia, 2015). I also recommend reading Wilsey’s thoughtful interrogation of certain homeschool curricula that advance the ideology of closed exceptionalism. See Wilsey, *American Exceptionalism and Civil Religion*, 193-215.

<sup>39</sup>For a powerful display of Wheatley’s ability to subversively critique Enlightenment beliefs through her poetry, see Watkins, “Literary Subversions,” 25-28.

<sup>40</sup>Carter, *Race, Race and Modernity*, in *Cornel West Reader*, 55-86; Ashley Montagu, *Man’s Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997); Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010); Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning*; Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785; repr., New York: Penguin, 1999).

“most dearest friends,” as mentioned above in her preface.

When other enslaved African children in New England were performing physical labor chores, Wheatley performed rigorous academic work at the behest of her master. She certainly found delight in the academic process, adding intellectual rounds in a growing arsenal of ideas against African oppression; and yet, as an enslaved woman, Wheatley could not refuse her master’s demands to meet their academic quotas. From her arrival to her emancipation, she remained childlike in the eyes of her owners.

When contemporary readers skew Wheatley’s spirituality, they often do so when her poetry becomes disjointed from her slave identity. Furthermore, if a reader lacks rudimentary exposure to socioeconomic and political dynamics of colonial American slavery, then discerning the spirituality of African diasporic evangelicals in colonial times will be difficult. Thorn, quoting Joanne Pope Melish, notes that “northern family slavery in practice demanded agency and feared it, demanded passivity and was disgusted by it.”<sup>41</sup> In other words, the racial mythologies that produced psychological disequilibrium lent weight to a society that was “largely either threatened by her abilities or unable to imagine them.”<sup>42</sup>

John Saillant, for instance, exemplifies an appropriate retelling of the life and thought of Lemuel Haynes (1753-1833), a biracial indentured servant reared in an Anglo-American family. Saillant’s biography on Haynes demonstrates how one should read African diasporic evangelicals in colonial New England.<sup>43</sup> Both Haynes and Wheatley shared an appreciation for classical Reformed orthodoxy and its apparent implications on the greatest social justice issue of their day—chattel slavery. Like Haynes, Wheatley received parental guidance from a British-American family without the familial right of

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<sup>41</sup>Watkins, “Literary Subversions,” 14.

<sup>42</sup>Thorn, “Phillis Wheatley’s Ghosts,” 85.

<sup>43</sup>See John Saillant, *Black Puritan, Black Republican: The Life and Thought of Lemuel Haynes 1753-1833* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

inheritance, which meant Haynes had little chance for economic autonomy in New England's sociopolitical world. In agreement with Mellish, Saillant offers insight as to why many New Englanders invited indentured and enslaved children into their households with aspirations of helping them think Christianly about their subjugated states of being. Saillant states,

White families' reliance on the labor of black servants or slaves and the sentimental absorption of a few young blacks into white families as surrogate children were, argues Joanne Pope Mellish, notable in eighteenth-century New England . . . . The combination of exploitation and sentiment not only gave some black New Englanders a chance to rise through white patronage but also offered a familial and religious language of affection, benevolence, sentiment, and virtue that African Americans used as leverage for respect and security in a white society. Phillis Wheatley, for instance, in articulating this familial and religious language in her poems, deployed what Phillip M. Richards describes as 'the most central aspect' of eighteenth-century Anglo-American culture.<sup>44</sup>

Thorn questions the credulity of using "family slavery" language for kidnapped children. Thorn explains that William Pierson coined the aforesaid term and made this concept "the focus of chapter 3 of his *Black Yankees: The Development of an Afro-American Subculture in Eighteenth-Century New England*."<sup>45</sup> In that chapter Pierson notes that full integration into a master's family usually precluded the development of independent black families for themselves.<sup>46</sup> Without the ability to give birth to one's own children, enslaved black household servants were subject to perpetual childhood themselves. Thorn's essay links this feeling of familial death to Wheatley's funeral dirge—which depicts an African mother who had her precious child ripped from her breast, and a father who could never protect his daughter from harm as her years progressed. In so doing, Wheatley evokes a sense of familial loss while subtly unraveling the tie that bound the fictive New England family.

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<sup>44</sup>Saillant, *Black Puritan, Black Republican*, 12-13.

<sup>45</sup>Thorn, "Phillis Wheatley's Ghosts," 95n2.

<sup>46</sup>Thorn, "Phillis Wheatley's Ghosts," 75-76.

African diasporic enslaved evangelicals often controlled their emotions to exist in a racialized society. In this respect, Thorn leans heavily on Anlin Cheng's description of "racial melancholies" in the psychological dispositions of racialized others. According to Thorn, Cheng suggests, "[R]acialization in America may be said to operate through the institutional process of producing a dominant, standard, white national ideal that is categorically inaccessible to the racialized other," that is, until someone from the dominant class gives them access to unknown realities.<sup>47</sup> Simply put, those who define the rules of the game become universal referees, defining who has a right to play, or not to play, on a given field of inquiry. In American political history, Wheatley's words dismantled the myth of the content slave. Her intellectual acuity granted her partial admission into the world of letters, therefore exposing her to the philosophies of exemplary or open American exceptionalism.

In the next section, I will examine Wheatley's polemical tactics against the British crown, academic elites, and colonial patriots. Though her poems are primarily religious and political, Wheatley does accommodate the royalists and patriots' nationalistic loves to evoke sympathy from her readers. As an enslaved African woman, Wheatley appealed to Anglo-male cultural elites who possessed power to unloose the fiendish grip of slavery from her black brethren's necks. Carmen Birkle calls Wheatley's action "border crossing and identity formation."<sup>48</sup> Crossing borders metaphorically explains her ability to transgress sociopolitical roadblocks through nonthreatening political poetry. Birkle argues, "[Wheatley] was able to cross these borders by seemingly affirming existing patriarchal and masculine ideologies in order to demand freedom for

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<sup>47</sup>Thorn, "Phillis Wheatley's Ghosts," 74.

<sup>48</sup>Carmen Birkle, "Border Crossing and Identity Creation in Phillis Wheatley's Poetry," in *American Studies: A Monograph Series*, ed. Udo J. Hebel (Heidelberg, Germany: Carl Winter Universitatverlag, 1999), 47-66.



black people in America.”<sup>49</sup> Although Wheatley’s identity, like the times in which she lived, was complex, the below poems illumine her commitment to revolutionary politics and open American exceptionalism.

Robert Lopez provides a three-pronged hermeneutic for analyzing the traits of American exceptionalism in public discourse.<sup>50</sup> After examining three works by John Winthrop, Thomas Jefferson, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, Lopez argues that exceptionalism’s tenets are seen on three fronts: religious, political, and economic. In analyzing Winthrop’s “A Model of Christian Charity” (1630), Jefferson’s *Declaration of Independence* (1776), and Emerson’s “The Young American” (1844), Lopez exposes how the rhetoricians’ commitment to their chosen nation and national glory motivated their depictions of American patriotism. As discussed above, Wilsey rightly offers the label “closed exceptionalism” for those with predilections toward divine commission, innocence, sacred land, and national glory.<sup>51</sup> Though Wilsey provides readers with more theological nuance regarding American exceptionalism than Lopez, both writers agree that American exceptionalism incorporates religio-politico language when discussing the making and sustaining of a pre- and post-revolutionary American identity.

In the poems that follow, Wheatley joins the train of American exceptionalists. And yet, she embodies the theological and ethical preoccupations of an afrosensitive evangelical who manipulates the language of open American exceptionalism and therefore challenges the hypocritical tropes of slavery propagated by closed exceptionalists in transatlantic discourse. Wheatley’s ability to delicately chastise both groups, while maintaining her place in society, should be both praised and emulated.

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<sup>49</sup>Birkle, “Border Crossing and Identity Creation in Phillis Wheatley’s Poetry,” 50.

<sup>50</sup>See Robert Oscar Lopez, “The Colors of Double Exceptionalism—The Founders and African America,” *Literature Compass* 5, no. 1 (January 2008): 20-41.

<sup>51</sup>Wilsey, *American Exceptionalism and Civil Religion*, 18-19.

### **“To the King’s Most Excellent Majesty on His Repealing the American Stamp Act” (1768)**

Most children adopt their parents’ political affinities. As a child living in an upper-middle class New England household, Wheatley’s captors displayed an unrelenting loyalty to colonial freedom amid looming threats from British loyalists. Such taunts went unnoticed by John and Susanna Wheatley, who pledged their allegiance to the revolutionary call for justice against despotism—what many patriots called “taxation without representation.” These New England leaders declared Old England a tyrannical parent whose abuse required an immediate response from its offspring. One of the greatest abuses in their eyes was The Stamp Act (1765), but another lash came by means of the Revenue Act. Carretta explains that “many colonists saw the Revenue Act (the Sugar Act) of 1764 as unprecedented attempts to exert Parliament’s authority over the thirteen colonies” who themselves lacked representation in Parliament.<sup>52</sup>

On March 22, 1765, the British Parliament imposed a tax that required American colonists to pay a small tax on “every skin or piece of vellum or parchment, or sheet or piece of paper, on which shall be engrossed, written, or printed.”<sup>53</sup> The Stamp Act funded troops who stood guard on the American frontier against aggressors near the Appalachian Mountains.<sup>54</sup> In the eyes of many colonists, the new legislation egregiously attacked the colonies’ measured autonomy since its primary goal was fundraising rather than structuring commercial trade for those living in the great American wilderness. Colonial leaders objected that the action both tightened the political shackles around their necks and encouraged Parliament’s perpetual autocracy. So they did not sit idly by. In

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<sup>52</sup>Vincent Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 68.

<sup>53</sup>Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley*, 68.

<sup>54</sup>For more information of the significance of three Parliamentary acts (i.e., Stamp Act, Currency Act, and Sugar Act) that caused further belligerency in colonial hearts, see James P. Byrd, *Sacred Scripture, Sacred War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 27.

October 1765, “A Stamp Act Congress” protested the “imposition of duties,” and established “the first joint colonial response to British government.”<sup>55</sup>

In 1768, Wheatley displayed transcontinental public theology by asking King George to revoke the Stamp Act. In three short couplets, she wisely honors the authority of the king over the lives of his subjects. She avoids explicit denunciation of his rule, and instead seeks to win his favor through obsequious compliment and surreptitious critique. Wheatley models proverbial wisdom: “A person’s gifts will make room for them in the presence of great people” (Prov 18:16). She appeals to King George’s ego before asking him to let her people go. Wheatley’s stylistic technique in this poem is a form of political protest. Marsha Watson agrees that political protest motivates Wheatley’s remonstrations.<sup>56</sup> I will quote the poem in its entirety:

Your subjects hope, dread Sire—  
The crown upon your brows may flourish  
Long,  
And that your arm may in your God be strong!  
O may your scepter num’rous nations sway,  
And all with love and readiness obey!  
But how shall we the British king reward!  
Rule thou in peace, our father, and our lord!  
Midst the remembrance of thy favours past,  
The meanest peasants most admire the last.\*  
May George, belov’d by all the nations round,  
Live with heav’ns choicest constant blessings  
crown’d!  
Great God, direct, and guard him from on high  
And from his head let ev’ry evil fly!  
And may each clime with equal gladness see  
A monarch’s smile can set his subjects free!  
\*The Repeal of the Stamp Act.

Wheatley used exceptionalist language to curry the favor of King George III.

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<sup>55</sup>Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley*, 68.

<sup>56</sup>Marsha Watson, “A Classic Case: Phillis Wheatley and Her Poetry,” *Early American Literature* 31, no. 2 (1996): 103-32.

This time, England—not America or Columbia—is the object of divine affection or good will. Wheatley presents colonists as loyal subjects of the King because “Americans generally prided themselves on being good subjects of their king.”<sup>58</sup> In the first couplet, she prays for religious, political, and economic favor from God on behalf of the King. She announces a blessing on George: “The crown upon your brows may flourish long, And that your arm in may in your God be strong!” Without question, Wheatley conjoins politics and religion to make an unmistakable plea for deliverance. But she is interested in more than British-American subjects; she also desires deliverance for those souls stolen from her native land for economic gain.

Wheatley uses militaristic language to make her appeal, illuminating the fact that she understood how political power can be enforced by weapons. Laws have little strength to govern society without the sword, and countries are vulnerable to other nations with stronger weapons. Nonetheless, Wheatley prays that the King’s military campaigns will end in victory over warring nations: “O may your scepter num’rous nations sway, And all with love and readiness obey!” Wheatley’s words eased suspicions that she was an American patriot who loathed the King’s every move. She creatively lived between two opposing political factions without showing her true hand, which was neither entirely accommodationist nor noticeably abolitionist. Wheatley took advantage of the paternalistic notions of King George even though she knew familial language between Great Britain and America did not apply to non-citizens of the thirteen colonies. In reality, black people lacked genuine access to the King’s parental care.

Wheatley, nonetheless, hoped against hope. She wrote for white people who denied the rights of and pervasively oppressed black people, even as they demanded their own liberation on religious and moral grounds. M. A. Richmond says, “[Wheatley]

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<sup>58</sup>Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley*, 69.

composed her elegies for dead white elders, most men of the church”—as well as political leaders on both sides of the Atlantic.<sup>59</sup> Through these elegies, she created common ground—or, more adroitly, she fostered a cobelligerency with her reading public. Unfortunately, Wheatley’s writings had little effect on the racialized sentiments of British Americans living in Boston.

For example, Reising records an observation by Leon F. Litwack:

“[D]iscrimination was so intense in Boston that by about 1800 the black leader Prince Hall [founder of African American Freemasonry through a British Charter] ‘could only advise his [black] brethren to be patient and bear up under the daily insults we [black people, slave or free] meet on the streets of Boston.’”<sup>60</sup> Lest we mistakenly believe racism’s ugly head stopped at the church doors, Litwack also notes:

Negroes found themselves segregated, either in an ‘African Corner,’ a ‘Nigger Pew,’ seats marked ‘B.M.’ (Black Members), or aloft in ‘Nigger Heaven.’ The Sabbath schools also provided separate quarters for Negro and white children. Religious bodies which offered the Lord’s Supper generally compelled Negroes to wait until the whites had partaken of the bread and wine.<sup>61</sup>

Wheatley’s enslavement was reinforced hour upon hour. She learned certain cultural cues so well that she crafted the “master’s language” as a tool “to dismantle the master’s house.”<sup>62</sup> Wheatley also demonstrates that one cannot think about blackness without considering whiteness. In other words, “blackness” and “whiteness” are ideological constructs used to define one’s status in the early American republic. It is important to note that as a thought construct whiteness became property in transatlantic

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<sup>59</sup>M. A. Richards, *Bid the Vassal Soar: Interpretive Essays on the Life and Poetry of Phillis Wheatley (ca. 1753-1784) and George Moses Horton (ca. 1797-1883)* (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1974), xi-xiii.

<sup>60</sup>Russell Reising, *Loose Ends: Closure and Crisis in the American Social Context* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 85.

<sup>61</sup>Reising, *Loose Ends*, 85.

<sup>62</sup>Reising, *Loose Ends*, 94.

politics.<sup>63</sup>

Contemporary thinkers often misconstrue the meaning of politics. They assume political orientations are only evident when a person speaks directly to governmental happenings. But nothing can be further from the truth. The modern word “political” is derived from the Greek *politikos*, “of, or pertaining to, the polis (the city).” Politics explains how people do life together in various institutions—family, government, church, etc.<sup>64</sup> We cannot begin to understand Wheatley’s political theology and opinions regarding open American exceptionalism without looking at one of her most vivid poems in its entirety.

In the next poem titled “America,” Wheatley explains her budding love of American freedom against the trope of British tyranny. But as we read this poem closely, from an afrosensitive perspective, we discover that Wheatley’s affections for America do not eclipse a conscience criticism of slavery. If readers of this dissertation feel a hint of redundancy, then my purpose is fulfilled. Afrosensitive evangelicals in eighteenth-century New England fought long and hard against the great divide, namely, the call for American freedom and contiguous black suffering.

In this poem, we observe Wilsey’s exceptionalist language descriptors: chosen nation, divine commission, innocence, sacred land, and glory.<sup>65</sup> The categorical difference between closed and open exceptionalism, says Wilsey, is that closed exceptionalism “locates life’s ultimate purpose and meaning in America itself as the millennial fulfillment of the human experience. But open exceptionalism finds its

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<sup>63</sup>See Cheryl I. Davis, “Whiteness as Property,” *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (June 1993): 1709-91. I am indebted to Steven M. Harris of the Southern Baptist Convention’s Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission for making me aware of this article.

<sup>64</sup>See Francis J. Beckwith, *Politics for Christians: Statecraft as Soulcraft* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2010), 41-57.

<sup>65</sup>Wilsey, *American Exceptionalism and Civil Religion*, 18-19.

expression in the American creed of individual freedom, natural rights, justice and equality.”<sup>66</sup> Wheatley has little hope for the millennial greatness of America. Instead, she reveres the ideals of liberty based on biblical anthropology, not socioeconomic pragmatism. Every image-bearer, in Wheatley’s mind, deserves freedom to pursue the creation mandate on American soil.

Babacar M’Baye believes Wheatley’s 1769 poem “America” was “critical of Britain’s tyrannical stronghold over New England,” walking a “fine line between satire and praise” of America’s mother country.<sup>67</sup> Clearly, this poem is a hotbed for seeing Wheatley’s commitment to open exceptionalism. Let us listen well to the poem before offering a plausible exposition, which demonstrates Wheatley’s use of subversive speech alongside her theological and ethical preoccupations.

“America”  
New England first a wilderness was found  
Till for a continent ‘twas destin’d round  
From feild [*sic*] to feild the savage monsters run  
E’r yet Brittania had her work begun  
Thy Power, O Liberty, makes strong the weak

Wheatley begins this poem with chosen nation and divine commission language. She invokes the imagery of “wilderness,” an uncharted and uncivilized land inhabited by countless of unknown “savage monsters.” Wheatley thinks the vast wilderness belonged to the English settlers since they explored distant lands by the secondary commission of King George and the primary command of God, the only true sovereign. The theological beliefs of many English Puritans still boded well with many New Englanders. Because Wheatley attended a Congregational Church in Boston, it is likely that she imbibed the Calvinistic teachings of her captors and church leaders. In the

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<sup>66</sup>Wilsey, *American Exceptionalism and Civil Religion*, 32.

<sup>67</sup>Babacar M’Baye, “The Pan-African and Puritan Dimensions of Phillis Wheatley’s Poems and Letters,” in *New Essays on Phillis Wheatley*, ed. John C. Shields and Eric D. Lamore (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2011), 271-93.

first line of the poem, the English settlers perceive a divine right to name and tame the vast wilderness. Wheatley goes on to describe the pervasive presence of the First Peoples who inhabit the land. In typical puritanical fashion, she labels them “savages.” At this juncture, the natives became prime candidates for Christian conversion, which often meant utilizing blades and Bibles to fulfill this divine commission. Wheatley certainly alludes to a conquering mindset when she says, “E’r yet Britannia had her work begun.” In other words, each English settler became an unofficial emissary of the King of England. They were commissioned by God and country to create a “civilized” world among the savage people of the enormous American wilderness.

Wilsey rightly argues that Puritans often compared their foray into the North American wilderness with the desert wanderings of the Israelites. He provides examples from Samuel Danforth’s “Brief Recognition of New England’s Errand into the Wilderness,” Cotton Mather’s “Magnalia,” Francis Higgins’ “On The Riches of New England,” Edward Johnson’s “Wonder Working Providence of Sion’s Saviour,” and John Cotton’s “Divine Right to Occupy the Land.”<sup>69</sup> Moreover, Wilsey cautions contemporary readers who quickly accuse the first settlers of ill motives. According to Wilsey, “Most of them [first English settlers] were not constitutionally prepared for a place where human communities existed within, and as a part of, the vastness and mystery of a limitless wilderness.”<sup>70</sup> In other words, they had no idea how intricate the ecosystems really were within dense brush and trees. They could not fathom that one step into the wilderness meant hundreds of thousands of miles—a distance no settler could complete in her lifetime.

Wheatley adopts the idea that the English settlers’ powerful hands and wits could transform the wilderness one step at a time, concomitantly assimilating indigenous

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<sup>69</sup>Wilsey, *American Exceptionalism and Civil Religion*, 44, 169-71.

<sup>70</sup>Wilsey, *American Exceptionalism and Civil Religion*, 167.



people into thriving sons and daughters of liberty by any means necessary.

And (wond'rous instinct) Ethiopians speak  
Sometimes by Simile, a victory's won  
A certain lady had an only son  
He grew up daily virtuous as he grew  
Fearing his Strength which she undoubted knew

In this couplet, Wheatley pronounces herself an “Ethiopian” who can speak. She answers the seemingly rhetorical line saying, “Sometime by Simile, a victory’s won.” Here, Wheatley indicates that her words are not always understood at a surface level. She will make unexpected literary maneuvers to yield a victory. In this case, she presents the budding nation—America—as an abused son of an unrelenting mother. She supports the natural strength and “innocence” of the son to stand against the harsh ways of his wayward caregiver. Wheatley believes the son’s strength intimidates Britannia to such an extent that the mother country applies more force to keep the child subdued.

She laid some taxes on her darling son  
And would have laid another act there on  
Amend your manners I'll the taxes remove  
Was said with seeming Sympathy and Love  
By many Scourges she his goodness try'd

Once again, Wheatley declares an innocent verdict on Britannia’s ideal. America is unjustly persecuted by Britannia’s strong arm. Britannia is a cruel mother who unfairly taxes her child to siphon its strength, dampening its internal drive to thrive in the new land without paternalistic assistance.

Until at length the Best of Infants cry'd  
He wept, Britannia turn'd a senseless ear  
At last awaken'd by maternal fear  
Why weeps americus why weep my Child  
Thus spake Britannia, thus benign and mild

Wheatley juxtaposes the “infants” tears with the mother’s “senseless ear.” Normally, when a mother hears a baby’s incessant cry, she will likely assess the infant’s dilemma. The mother fears a dreadful lot might be upon her child, so she makes haste to

ameliorate the situation. Wheatley imagines an abusive parent whose “maternal fear” induces neglect rather than care. She visualizes Britannia’s disposition toward “americus” as “benign and mild.” In other words, instead of delivering the child from pain, Wheatley’s personification creates further tension between parent and child.

My dear momma said he shall I repeat—  
Then Prostrate fell, at her maternal feet  
What ails the rebel, great Brittania Cry’d  
Indeed said he you have no cause to Chide.  
You see each day my fluent tears my food.

Wheatley continues to tug at her listener’s hearts. She applies the affectionate description “dear momma” to evoke compassion in this transatlantic conversation. Wheatley’s exceptionalist apologetic plays on the idea of “a rebel without a cause” when she says, “What ails the rebel, great Brittania Cry’d . . . . Indeed said he you have no cause to Chide.” As such, Wheatley provides one more assertion of innocence.

Without regard, what no more English blood?  
Was length of time drove from our English veins.  
The kindred he to Great Brittania deigns?  
‘Tis thus with tee O Brittain keeping down  
New English force, thou fear’st his Tyranny and though didst Frown.  
*He weeps afresh to feel this Iron chain [emphasis added]*

In this section, Wheatley borders on cultural misorientation to modern readers who discount an intertextual reading of early African diasporic literature.<sup>76</sup> Watson provides a terse explanation of intertextuality: “[Intertextuality is] a dynamic convergence that is not restricted merely to alluding to past writings.”<sup>77</sup> For Watson, intertextuality helps readers to pinpoint in Wheatley’s writings “texts that refer to other

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<sup>76</sup>See the discussion on cultural misorientation in chap. 2 of this dissertation. I generally adhere to Edward Said’s “Culture and Imperialism,” which intimates a postcolonial suspicion on the English literary tradition, especially when early American African diasporic writers are read through a parroting lens. Wheatley accommodates cultural sentiments and appropriates English literary styles to create a sophisticated evangelical remonstrance against black suffering.

<sup>77</sup>Watson, “A Classic Case,” 113.

texts” within the “canonical, Anglo-European tradition.”<sup>78</sup> In this instance, Wheatley integrates the writing styles of Alexander Pope without parroting his voice. She adapts Pope with an important purpose in mind: to veil her speech in order to extend her prophetic reach. For instance, Wheatley enlists “our English veins” to echo British-American patriotic cries, picturing the colonists as kindred spirits of the royal crown, not enemies. They share the same English blood running through their veins, and therefore should not be dealt the weeping blow of “Iron chains.”

The phrase “iron chains” screams out against those who hold literal chains on African peoples in British-America. Wheatley’s poetic work, writes Reising, often “functions both as autobiographical gloss on her own ambiguous existence as well as general reflection on the status of domestic African American slaves living under domination—legal, political, economic, and religious—white culture.”<sup>79</sup> Wheatley establishes a strong binary between freedom and captivity, showing dual deference to the land of the free and home of the brave.

Furthermore, Wheatley foresees courage in the lives of valiant blacks who adapted dominant behavioral motifs to protest a society that inherently disdained blackness. Political protest is evident when, according to Birkle, Wheatley establishes “the analogy between the American nation fighting against British tyranny and the African slaves fighting against the institution of slavery.”<sup>80</sup> In patriotic form, Wheatley lauds the ideals of America while cautiously lamenting the realities of black suffering. She appeals to the powerful mother (Great Britain) who alone can deliver her sons and daughters (American colonies) from tyranny’s wickedness. As such, Wheatley’s verse offers intuitive listeners a double meaning. Birkley speculates that subversion lurks in

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<sup>78</sup>Watson, “A Classic Case,” 113-14.

<sup>79</sup>Reising, *Loose Ends*, 103.

<sup>80</sup>Birkle, “Border Crossing and Identity Creation in Phillis Wheatley’s Poetry,” 59.

Wheatley's wordplay with the terms "America," "iron chain," "Tyranny," "lawless hand," and "t'enslave."

Turn, O Brittonia claim thy child again  
Riecho Love drive by the powerful charms  
Indolence Slumbering in forgetful arms  
See Agenoria diligent imploys

Wheatley now speaks intertextually, particularly in the last line. The name Agenoria refers to the Roman goddess of activity. Augustine mentions this god in his prolific work *The City of God* (4.11). In Roman folklore, Agenoria provides children the capacity to learn. She endows children with the ability to reason and relate well to the society at large. Wheatley seems to suggest that Brittonia is, in a sense, like Agnoria insofar as she provides America the ability to reason and relate well to surrounding nations.

Her sons, and thus with rapture she replys  
Arise my sons with one consent arise  
Lest distant continents with vult'ring eyes  
Should charge America with Negligence  
They praise Industry but no pride commence  
To raise their own Profusion, O Britain See  
By this New England will increase like thee

Wheatley pleads with Brittonia to embrace her child so that both parent and child can thrive above the "distant continents with vult'ring eyes." She believes America is exceptional alongside Brittonia because both nations will providentially increase their power over and against other nations. America's "Industry" is Brittonia's industry when they work together in equitable interdependence rather than tyrannical independence. Wheatley presents America as a chosen nation whose innocence and glory resides in the sacred land known as "New England."

"Liberty and Peace"  
LO! Freedom comes. Th' prescient Muse foretold,  
All Eyes th' accomplish'd Prophecy behold;  
Her Port describ'd, "*She moves divinely fair,*

*“Olive and Laurel bind her golden Hair.”*  
She, the bright Progeny of Heaven, descends

Wheatley praises the end of British rule over the newfound nation. She describes herself as a clairvoyant muse who speaks in the place of divinity. She believes freedom has come to the colonies because God, who spoke prophetically through her pen, has delivered “Columbia” from Britannia’s abuse.<sup>84</sup> Lines three and four have been ridiculed by some African-American scholars. They accuse Wheatley of revering whiteness above blackness. They presuppose the phrase—”She moves divinely fair, ‘Olive and Laurel bind her golden Hair’”—alludes to Susanna Wheatley’s hair since Wheatley likely brushed her hair each morning, possibly before Susanna took her bed. Even if this true, a racist critique of Wheatley’s verse fails to analyze her point concerning exceptionalism. She may very well have had an appreciation for Susanna’s hair, but that need not mean she had disdain for her own. Wheatley simply used this imagery to highlight American freedom.

And every Grace her sovereign Step attends;  
For now kind Heaven, indulgent to our Prayer,  
In smiling Peace resolves the Din of War.  
Fix’d in Columbia her illustrious Line,  
And bids in thee her future Councils shine.

In this stanza, Wheatley declares America a sovereign nation whose steps have been ordered by heaven. The Lord heard the patriots’ prayers and has brought peace through the sword so that the “Din of War” is no more. The dual exceptionalist themes of “sacred land” and “divine commission” are readily heard in lines nine and ten. Columbia (America) was bound to prevail with God on her side against the hands of enemy Britannia. In fact, Columbia will serve future generations and nations as a shining arbiter of truth and goodness.

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<sup>84</sup>For more information, see Thomas J. Steele, “The Figure of Columbia: Phillis Wheatley Plus George Washington,” *NEQ* 54, no. 2 (June 1981): 264-66. Shields mentions this article in *Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, 306. According to Shields, Steele observes that “The name ‘Columbia’ was used as early as 1761 to designate English America as opposed to ‘Brittania.’”

To every Realm her Portals open'd wide,  
Receives from each the full commercial Tide.  
Each Art and Science now with rising Charms  
Th' expanding Heart with Emulation warms.  
E'en great Britannia sees with dread Surprize

Columbia has severed the rope that bound her neck, and Brittania will soon discover the strength of the budding nation above other nations. Columbia will become a “portal” of commercial or financial influence now that Brittania’s grip has been released. Here, Wheatley appeals to the capitalistic hopes of the democratic republic without exposing the human resource utilized to create the wealth: enslaved Africans. At this juncture, Wheatley writes to acquire a hearing. She highlights the potential good in the New Republic. Perhaps freedom will finally ring for all those who bear God’s image since the war against tyranny has come to an end. She even surmises that Brittania will be shocked at America’s innovation.

And from the dazzling Splendor turns her Eyes!  
Britain, whose Navies swept th’ Atlantic o’er,  
And Thunder sent to every distant Shore;  
E’en thou, in Manners cruel as thou art,  
The Sword resign’d, resume the friendly Part!  
For Galia’s Power espous’d Columbia’s Cause,  
And new-born Rome shall give Britannia Law,  
Nor unremember’d in the grateful Strain,  
Shall princely Louis’ friendly Deeds remain;  
The generous Prince th’ impending Vengeance eye’s,

Wheatley gives thanks for France’s help in the Revolutionary War. The phrase “for Galia’s Power espous’d Columbia Cause” refers to the Gallic people, namely, the French. In another poem, Wheatley used the closer terms “Gallic powers” as opposed to “Galia’s Power” in a similar poetic context. In comparing the two uses, it is clear they both refer to the French empire. Shields interprets “Gallic powers” as the “French military and economic support of the American patriots during the Revolutionary War.”<sup>87</sup> Columbia will become “a new-born Rome” who will one day overcome and govern

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<sup>87</sup>*Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, 306.

Britannia. Wheatley also gives thanks to King Louis of France for his generosity toward the developing nation. Louis did not forsake America in her time of need. Americus would have certainly perished without Louis's support.

Sees the fierce Wrong, and to the rescue flies.  
Perish that Thirst of boundless Power, that drew  
On Albion's Head the Curse to Tyrants due.  
That bids the Realm of Freedom rival thee!

Wheatley continues to celebrate American independence from Britannia. Shields exposit this stanza saying, "British tyranny the agent of American oppression, has now been taught to fear 'americus,' her child."<sup>88</sup> He highlights Wheatley's thought of "divine sanction," which bolsters my argument for divine commission in Wheatley's theological and ethical preoccupations. The sacred land of America will act as the "Realm of Freedom" against tyrannical rule, and America will finally receive the glory that is due her.

Now sheathe the Sword that bade the Brave attone  
With guiltless Blood for Madness not their own.  
Sent from th' Enjoyment of their native Shore  
Ill-fated—never to behold her more!  
From every Kingdom on *Europa's* Coast

In lines thirty-one and thirty-two, Wheatley announces America's innocence as "guiltless Blood for Madness not their own." In other words, Wheatley believes that America only fought alongside the other nations against her mother country to stymie the abusive hand of Britannia. She laments the residual effect of war between mother and child, and predicts an insurmountable rift between the two nations.

Throng'd various Troops, their Glory, Strength and Boast.  
With heart-felt pity fair Hibernia saw  
Columbia menac'd by the Tyrant's Law:  
On hostile Fields fraternal Arms engage,  
And mutual Deaths, all dealt with mutual Rage;

Wheatley brings another ally of American liberty to our attention in lines

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<sup>88</sup>*Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, 239.

thirty-seven and thirty-eight: “With heart-felt pity fair Hibernia saw, Columbia menac’d by the Tyrant’s Law”: According to Shields, Hibernia is “the Latin and poetic name for Ireland.”<sup>91</sup> Wheatley deals realistically with the plights of war. Death and carnage on the field of battle is the only way to declare a winner and loser. Notice how she describes the opposing parties. She says, “On hostile Fields fraternal Arms engage.” One could interpret this line in two ways. First, “fraternal Arms” might refer to the soldiers on their respective fronts with their weapons armed and bayonets fixed. Second, Wheatley could be exposing the horror of two former brothers engaged in a battle to the death. With Wheatley’s ability to manipulate the pen, I venture she is making a statement about the ludicrousness of fighting for material wealth. The following couplet lends weight to my suspicion that Wheatley is subtly repudiating the act of war itself while maintaining a patriotic voice.

The Muse’s Ear hears mother Earth deplore  
Her ample Surface smok with kindred Gore:  
The hostile Field destroys the social Ties,  
And every-lasting Slumber seals their Eyes.  
Columbia mourns, the haughty Foes deride,

Wheatley argues that the “hostile Field destroys the social Ties” by taking innocent American lives. Liberty will be ushered in, but the cost is thousands of American patriots whose “ever-lasting Slumber seals their Eyes.”

Her Treasures plunder’d, and her Towns destroy’d:  
Witness how Charlestown’s curling Smoaks arise,  
In sable Columns to the clouded Skies!  
The ample Dome, high-wrought with curious Toil,  
In one sad Hour the savage Troops despoil.

In this couplet Wheatley highlights the destruction of Charlestown by the “savage Troops” who “plunder’d” the treasures of the American city. For Wheatley, the greatest application of Wilsey’s open exceptionalism criteria is “innocence.” This poem

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<sup>91</sup>*Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, 309.



certainly reeks of incorruptibility in almost every stanza.

Descending *Peace* and Power of War confounds;  
From every Tongue celestial *Peace* resounds:  
As for the East th' illustrious King of Day,  
With rising radiance drives the Shades away,  
And in her Train Commerce and Plenty shine.  
Britannia owns her Independent Reign,  
Hibernia, Scotia, and the Realms of Spain;  
And great Germania's ample Coast admires  
The generous Spirit that Columbia fires.  
Auspicious Heaven shall fill with fav'ring Gales,  
Where e'er Columbia spreads her swelling Sails:  
To every Realm shall *Peace* her Charms display,  
And Heavenly *Freedom* spread her golden Ray.

The final three stanzas are the crescendo to open exceptionalism. Wheatley presents America as the glorious nation who will incite envy in the heart of “great Germania’s coast” while offering her commercial riches to the European world, namely, Ireland, Scotland, and Spain. America’s ability to produce such wealth is attached to Heaven’s divine sanction, which is a metonymical euphemism for God. Columbia has divine sanction to, as Shields puts it, “act as a world emissary, an emanating force like the rays of the sun.” Moreover, he rightly concludes, “Wheatley has captured, perhaps, for the first time in poetry, America’s ideal mission to the rest of the world, a mission which the country pursued now with the most profound sense of duty and urgency in its two-hundred years of participation in world affairs.” For America, it seems that unilateralism—the belief that a nation can act in global affairs without consent or feedback from other nations—is a divinely caused commission given to those who dwell on the glorious empire’s sacred land.

As an open American exceptionalist, Wheatley celebrated the ideals of American freedom in common with the other revolutionaries. She believed God had richly blessed America with the right to spread liberty all over the world, and she renders a verdict of not guilty when Britannica accuses America of treason. But there remains a

crucial difference: Wheatley supports this with the hope that freedom will ring in slave quarters, too—not only from the pristine steeples of white church structures. Her poems rhetorically exposed the hypocritical strain of social bondage and freedom espoused in the streets of New England that overlooked the literal bondage of enslaved African families. In doing so, Wheatley gave a political voice to silent tears. Sadly, the vast majority of her contemporaries neglected this.

## CHAPTER 4

### AN AUGUSTINIAN READING OF WHEATLEY

Phillis Wheatley championed theological ethics through Augustinian moral theology. Wheatley employs virtue ethics to expose British-American tyranny against black lives. Steven B. Cowan and James S. Spiegel provide a fitting definition of virtue: “a stable character trait or habit that provides a person with a disposition to act in certain excellent ways. Virtues can be moral or intellectual. A moral virtue disposes a person to act morally, while an intellectual virtue disposes a person to acquire true beliefs and avoid acquiring false beliefs.”<sup>1</sup> Wheatley illustrates the coalescing of moral and intellectual virtues in an early American evangelical commitment to social justice. When contemporary readers apply Augustinian virtue ethics to Wheatley’s oeuvre, they discover new ways to challenge the oft-repeated narrative of “black radicalism.”<sup>2</sup>

African diasporic evangelical thought presupposes the supremacy, simplicity, and sufficiency of Scripture as the foundation for ethics. Nonetheless, African diasporic evangelical writings challenge pejorative arguments against African intellectualism without jettisoning Christian orthodoxy.<sup>3</sup> Afrosensitive evangelical spirituality is complex insofar as the discipline interprets African continental and diasporic voices as counterfactual witness to the dominant narratives used during the colonial era to advance

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<sup>1</sup>See Steven B. Cowan and James S. Spiegel, *The Love of Wisdom: A Christian Introduction to Philosophy* (Nashville: B & H Pub., 2009), 464.

<sup>2</sup>See Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998).

<sup>3</sup>See Chukwuemeka Onwubu, “The Intellectual Foundations of Racism,” in *Africana Studies: Philosophical Perspective and Theoretical Paradigms*, ed. Delores P. Aldridge and E. Lincoln James (Pullman: Washington State University Press), 71-72.

black suffering. This spiritual hermeneutic requires interpreters to fight against inherent racial biases that discard the qualitative nature of early American African sources. Evangelicals have the potential to break new historiographical ground when scholars and students posture themselves to investigate the hidden colors of love, theological fidelity, and social action in African American religious experience.

This chapter locates constructive references to African identity formation to strengthen an afrosensitive evangelical reading of Wheatley based on an Augustinian ethic of love. First, I explain and expose the reality of racialized scholarship in Augustinian and Wheatley studies. Second, I exposit select writings from Wheatley on love and virtue to articulate her Augustinian political theology. Third, I affirm Wheatley's staunch commitment to evangelical theology amid a deeply painful theodical reality.

### **Racialized Scholarship**

In his book *Race: A Theological Account*, J. Cameron Carter, a self-proclaimed non-Afrocentrist, painstakingly argues that “modernity’s racial imagination has its genesis in the theological problem of Christianity’s quest to sever itself from its Jewish roots.” This assertion leads Carter to conclude that the myth of modern racial reasoning emasculated the capacity to engage works of antiquity from a non-racialized posture.<sup>4</sup> Take, for example, Joseph McCabe’s 1902 work *St. Augustine and His Age*. In McCabe’s introduction, he describes Augustine’s birthplace:

A glance at the map of Africa discovers a strip of territory of singular situation

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<sup>4</sup>J. Cameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 4; 39-226. Carter, a professor of theology and Black Church studies at Duke Divinity School, illustrates the ability to use principles from Afrocentric thought without affirming its theological orientation against Christian orthodoxy. Carter, who received degrees from Temple University (BS), Dallas Theological Seminary (ThM), and the University of Virginia (PhD), acknowledges his natural dependency on works written by Western scholars, but courageously reads works written by non-Western scholars like the Ghanaian theologian, Kwame Bediako, to curtail hegemonic ideas. Carter highlights Bediako’s skill in explaining the “deep connection between African religion and ancient Christianity” (417n79).

on its North-west border. Isolated from the rest of the continent by a range of lofty mountains that extends from Tunis to the Atlantic, its broad and fertile plains open to the breath of the great sea which was the heart of the world for so many ages, it seems to have prepared by nature as the theatre of some thrilling national life. It seems as though it should have a natural immunity from the *curse of Cham* [emphasis added]. Yet in the story of the nations that richly endowed territory has ever played the part of a dependency.<sup>5</sup>

Notice the allusion to the so-called “Hamitic Curse” in McCabe’s portrayal of Augustine’s African homeland. At first blush, the reader is culturally lulled to sleep by McCabe’s depiction of the African landscape. One feels a sense of majestic awe—until the cantankerous crash of a racialized hermeneutic bellows out via McCabe’s eisoptical reading of Genesis 9:24–27. In addition, his understanding of Roman North Africa betrays a minimalist view of Africa and a belief in the metanarrative of Roman and Grecian superiority.<sup>6</sup>

To wit, this writer has yet to encounter a multitude of interpreters who read Augustine from an afrosensitive perspective rather than a Eurocentric worldview. For example, Peter Brown’s *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* visualizes his approach to Augustine as a window to gaze at the latter-day Roman Empire, exposing what seems to be a disjointed approach to analyzing Augustine’s story.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, Brown believes European scholars, who wrote extensively on the life and legacy of Augustine, were “fascinated about the relations of Augustine to the classical pagan past,” creating a universal ethos in Augustinian studies toward the cultural dislocation of African identity. Consequently, Augustine’s African identity was treated as a peripheral object, not a

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<sup>5</sup>Joseph McCabe, *Saint Augustine and His Age* (London: Duckworth and Co., 1902), 3.

<sup>6</sup>McCabe, *Saint Augustine and His Age*, 4-21.

<sup>7</sup>Brown states, “With the study of Augustine, I realized that I had found a way to what I wanted most—a way from an ‘outer’ to an ‘inner’ history of the later Roman Empire . . . . It was possible to view an entire period of late Roman history refracted through the lens of a personality which, itself, seemed to change profoundly over the years—view the world very differently as an old man than he had as a younger thinker. That was my reason for writing a biography of Augustine in the first place, and for writing it in the manner that I did.” Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 489.

primary subject.

In this regard, Brown envisions 1960s Augustinian scholarship as suffering from the “paradoxical limitation of immense achievements.”<sup>8</sup> In Brown’s estimation, their success was the only decisive limitation of 1960s scholarship. This is hardly a rebuke unless Brown presupposes that cornering the Augustinian market, as it were, stifles scholarly inquiry.

Ironically, Brown’s laudation of the immense achievements of Augustinian scholarship simultaneously begets refutation from Afrocentric readers. The Afrocentrist would read Brown’s comments as an ode to hierarchical discourse since Augustine is understood through European Rome rather than North Africa. As such, Europe dictates the means of investigation. Molefi Asante helpfully conceptualizes three characteristics of hierarchical discourse: (1) control over the rhetorical territory through definition, (2) establishment of a self-perpetuating initiation or *rite de passage*, and (3) the stifling of opposing discourse.<sup>9</sup>

Asante understands that many Eurocentric epistemologies inadvertently place a stranglehold on the interpretation of data. The reader should not take this as tacit endorsement of a postmodern hermeneutic of suspicion. Rather, this affirmation involves the need for African peoples to understand and engage “uninspired texts” from a place of cultural agency. For instance, Asante explains,

“[My] work has increasingly constituted a radical critique of the Eurocentric ideology that masquerades as a universal view in the fields of intercultural communication, rhetoric, philosophy, linguistics, psychology, education, anthropology, and history. Yet the critique is radical only in the sense that it suggests a turnabout, an alternative perspective on phenomena . . . . The inability to ‘see’ from several angles is perhaps the one common fallacy in provincial scholarship.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 496.

<sup>9</sup>See Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1987), 3.

<sup>10</sup>Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*, 27.

Moreover, Afrocentric thought should not be used as an undergirding literary device; but it can and should distill some perspectives in various categories of life and learning. Afrocentric thought is a powerful evaluative tool in aesthetics, ontology, axiology, and deontology when employed as a tertiary interlocutor. However, in Christian theology, the primary voice must be Scripture, while the secondary voice flows from the pens of faithful historic Christian witnesses throughout the global church.

The difference, as we shall see, is historical and philosophical. Historically, the dearth of non-European Augustinian resources available to these scholars shaped their worldview. Early interpreters of Augustine seemed to employ a lineal hermeneutic whereby Europe received the top tier as intellectual arbiter. Thus, a Western European cultural ethos, marinated in superiority, began to reject the epistemic worth of the African intellectual.<sup>11</sup> Eurocentric intellectual provincialism victimized Wheatley's work, as well. For instance, Dona Richards surmises that the ideology of European dominance in the academy domesticates African intellectuals who challenge standardized historiographical forms: "Intellectual, ideological control was the order of the day. The objective was to prove racial inferiority to the Africans, not with a whip, but with a textbook."<sup>12</sup> Brown makes this move when he describes the alienation of "the fully Latinized African of the fourth century."<sup>13</sup> What does this mean? Brown asserts that the outside world has unanimously agreed that Africa had little to offer the Eurocentric world of letters.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>This point is made in the following: Vera P. Swann, "African Presence and World Culture," in *African Roots: Towards an Afrocentric Christian Witness*, ed. Michael I. N. Dash et al. (Lithonia, GA: SCP/Third World Literature Pub., 1994), 28-41; Carter, *Race*, 82-96; Dona Richards, "The Ideology of European Dominance," *Western Journal of Black Studies* 3, no. 4 (1979): 87-95.

<sup>12</sup>Richards, "The Ideology of European Dominance," 94.

<sup>13</sup>Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 10.

<sup>14</sup>J. Deotis Roberts, *Africentric Christianity: A Theological Appraisal for Ministry* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2000). Roberts responds to pejorative statements against African historicity by reminding classicists that Africa must define its own history. He states, "One needs to see the problems and issues raised by Africentric [*sic*] scholars against the backdrop of the history of racist oppression and the improper attitude presented in the classic scholarship that some Europeans scholars have passed on as

Some scholars repudiate any semblance of intellectual racism in their pedagogical process even though these scholars—often without critically examining non-Anglo academic literature within a given field—consider such works inferior. Intellectual racism occurs when scholars dismiss works by people of color without reading said monographs.

This anti-African bias engenders a perceptive question from Thomas Oden: “Where was this prejudice against Africa manufactured?”<sup>15</sup> Oden, in agreement with Carter, avers, “The most distracting voice was that of Adolf von Harnack, the leading liberal German historian in the 1890s and early 1900s.” Harnack and the German liberal tradition constructed a school of thought that argued for a “regression of Ancient Christianity in Hellenistic abstractions and dualisms.”<sup>16</sup> Moreover, Oden remarks that the “misperception caused European historicism to fail to analyze adequately the close engagement of early African Christian teaching with indigenous, traditional and primitive African religions in North Africa.”<sup>17</sup> Fundamentally, these historians questioned the genetic fallacy that assumes Africa is intellectually famished apart from European intervention. This foundational belief created an ideological chasm between African and European ideological networks. European historians deracinated both Augustine and Wheatley’s African roots, so that they might be made in their own image: European intelligentsia, rather than African.

As such, black scholars projected conceptual whiteness on Wheatley’s ideas. White scholars limited Wheatley’s genius through the accusation of imitation. Both

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authentic for everyone. Eurocentric scholarship is now being challenged precisely because it has claimed a universal status and yet has remained provincial” (31).

<sup>15</sup>Thomas Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2007), 57.

<sup>16</sup>Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind*, 57.

<sup>17</sup>Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind*, 58.



Eurocentric and Afrocentric literary critics dealt Wheatley an unfair hand. Black intellectuals argued that Wheatley lacked ethnic pride because, in their estimation, she parroted the ideas of her oppressors. At the same time, ideological whiteness renounced Wheatley's ability to display a creative literary imagination. Unfortunately, these philological groups, as Eric Hairston notes, "fail to consider the African American literary convention of signifying, the practical risk of black writers, or the practical limitations of Wheatley's classical education."<sup>18</sup> These Anglo intellectuals used the accusation of imitation against Wheatley in a different manner than the aforesaid black scholars. Anglo literary scholars often venerated Wheatley's stylistic techniques and ideals when her methods complemented their sociopolitical aspirations.

Wheatley became the victim of racialized scholarship like her forebear Augustine. This discounted her African agency in the scholarly interpretive process. As stated above, the interpreter assumes ignorance or illegitimacy before a single line is analyzed. Such an assumption in the heart of the interpreter creates a learning fog between the author and reader, all of which hampers one's ability to read African diasporic texts with depth. This pedagogical disconnect can be ameliorated, however, once interpreters reckon with their preconceived biases.

Wheatley and Augustine, a daughter and son of Africa, received a Eurocentric rather than an afrosensitive hearing. Therefore, a sincere reading of Wheatley's theological ethics from an Augustinian framing demands cultural and theological sensitivity. Readers cannot assume that Wheatley abandoned love for Africa when she came to America. Nor did Africa relinquish love for her stolen child. Seeds of African identity formation sprouted gently through the hard surface of colonial racism. To be sure, Wheatley's African agency might be indistinguishable at first blush, but a closer

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<sup>18</sup>Eric Ashley Hairston, "The Trojan Horse: Classics, Memory, Transformation, and Afric Ambition in Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral," in *New Essays on Phillis Wheatley*, ed. John C. Shields and Eric D. Lamore (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2011), 90.

look reveals sociopolitical protest.

This dissertation will examine this germination process by analyzing the theological and ethical commitments Wheatley exemplifies in a few selected poems: “An Hymn to the Morning,” “On Recollection,” “On Imagination,” and “On Virtue.” In these poems, Wheatley applies a European classical understanding of virtue ethics to underscore how New England racial hierarchicalism treads on her identity.

### **Theological and Ethical Preoccupations of Afrosensitive Spirituality**

#### **An Analysis of “An Hymn to the Morning”**

Afrosensitive evangelical spirituality champions social justice without revising Scripture. In these poems, Wheatley reveals distinct pieces of her African memory. She recalls fond memories of the African plain, as well as watching her mother pour out water before the rising sun. Wheatley appropriates an afrosensitive use of common literary practices by combining classical myth and evangelical theology to promote freedom. In the characteristic fashion of English neoclassic art, Wheatley fuses pagan and Christian tradition together.<sup>19</sup> Her appropriation becomes afrosensitive when she manipulates neoclassicism to honor her African past while critiquing slavery. Wheatley writes,

Attend my lays, ye ever honour'd nine,  
Assist my labours, and my strains refine;  
In smoothest numbers pour the notes along,  
For bright Aurora now demands my song.

In the opening, Wheatley beckons the “honour'd nine”—the goddesses of the arts—to guide her thoughts and pen. Classical poets would often invoke Muses for inspiration, but Wheatley goes a step further by commanding divine assistance.<sup>20</sup> She

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<sup>19</sup>Marsha Watson, “A Classic Case: Phillis Wheatley and Her Poetry,” *Early American Literature* 31, no. 2 (1996): 120-21.

<sup>20</sup>Devona Mallory, “I Remember Mama: Honoring the Goddess-Mother While Denouncing the Slaveowner-God in Phillis Wheatley’s Poetry,” in *New Essays on Phillis Wheatley*, 22.

desires the Muses to refine her ability to communicate wisely because she knows her readers will dismiss ideas that counter their presuppositional biases regarding African dignity. Therefore she carefully chooses words that declare subtle war between her and her oppressors.<sup>21</sup>

In the last line of this stanza, for example, Wheatley declares that “bright Aurora demands my song.” Aurora is the goddess of the dawn, a rising sun that exerts power over the blackness of night. In this case, Aurora commands Wheatley to write a verse from her captured pen. Aurora’s figurative rule is too much for Wheatley, who is a member of the sable or dark race, to refuse.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, she continues her subversive protest:

Aurora hail, and all the thousands dies,  
Which deck thy progress through the vaulted  
skies:

She depicts the pervasive reach of Aurora’s sunbeams across the expanse of the earth. I contend that the sunbeams refer to European imperialism. Why? Wheatley’s political imagination visualizes Aurora’s sunbeams subduing and destroying every amount of darkness. If the awakening of the sun and dispelling of darkness remind Wheatley of her African heritage, then the destruction of darkness is a plausible reference to the transatlantic destruction of black civilization through the slave trade and American chattel slavery.<sup>23</sup> Devona Mallory makes a similar observation about Wheatley’s poem “An Hymn to the Morning”: “What is productive in the case of Wheatley’s poetry is that in darkness one can cloak or disguise what one is saying . . . . [T]he sun may symbolize

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<sup>21</sup>See Sondra O’Neale, “A Slave’s Subtle War: Phillis Wheatley’s Use of Biblical Myth and Symbol,” *Early American Literature* 21, no. 2 (Fall 1986): 144-65.

<sup>22</sup>In chap. 2, I note similar examples of subversive captivity language in the preface to *Poems*.

<sup>23</sup>See Chancellor Williams, *The Destruction of Black Civilization: Great Issues of a Race from 4500 BC to 200 AD* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1976).

the patriarchal light of slavery that threatens to overpower her with its beams of bigotry.”<sup>24</sup> Other scholars, like Shields, take Wheatley’s use of the sun differently. Hairston notes that Shields envisioned “Wheatley’s frequent references to the sun and solar progress—Phoebus Apollo, Aurora, and so on—signified a remnant memory of African solar worship mixed with Islam.”<sup>25</sup> As stated above, when one reads Wheatley canonically, such interpretive claims have little merit.

Euro-Americans advanced the idea of Western imperial development through political power and classical education. Karen L. Dovell states, “Early Americans believed that the westward progression of civilization, embodied in the classical concepts of *translatio imperii* and *translatio studii*, was destined to be carried out in America.”<sup>26</sup> Wheatley made use of the expansion-into-the-great-wilderness trope to sedate rival nationalistic notions.

Wheatley desires protection from the judgmental rays of Aurora:

Ye shady groves, your verdant gloom display  
To shield your poet from the burning day:  
*Calliope* awake the sacred lyre,  
While thy fair sisters fan the pleasing fire:  
The bow’rs, the gales, the variegated skies  
In all their pleasures in my bosom rise.

She solicits the “shady groves, verdant gloom display” to “shield your poet from the burning day.” After situating the role of Aurora, the next line seems to favor poetic sanctuary from naysayers who are inexperienced with poetry. These antagonistic neophytes allow Wheatley’s race and gender to elicit sophomoric criticisms against her. Racial trauma necessitates additional assistance from Calliope. She pleads with Calliope

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<sup>24</sup>Mallory, “I Remember Mama,” 29.

<sup>25</sup>Hairston, “The Trojan Horse,” 79.

<sup>26</sup>Karen Lerner Dovell, “The Interaction of the Classical Traditions of Literature and Politics in the Work of Phillis Wheatley,” in *New Essays on Phillis Wheatley*, ed. John C. Shields and Eric D. Lamore (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2011), 36.

to awaken the sacred lyre in company with women who will fan Wheatley's poetic fire.

In classical literature, Calliope is the muse of heroic poetry, and she becomes a female heroine who collaborates with other women to stir Wheatley's conscience against racialized hegemony. Wheatley guards her words ever so carefully by using prophetic double-speech and tropes that cloak explicit criticism. Gates explains that these speech-veiling tropes have been utilized by African Americans for many years. Gates employs signifying language to explain how they emphasize a way of speaking among African Americans then and now. According to Gates, tropes are more than figures of speech in African-American literature. They reveal common discourse among oppressed classes.<sup>27</sup> Even though Wheatley grew up in a sheltered, Anglo-American context, she employed tropes in an intertextual conversation against tyranny while still in bondage. For example, the allusion Wheatley makes to gender equality through nontraditional figures of speech is telling. Women, in Wheatley's thought life, are an intellectual bulwark despite their second-class citizenship. These female heroines strengthen Wheatley's resolve to write poetic arguments for the marketplace.

Wheatley becomes a muse who gives voice to the voiceless, speaking on behalf of a downtrodden and forgotten people. Jean-Luc Nancy, in *The Muses*, explains the relationship of the Muse to the neoclassical writer: "The Muses get their name from a root that indicates ardor, the quick temped tension that leaps out in impatience, desire, or anger, the sort of tension that aches to know and to do."<sup>28</sup> In this sense, the constant drumming of injustice compels Wheatley to react rather than retreat. Wheatley's acumen shatters the idea of black female inferiority.

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<sup>27</sup>For more information on African American literary signifying, see Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 52; Gates, *Figures in Black: Word, Signs, and the "Racial" Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Gates, "'Blackness of Blackness': A Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey," *Critical Inquiry* 9, no. 4 (June 1983): 685-723.

<sup>28</sup>See Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Muses* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 1.

Dovell presumes that Wheatley invokes the sun God, Apollos, in the following lines:

See in the east th' illustrious king of day!  
His rising radiance drives the shades away—  
But Oh! I feel his fervid beams too strong,  
And scarce begun, concludes th' abortive song.

However, the newfound masculine metaphor for the sun creates tension between Wheatley's social location and paternalism in colonial New England. Wheatley knows that the powerful presence of Anglo male privilege will "drive the shades away." By "shades" she seems to mean the dark remnants of black identity. Wheatley exclaims that the sun's powerful force against her black identity is far too strong to thwart. She will be assimilated into social nothingness without someone to plead her cause against unrelenting African oppression. The very last line depicts the notion that Wheatley's race, class, and gender will abort the poem's light without influential supporters.

### **An Analysis of "On Recollection"**

This poem is one of the clearest examples of subversive protest in Wheatley's oeuvre. She fights for social justice without drawing attention to herself. Hairston provides a provocative commentary on Wheatley's consistent ability to balance piety, ambition, and pride while challenging the common narrative against African personhood. She utilized classic European characterizations to promote the idea of African equality with the dominant class. Shields identifies the poem's structure as "the five-stress iambic line of heroic verse" opting to "open with the older form of memory's name" rather than choosing the longer form "Mnemmosyne." Shields thinks Wheatley's move towards the diminutive use demonstrates her sophistication as a classicist.<sup>29</sup> Hairston argues, "Wheatley emerges as being in league with or possessed by the Muses, their '*vent'rous*

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<sup>29</sup>John C. Shields, "Phillis Wheatley's Theoretics of the Imagination: An Untold Chapter in the History of Early American Literary Aesthetics," in *New Essays on Phillis Wheatley*, 359.

*Afric.*”<sup>30</sup> The African muse writes,

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

Once again, Wheatley transforms her identity from enslaved African female to a literate empowered black woman who quietly demands equality. When Wheatley classifies herself on par with the Muses, she sees herself as the tenth daughter of the divine nine.<sup>31</sup> This veiled, yet puissant juxtaposition strengthens Wheatley's resolve to honor black womanhood with the aid of these neoclassical goddess figures. Mneme, the Greek goddess of memory and the mother of the muses, will not allow Wheatley to rest.<sup>32</sup> She remembers her calling as a prophetess and evangelical activist. April C. E. Langley asserts Wheatley's prophetic call comes from an African-centered worldview. Langley describes Wheatley as “a displaced Sengalese griotte, an eighteenth-century American slave-poet laureate [who] highlights the dilemma involved in attempting to rewrite the spiritual and political histories” of enslaved and nominally free African peoples.<sup>33</sup> Afrosensitivity inspires contemporary readers to consider Langley's perspective without an outright dismissal.

Mneme in our nocturnal visions pours  
The ample treasure of her secret stores;  
Swift from above the wings her silent flight  
Through Phoebe's realms, fair regent of the night;

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<sup>30</sup>Hairston, “The Trojan Horse,” 84.

<sup>31</sup>Hairston, “The Trojan Horse,” 88.

<sup>32</sup>*Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, 285.

<sup>33</sup>April C. E. Langley, *The Black Aesthetic Unbound: Theorizing the Dilemma of Eighteenth Century African American Literature* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2008), 57-58.

And, in her pomp of images display'd,  
To the high-raptur'd poet gives her aid,  
Though the unbounded regions of the mind,  
Diffusing light celestial and refin'd.

Wheatley imagines divine wisdom pouring into her mind while she slumbers. These secret treasures are given for others to enjoy, not simply for the poet's own self-aggrandizement. To reach her, this newfound wisdom traveled through the celestial realm of the moon goddess, Artemis.<sup>34</sup> Each woman figure has authority over Wheatley's memory, and only these women have the right to give her counsel and charge. For Wheatley, the gendered female provided literary power.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, Wheatley's mind is engulfed by the gift of inestimable knowledge. There is a sense in which she converses with the goddess while becoming the seer to those who will experience enlightenment from her refined words. We cannot discount the potentiality that the allusion to light and refinement hint at race and gender equality.

The heav'nly phantom paints the actions done  
By ev'ry tribe beneath the rolling sun.

Furthermore, Wheatley intimates that those who lack virtue will not go unpunished. She makes a global indictment against lovers of evil to avoid an overly aggressive tone against American wickedness. Furthermore, she mentions the "heav'nly phantom" in a neoclassical sense rather than an overtly Christian reference to God. The phantom sees every action done under the sun whether good or evil. There will come a time of reckoning for the sins against African peoples; they will not be left unnoticed. Every slaver, seller, or buyer will stand before the great tribunal to give an account for the things done "beneath the rolling sun."

Mneme, enthron'd within the human breast,  
Has vice condmen'd, and ev'ry virtue blest.  
How sweet the sound when we her plaudit hear?

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<sup>34</sup>*Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, 285.

<sup>35</sup>Shields, "Phillis Wheatley's Theoretics of the Imagination," 359.



Sweeter than music to the ravish'd ear,  
Sweeter than Maro's entertaining strains  
Resounding through the groves, and hills, and plains.

Wheatley laments past and present memories of bondage and freedom. She remembers America while longing for Africa. She holds these competing loves tightly within her breast. Because these loves are contradictory, she courageously condemns vice and celebrates virtue. Shields says, "Recall that Phillis, gallingly and unimaginatively named for the slaver that brought her, was seven or eight years old when sold on the block, July 11, 1761." Remembering her literal chains, Wheatley rejects the virtuous, chosen nation trope. And yet, perhaps the deadliest sin that comes to her mind is the greed that makes slavery a viable option for some and a painful reality for others. For Wheatley, a truly virtuous person will receive universal praise. A contemporary reader would be naïve to assume she does not have the vice of slavery in mind. She has seen, smelled, and touched the horrid slave trafficking conditions firsthand. Those memories remain intact. As such, Shields intimates that Wheatley shifts from an idyllic pastoral to a seemingly innocuous statement on the realm of vice.<sup>36</sup> She longs for the day when the "ravish'd ear" might rejoice in the melodious songs of freedom. Langley notes the dual meaning of "ravished" in Wheatley's "Niobe in Distress for Her Children Slain by Apollo, from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Book VI. And From a View of the Painting of Mr. Richard Wilson."<sup>37</sup> Langley writes, "Ravished refers to the bartered and battered condition of eighteenth-century America's black and white poverty stricken children."<sup>38</sup> If Langley is correct, then Wheatley utilizes the phrase "ravished ear" as a synecdoche to refer to the whole body and therefore to chastise American tyranny.

Freedom's celebratory chorus will echo "through the groves, and hills, and

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<sup>36</sup>Shields, "Phillis Wheatley's Theoretic of the Imagination," 360.

<sup>37</sup>*Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, 101-13.

<sup>38</sup>Langley, *The Black Aesthetic Unbound*, 81.

plains.” This echo will be sweeter than Virgil’s (i.e., Maro’s) subversive verse in *Eclogues* and *Georgics*. The latter, explains Eric Lamore, is an “ancient classical work, comprising four didactic books [that] advised Roman farmers on various aspects of husbandry, and simultaneously glorified and critiqued Rome.”<sup>39</sup> Lamore connects Wheatley’s study of Virgil to the classical training she received from Mather Byles, a Harvard-educated tutor and preacher at the Hollis Street Congregational Church in Boston.<sup>40</sup> Byles also served as one of the attestation signatures in the *To the Publick* section of *Poems*.<sup>41</sup> He was the grandson of Increase Mather and nephew of Cotton Mather.<sup>42</sup> As a direct descendent of the Matherses, Byles was a societal elite and an influential Congregationalist leader in Boston. Cotton viewed himself as a father to Byles.<sup>43</sup> Lamore notes that Increase likely bequeathed his monstrous library to Cotton who later transferred it to Byles. Perhaps at the prodding of Susanna Wheatley, Byles leveraged this privilege in favor of educating Wheatley. Since *Georgics* modeled subversive speech within the public square, Lamore argues Wheatley adapted his poetic duplicity for the common good.

But how is Mneme dreaded by the race,  
 Who scorn her warnings, and despise her grace?  
 By her unveil’d each horrid crime appears,  
 Here awful hand a cup of wormwood bears.  
 Days, years misspent, O what a hell of woe!  
 Hers the worst tortures that our souls can know

If the previous stanza lacked a clear-cut connection to slave trafficking, then this stanza leaves little doubt that Wheatley reflects on the dastardly deeds of dark-

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118. <sup>39</sup>Eric D. Lamore, “Phillis Wheatley’s Use of the Georgic,” in *New Essays on Phillis Wheatley*,

<sup>40</sup>Lamore, “Phillis Wheatley’s Use of the Georgic,” 127.

<sup>41</sup>*Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, 7.

<sup>42</sup>Lamore, “Phillis Wheatley’s Use of the Georgic,” 129.

<sup>43</sup>Lamore, “Phillis Wheatley’s Use of the Georgic,” 127.

hearted masters. Wheatley characterizes Mneme as the one who warns the dominant race of impending judgment because of their crimes against black humanity. These crimes are as bitter as wormwood because she has spent most of her childhood as chattel.

Now eighteen years their destin'd course have run,  
In fast succession round the central sun.  
How did the follies of that period pass  
Unnotic'd, but behold them writ in brass!  
In Recollection see them fresh return,  
And sure 'tis mine to be asham'd, and mourn.

In this poem, Wheatley not only serves the arts and literature through her memory, she also becomes an early American abolitionist intellectual who speaks truth to power. She seems to allude to her eighteen-year incarceration for a crime she did not commit.<sup>44</sup> She asks, “How did the follies of that period pass unnotic'd, but behold them writ in brass!” Shields connects this query to a line in Shakespeare’s *Henry VIII*: “Mens evil manners live in brass, their virtues / We write in water.” In other words, Wheatley likely manipulated this line to indict the wretched enslaver that destroys beauty while gleefully stymieing the common good. She contemplates how such a dastardly deed could have gone unnoticed for so long. Every enslaved African knew that slavery was not right, so what made the majority blind to these truths?

Augustine provides a plausible answer. Many early American political leaders drank deeply from the stale well of Cicero’s understanding of statesmanship. Cicero promoted the idea of *optimi uiri* whereby the Roman statesman relished in vainglory rather than humility. These leaders customarily placed more emphasis on oratorical skills than piety.<sup>45</sup> Augustine, however, advised his listeners to follow the incarnation of Christ who viewed all kinds of people through the eyes of grace. His incarnation makes social transformation possible for those who do not use godliness as a means of gain. Christ

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<sup>44</sup>Shields, “Phillis Wheatley’s Theoretics of the Imagination,” 361.

<sup>45</sup>Robert Dodaro, *Christ and the Just Society in the Thought of Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 182-83.

showed deference to the Father so that professed believers might learn to honor every nation, tribe, and tongue (Rev 5:9; 7:9). For Augustine, Christ is the exemplar of virtue ethics.

O Virtue, smiling in immortal green,  
Do thou exert thy pow'r, and change the scene;  
Be thine employ to guide my future days,  
And mine to pay the tribute of my praise.

Wheatley places “O Virtue” in the vocative position, invoking virtue to act on behalf of the oppressed. Figuratively, Virtue represents those who have been given power to change the barren fields of race-based slavery to the “smiling immortal green” harvest of racial equality. Wheatley understands, in the words of Lord Acton, that “power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” The New Republic was pregnant with ideas on how to break the shackles of British tyranny even as it fostered black nihilism through impious, demonic doctrines that contradicted God’s creation mandate (Gen 1:26–28). Therefore, in Wheatley’s eyes, theoretical virtue seems impotent to change black suffering in British-America without persons of authority wielding the sword of virtue by establishing and enforcing just laws. Wheatley implores virtuous souls to seek justice and walk humbly with God before the Day of Judgment.

Of Recollection such the pow'r enthron'd  
In ev'ry breast, and thus her pow'r is own'd.  
The wretch, who dar'd the vengeance of the skies,  
At last awakes in horror and surprize [*sic*],  
By her alarm'd, he sees impending fate,  
He howls in anguish, and repents too late.  
But O! what peace, what joys are her t' impart  
To ev'ry holy, ev'ry upright heart!  
Thrice blest the man, who, in her sacred shrine,  
Feels himself sheltered from the wrath divine!

The final stanza, however, reveals a subtle assault against racial hierarchicalism. Mary McAleer Balkun comments, “Now eighteen years old, she mourns her past bad behavior, but she seems determined to evoke a reciprocal response in her reader: a regret for past

actions and desire for reform.”<sup>46</sup> Theologically, Wheatley employs eschatological judgment on “The wretch, who dar’d the vengeance for the skies, / At last awakes in horror and surprise.” Shields correctly adduces Wheatley’s reference to “the wretch” as white enslavers.<sup>47</sup> As such, Wheatley is cognizant of sin’s power to blind racist hearts from the simplest truth of Scripture: love your neighbor as yourself. Without this love, Wheatley believes “horror and surprize” is the “impending fate” of the unrepentant heart. Balkun ponders, “It is difficult to determine whether the wrath described here will be that of Mneme or God, but the implication seems clear: those who sin will be punished, and that punishment will begin on earth.”<sup>48</sup>

In Wheatley’s theology, racism radically contradicts biblical anthropology and soteriology because racism undergirds a truncated view of the vertical and horizontal implications of the gospel.<sup>49</sup> God liberates the soul from the shackles of sin so that these early American believers might see the gospel aright in the midst of a corrupt generation. For Wheatley, this freedom leads to peace, joy, and holiness before God and man. She states: “But O! what peace, what joys are hers t’ impart / To ev’ry holy, ev’ry upright heart !” The last two lines in this stanza are clearly eschatological. As stated above, Wheatley avoids overtly Christian theological language to accommodate her voice to attack the semireligious system that made white supremacy an option in colonial New England. Through the trope of the classical muse, she declares a blessing over those whites who walk in love: “Thrice blest the man, who, in her sacred shrine, / Feels himself shelter’d from the wrath divine!” Divine wrath awaits unrepentant haters of the *imago*

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<sup>46</sup>Mary McAleer Balkun, “To ‘Pursue th’ Unbodied Mind’: Phillis Wheatley and the Raced Body in Early America,” in *New Essays on Phillis Wheatley*, 390.

<sup>47</sup>Shields, “Phillis Wheatley’s Theoretics of the Imagination,” 361.

<sup>48</sup>Balkun, “To ‘Pursue th’ Unbodied Mind,’” 391.

<sup>49</sup>For biblical references that support a holistic view of the gospel, see 2 Cor 5:17-21; Gal 1:4, 2:11-16, 3:13-14, 6:15; Eph 1:9-3:8, 4:1-5:31.

*Dei* whose lack of humility engenders a failure to repent publicly for their sins.

In the *City of God* Augustine offers the public penance of Emperor Theodosius I as an example of religious humility. According to Dodaro, Augustine is discontent with celebrating private virtue while neglecting public humility, compassion, and action.<sup>50</sup> Just as Augustine called for ethical leadership within the Roman commonwealth, Wheatley desired early American political forces to live *coram Deo*. Ethical leadership exposes ignorance and weakness before any discord makes the reality known. Prideful leaders victimize people by their unethical practices. When political leaders hide their flaws, in search of Cicero's *optimus uir*, the poor, the disenfranchised, and the oppressed peoples of the world—and womb—suffer harm.

Both Augustine and Wheatley will capitulate to ungodly political standards. In chapter 2, I rehearsed Thomas Jefferson's intellectual racism toward Wheatley. Like David Hume, Jefferson believed blacks were incapable of producing poetically stimulating ideas.<sup>51</sup> He thought they could recall ideas but not construct original concepts. In other words, blacks were capable only of recollection, not imagination. But Wheatley challenged the era's prevalent racist ideas even with the titles of her poems: "On Recollection" is followed by "On Imagination." These titles make it clear to anyone who affirms Jefferson's bigotry: Wheatley's intellect exceeds most of her would-be critics. Balkun observes the two poems "appear at almost the exact center of her published manuscript, and they both celebrate her intellectual ability and refinement and work against racist notions of circumscription."<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup>Dodaro, *Christ and the Just Society in the Work of Augustine*, 192-93.

<sup>51</sup>See Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785; repr., New York: Penguin, 1999); David Hume, "Of National Characters," in *Political Essays/David Hume*, ed. Knud Haakousen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 78-92.

<sup>52</sup>Balkun, "To 'Pursue th' Unbodied Mind,'" 389.

## An Analysis of “On Imagination”

In “On Imagination,” Wheatley’s theological and ethical preoccupations mature from remembering the past to imagining a better future. Lamore contends that Wheatley is at pains to create an alternative world free from the sin of chattel slavery.<sup>53</sup> In so doing, “[she] reconnect[s] with her African homeland.” This reconnection undergirds Wheatley’s veneration of Africa, which persists throughout her writing. She imagines Africa as more than a nation filled with heathens who love folly and scorn wisdom. Terrence Collins, writing in 1975, rejects the notion that Wheatley positively looked upon African identity formation through veiled speech because he failed to account for the racial and gender polarities that made such surreptitious discourse necessary.<sup>54</sup> Collins was committed to an Afrocentric reading of Wheatley, which prejudiced his ability to read between the lines.

An afrosensitive reading, however, beckons readers to be swift to hear, slow to speak, and slow to get angry as Wheatley constructs a better theological vision for all. Russell Reising says the most crucial element of Wheatley studies concerns overcoming a simplistic reading of her poetry and prose. He admonishes readers to “read her rhetoric as rhetoric—strategic, subtle, and veiled.”<sup>55</sup> Remember, all forms of racism hurt both the oppressed and the oppressor because it exchanges the truth of God for a lie. Wheatley’s accommodationist strategy is not definitive but rather dialectically complementary. Examining “On Imagination” in dialogue with an Augustinian justice ethic will demonstrate this.

THY various works, imperial queen, we see,  
How bright their forms! How deck’d with

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<sup>53</sup>Lamore, “Phillis Wheatley’s Use of the Georgic,” 132.

<sup>54</sup>Terrence Collins, “Phillis Wheatley: The Dark Side of Poetry,” *Phylon* 36, no. 1 (March 1975): 78-88.

<sup>55</sup>Russell Reising, *Loose Ends: Closure and Crisis in the American Social Context* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 113.

pomp by thee!  
Thy wond'rous acts in beauteous order stand,  
And all attest how potent is thine hand.  
From Helicon's refulgent heights attend,  
Ye sacred choir, and my attempts befriend:  
To tell her glories with a faithful tongue,  
Ye blooming graces, triumph in my song.

Mary T. Clark maintains that Augustine believed justice “one of the four main forms of loving God [that] emphasiz[e] right relationship.”<sup>56</sup> She argues Augustine provides a textbook definition for justice: “Its task is to see that to each is given what belongs to each.”<sup>57</sup> Certainly, this task is realized when societal leaders have an interior commitment to justice. As Clark notes, “Justice begins within. There must be right order within man himself” to build a just society.

Wheatley likewise believes order is important to structure a society on a just foundation. She celebrates the power of the mind to produce virtuous realities and extols the imperial queen, which seems to be an allusion to the *Muses*, for creating beauty and order from the mountain of Helicon. In Greek mythology, Helicon was a large mountain summit located in Boetia. The Greeks revered the gigantic mountain range and assumed it housed the gods and goddesses. Wheatley plays on this Greek myth to imagine a world without racialized mythmaking. When she seeks to “tell her glories with a faithful tongue,” she prepares her heart to cautiously speak the truth in love. One should not conclude that Wheatley’s caution is commensurate with the fear of man. Wheatley aspired, as mentioned above, to advance the cause of justice by publishing her work so that she might plant transformative seeds of equality in the weeds of racism. She did not fear racist and sexist men; she understood them.

Wheatley understands that a man cannot renovate his heart without engaging

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<sup>56</sup>Mary T. Clark, “Augustine on Justice,” in *Augustine and Social Justice*, ed. Teresa Delgado, John Doody, and Kim Paffenroth (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015), 3.

<sup>57</sup>Clark, “Augustine on Justice,” 3.



his mind. Clark reminds us that Augustine “tells us that the man ‘with God in his thoughts,’ is the man who is becoming just.”<sup>58</sup> If a man lacks personal order, then societal order is a fleeting fancy. Both Augustine and Wheatley knew that men typically love themselves more than their neighbors. This is obvious in the American slave economy. However, Augustine believes that self-love should spotlight “man’s love for his highest good.”<sup>59</sup> Clark interprets Augustine’s understanding of self-love as attempting to draw one’s neighbor to the good that one is pursuing.<sup>60</sup> Augustine imagines a society rightly related to God will, according to Clark, “enjoy personal harmony and social peace.”

Wheatley pictures the same theo-political possibility. In the fifth stanza of the poem, she deconstructs racism by reconstructing righteousness.

Though *Winter* frowns to Fancy’s raptur’d eyes  
The fields may flourish, and gay scenes arise;  
The frozen deeps may break their iron bands,  
And bid their waters murmur o’er the sands.  
Fair Flora may resume her fragrant reign,  
And with her flow’ry riches deck the plain;  
Sylvanus may diffuse his honours round,  
And all the forest may with leaves be crown’d;  
Show’rs may descend, and dews their gems disclose,  
And nectar sparkle on the blooming rose.

Lamore affirms my early contention regarding the phrase “though *Winter* frowns to Fancy’s raptur’d eyes.” He argues that the italicized word is an example of subversion: “Here [Wheatley] deliberately chooses the word ‘Winter’ to refer to the oppressive segment of the Boston community who refused to support her first attempt to publish a volume of her poems in 1772.”<sup>61</sup> Lamore arrives at this conclusion through Intertextual analysis. He likely compares Wheatley’s deployment of italics in other areas

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<sup>58</sup>Clark, “Augustine on Justice,” 4.

<sup>59</sup>Clark, “Augustine on Justice,” 4.

<sup>60</sup>Clark, “Augustine on Justice,” 4.

<sup>61</sup>Lamore, “Phillis Wheatley’s Use of the Georgic,” 133.

to magnify her scholastic subterfuge.

Wheatley assaults intellectual racism by juxtaposing a cold Boston winter with cold-hearted Bostonians who devalued her contribution to the world of ideas.

Furthermore, Reising describes “winter as the poetic embodiment of slave-holding Boston’s northern climate and oppressive social regime.”<sup>62</sup> In so doing, Wheatley provides space for social peace by fighting against oppression. Lamore continues, “Despite this group’s best efforts to oppress the African American artist, the exercising of the imagination allows the artist to resist any form of oppression.”<sup>63</sup> Boston refused both intellectual asylum and economic reward for Wheatley’s Christian imagination.

In this sense, Wheatley exposes the unjust strictures that many New England entrepreneurs held against enslaved Africans. When Adam Smith penned *The Wealth of Nations*, he overlooked the inability of oppressed classes to thrive financially in the global economy. Wheatley challenges the ethics of the slave-market economy and crony mercantilism. At first blush, readers miss how Wheatley loathes her inability to create wealth and therefore experience social peace in British North America. But in “On Imagination,” she does more than simply laud the “relationship between the mind and the material world.”<sup>64</sup> As Reising notes, “Wheatley *anticipates* [emphasis added] the covert and coded practices made so visible in nineteenth-century African American texts. [She] commandeers the language of poetic conventions, warping them to her own oppositional purposes.”<sup>65</sup> Simply put, the orientation of an afrosensitive evangelical speaks truth to power.

In Wheatley’s case, she used resistive poetics to chastise economic cronyism

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<sup>62</sup>Reising, “Loose Ends,” 98.

<sup>63</sup>Reising, “Loose Ends,” 98.

<sup>64</sup>Reising, “Loose Ends,” 95.

<sup>65</sup>Reising, “Loose Ends,” 96.

and nepotism. We must not forget: Wheatley's genius benefited *her captors'* financial situation—not her own. She is emblematic of the unjust economic weights that many New England entrepreneurs leveled against both enslaved and free Africans. Enslaved Africans made countless contributions to the American political economy without any recognition for their works, and when they gave their best intellectual work, their ideas lined their masters' pocketbooks. As a result, many enslaved Africans protested this injustice through duplicity. They acted mentally ignorant or physically weak to lessen the potential profits of unjust rulers who exercised punitive control over their minds and bodies. Reising captures this idea well: "Slaves may imagine freedom as an otherworldly religious utopia only so long as those imaginative projections stop short of the insurrectionary implications of Wheatley's 'rising fire.'"<sup>66</sup> In other words, laws protecting white rule over black bodies were swiftly called upon when African peoples organized literary militias to take up arms through the transatlantic print culture. For obvious reasons, Wheatley never called enslaved folks to arms in her poetry or prose. But she does speak from the point of view of an enslaved woman in a slave society, which means she has little margin for writing from "an abstract or conventionally aesthetic angle."<sup>67</sup> Without a helping hand from wealthy landowners or transatlantic merchants, Wheatley's ideas would never have seen the light of day.

According to Augustine, refusing to help one's neighbor and injuring one's neighbor are equally unjust. Clark offers a poignant summary of Augustine's thinking:

At times there is a tendency to think that whereas physical injury to another is an injustice, a failure to extend a helping hand is only, as they phrase it, a failure in charity to which I was not obligated. But Augustine unites these two acts and regards them both as failures in justice and failures in charity: ". . . a man may sin against another in two ways, either by injuring him or by not helping him when it is in his power."<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup>Reising, "Loose Ends," 114.

<sup>67</sup>Reising, "Loose Ends," 95.

<sup>68</sup>Clark, "Augustine on Justice," 4.

Here, Augustine mirrors Jesus' "Good Samaritan" who makes a sacrifice to aid a fallen image-bearer at great expense to himself. According to Jesus, the Samaritan modeled the Great Commandment better than the hypocritical Jewish religious leaders who walked past the victim in order to protect themselves from vocational or physical harm. Though these so-called spiritual leaders had access to the *Shema* and understood the Ten Commandments, they failed the test of love. Clark argues, "All sins against the Ten Commandments are acts of injustice: the first three are violations of the virtue of religion—love for God; the fourth is a violation of the virtue of piety—love for parents; and all others violate the law of love for neighbor." Wheatley, like Augustine, believes social justice begins with neighbor-love.

Wheatley wants radical, society-wide transformation. To reflect this desire in her poetry, she transforms the coldness of "colonial Boston into a warm and lusty rural scene" by using the subjunctive "may" six different times to "signal the potential for these difficult changes to occur."<sup>69</sup> Wheatley imagines winter as it finally melts away due to the warm breeze of love. Wheatley and Augustine believe love is the truest virtue because it is able to transform our social imaginary to one that is more befitting of the kingdom.

### **An Analysis of "On Virtue"**

Wheatley enters the conversation on race and political theology with less subversion. She seems to combine wisdom literature with a neoclassical understanding of virtue. Reising notes that Wheatley "adds greater density and range to the ideological work of these poems" through philosophical discourse.<sup>70</sup> It is significant that the second

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<sup>69</sup>Lamore, "Phillis Wheatley's Use of Georgic," 133-34.

<sup>70</sup>Lamore, "Phillis Wheatley's Use of Georgic," 106-7. Reising does a fine job exposing the potential shortsightedness of Wheatley's critics. Many read "On Virtue" as another example of Wheatley's "capitulation to white culture." He prosecutes their understandings of Wheatley's usage of "light and dark" as an unnecessary polarization of a strict reference to white purity and black deprecation in Wheatley's oeuvre.

poem articulates a commitment to moral theology. Wheatley speaks on various subjects, religious and moral, without demarcating either religion or morality. By manipulating non-Christian sources and subtly alluding to biblical texts to bolster her stance against colonial impiety, Wheatley demonstrates that virtue emanates from the mind of God without ever using explicit God-talk.

Shields grants that “the idea of virtue [is] not Christian in origin, but it is a distinctly classical concept having its roots in Greek and Roman Stoicism.”<sup>71</sup> Shields assumes that a global understanding of virtue finds its origin in Grecian and Roman philosophical constructs rather than Scripture. However, Wheatley weaves wisdom literature principles with seemingly innocent verse to contemplate the operation of virtue amid unearned suffering. Within the African-American religious experience, unearned suffering forced African peoples to grapple with theodicy. Wheatley is no exception, and she courageously maintains an orthodox view of God’s providence, even though professing Christians had a hand in her suffering. Wheatley states,

O Thou bright jewel in my aim I strive  
To comprehend thee. Thine own words declare  
Wisdom is higher than a fool can reach.  
I cease to wonder, and no more attempt  
Thine height t’ explore, or fathom thy profound.  
But, O my soul, sink not into despair,  
Virtue is near thee, and with gentle hand  
Would now embrace thee, hover o’er thine head.  
Fain would the heav’n born soul with her converse,  
Then seek, then court her for her promis’d bliss.

Wheatley opens this poem with a lamentation. She is sorrowful that wisdom seems to elude her grasp, but she continues to strive after this pearl of great worth. Wheatley points to the source of wisdom by alluding to the Sacred Writings: “Thine own words declare/wisdom is higher than a fool can reach.” This is an allusion to Proverbs 24:7— “Wisdom is unattainable for a fool; in court he does not open his mouth”—which

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<sup>71</sup>*Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, 280.

speaks of a person's dilemma who bypasses the road of virtue to travel the way of folly. In context, this proverb illustrates a person whose ignorance makes attaining wisdom problematic. Bruce Waltke interprets this section saying, "Conscience ignorance is the first principle of knowledge."<sup>72</sup> In other words, wise people are well aware of the limitations of their reasoning. Waltke employs his own metaphor to explain the proverb in zoomorphic terms: "[T]he incorrigible lacks the wings of piety and humility that soar high enough to attain the heavenly wisdom needed for public affairs. This fool must not be allowed to shape public opinion or policy or settle disputes."<sup>73</sup>

If Waltke's interpretation is accurate, then Wheatley's ability to deliver subtle blows to an impious political arrangement is even stronger. In these few lines, we observe a clear demonstration of her political theology without an explicit use political jargon. She is constrained by her social location and temporarily commissioned to work within those constraints. Jonathan Leeman, quotes Ronald Jepperson, saying, "Institutions are not just constraint structures; all institutions simultaneously empower and control. Institutions present a constraint/freedom duality . . . . [T]hey are vehicles for activity within constraints."<sup>74</sup> The mere fact that God has providentially given her keys to unlock the mental chains of black inferiority requires a huge amount of constraint. Wheatley exudes the ethical preoccupations of an afrosensitive evangelical activist who understands that every institution has "constraining and commissioning power."<sup>75</sup>

Wheatley ponders if her readers can reach the pinnacle of wisdom. In so doing, she circumvents potential accusations that she is causing unrest. She could not afford the

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<sup>72</sup>Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 15-31*, in *New International Commentary of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 272.

<sup>73</sup>Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 273.

<sup>74</sup>Jonathan Leeman, *Political Church: The Local Assembly as Embassy of Christ's Rule* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016), 107n40.

<sup>75</sup>Leeman, *Political Church*, 107.

irredeemable title of rabble-rouser. Black literary critics walked a fine line in the eighteenth century. Eric Gardner reminds us that figures like Wheatley, John Marrant (1755–1791), and Jupiter Hammon (1711–c. 1806) “had to negotiate the broader politics of the American Revolution, including what seemed to be promising possibilities for black loyalists.”<sup>76</sup> At the end of the day, these Christian apologists were loyal to the gospel and African diasporic freedom. They would have supported the leadership of any George who vied for their holistic freedom. Either King George or George Washington could have sheltered these defenseless souls from the mortars of indignity.

Wheatley is self-critical in order to gain a hearing from others: “I cease to wonder, and no more attempt / Thine height t’ explore, or fathom thy profound.” She envisions herself as the helpless one whose ignorance keeps wisdom at bay. She feels that her very soul is on the brink of nihilism or despair. Readers who are familiar with Proverbs might hear an echo from Proverbs 13:12, which says, “Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is like a tree of life.” Wheatley’s self-criticism is actually a longing for corporate criticism, a calling for her readers to forsake global exploitation by embracing virtue. She exclaims, “Virtue is near thee, and with gentle hand / Would now embrace thee, hovers o’er thine head.” In the spirit of Matthew 7:1–5, Wheatley calculates the removal of the beam from her own eye before removing the speck from the eyes of professed believers. Frankly, it is difficult to envision a greater level of wrong than slavery, but Jesus’ admonition suggests that we must place stricter judgment on ourselves before highlighting the faults of others. Wheatley writes with caution and humility amid interracial conversation.

Mark L. Chapman addresses Benjamin E. Mays’ approach to criticism when doing the difficult work of interracial communication. Mays asserted that both parties should be self-critical before criticizing others. Typically, people are willing to hear

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<sup>76</sup>Eric Gardner, “Early African American Print Culture,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*, February 2018, accessed March 5, 2018, <http://10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.283>.

critique when the evaluator admits personal weaknesses as well. Chapman quotes Mays, one the most brilliant black pastor-theologians in the twentieth century, “Criticisms are likely to be more effective and better received when those who give them accept the fact that they themselves are not perfect, and that they are part and parcel of the evil they condemn.”<sup>77</sup>

In this poem, Wheatley ushers readers into dialogue with eternity. She imagines virtue as the celestial queen who nurtures from the cradle to the grave. Virtue will not leave her motherless. She strengthens anyone who no longer craves “the false joys of time” because their hearts are fixed on eternal bliss. Wheatley and Augustine’s African communalism undergird their desire for justice in an unjust society. They both had a political theology informed by the Great Commandment and Great Commission. In Augustine’s mind, the *imago Dei* meant believers must love all people because they are earthly neighbors who deserve love and respect. In fact, Augustine takes his political theology to an ethically eschatological end, reminding his listeners that they are uncertain which of these image-bearers will be their heavenly neighbors.<sup>78</sup> Similarly, Wheatley links all people groups together through phrases that express ethnic equality between blacks and whites, and by implication, every beautiful skin color under the sun.<sup>79</sup>

### Conclusion

Wheatley modeled African diasporic evangelical activism by cementing the gospel and social justice together. African diasporic evangelicals in early America exemplified right theology and right sociology. These drum majors for justice had no

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<sup>77</sup>Mark L. Chapman, *Christianity on Trial: African-American Religious Thought Before and After Black Power* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1996), 32-33.

<sup>78</sup>Sarah Stewart-Kroeker, “Friendship and Moral Formation: Implications for Restorative Justice,” in *Augustine and Social Justice*, 259.

<sup>79</sup>See Wheatley’s poems “To Maecenas”; “To the Right Honourable WILLIAM, Earl of Dartmouth, His Majesty’s Principal Secretary of State for North America, & c.”; “On the Death of the Rev. Mr. GEORGE WHITFIELD. 1770.”



other recourse but to speak prophetically into a demonic political system. Wheatley's identity, like Augustine, was foundationally shaped in Africa *before* European superiority and influence became all-encompassing. Augustine and Wheatley shared a common theological vision for Christian orthodoxy and virtue ethics. They believed transformational love would produce, rather than contradict, a political economic system designed to advance global human flourishing for all peoples.

According to Augustine and Wheatley, inward virtue precedes a just society. Augustine had little hope in the base instincts of man to pursue goodness and beauty, but his theological convictions did not hinder his desire to shepherd and care for the poor and oppressed. Wheatley, however, embodied the theological preoccupations of an afrosensitive evangelical by implicitly rebuking black suffering while maintaining a future hope. She desired to usher in the return of Christ by bringing down satanic systems that held captive the minds of professing British-American Christians. Racism will always be a counter-gospel doctrine of demons. On the other hand, Wheatley's authentic Christianity encourages believers to passionately love both God and neighbor.

According to Shields, "[Wheatley] presents a rare autobiographical portrait describing [how] she was taken from her native Africa" to illustrate her struggle for freedom and love for African people.<sup>80</sup> This is important because at the height of America's Civil Rights Movement several African-American critics chose to cast aside Wheatley's contribution to black intellectual thought. They argued she lost her ability to "think black," and therefore failed to confront white supremacy in open forums.

Unfortunately, too many scholars allowed contemporary affinities toward black consciousness and black power to skew their appreciation for Wheatley's subtle protest. As such, these African American intellectuals swallowed a racialized hermeneutic and labeled Wheatley an assimilationist without grappling with the

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<sup>80</sup>Shields, "Phillis Wheatley's Struggle for Freedom," in *Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, 235.

intersections of race, class, and gender in colonial New England. As mentioned above, Kende is guilty of this fatal flaw. Another example is Collins, who contends Wheatley's poetry models the self-destroying nature of white supremacy on the development of black identity.<sup>81</sup> According to Collins, Wheatley surrenders her blackness to whiteness in order to survive an oppressive society.<sup>82</sup> These African-American scholars shame the legacy of this African Christian daughter because they failed to read her through an afrosensitive framework.

The next chapter examines the contours of afrosensitive evangelical spirituality through Christology, missiological apologetics, and spiritual friendship. By closely examining Wheatley's poetry and prose pre- and post-manumission, I will identify Wheatley's gospel-centered transition from subversive speech to direct attacks against globalized black suffering.

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<sup>81</sup>Collins, "Phillis Wheatley," 78–88.

<sup>82</sup>Collins, "Phillis Wheatley," 78-88.

CHAPTER 5  
CONTOURS OF AFROSENSITIVE  
EVANGELICAL SPIRITUALITY

Wheatley demonstrates a staunch commitment to Christian orthodoxy. She honors Christ as the exclusive way of salvation through literary apologetics in two select poems, “Atheism” and “An Address to The Deist.”<sup>1</sup> Although it would be anachronistic to classify Wheatley a presuppositional apologist, she demonstrates a sophisticated use of Socratic questioning to challenge rival worldviews.

These poems question the notion that Wheatley mimicked her master’s theological voice to achieve colonial recognition and eventual emancipation. As argued above, Wheatley often used mimicry in her writings to chastise white supremacy, but the evidence is lacking to argue she does so concerning her Christian identity.

**Wheatley’s Christological and  
Missiological Apologetic**

Phillis Wheatley defends the Christian faith against atheism and deism. She maintains a high view of the person and work of Christ to fulfill his missiological imperative. Wheatley fulfills this missiological imperative by writing poetry that shows the relationship between love of God and neighbor. When Wheatley confronts competing truth claims, readers sense her spirit of humility and reverence for those trapped in false beliefs. As an enslaved African, she likely understands the difficulty of being held captive by alien philosophies. In Colossians 2:8, for example, the Apostle Paul warns the church at Colossae: “See to it that no one takes you captive.” According to Paul,

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<sup>1</sup>*The Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, ed. John C. Shields, Schomburg Library of Nineteenth Century Black Women Writers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 129-32.

philosophical ideas that oppose the gospel handcuff listeners' minds.

Wheatley understands this shackling both literally and figuratively. Literally, she spends each moment realizing that others had been given power over her identity. Figuratively, she concludes that false ideas against “the land of errors” created one of the greatest errors in human history—the transatlantic slave trade. As we examine Wheatley’s poem “To The University of CAMBRIDGE in NEW-ENGLAND,” we witness a gentle grappling with these aforementioned realities.

Wheatley wrote the first version of this poem around in 1767 when she was 13.<sup>2</sup> According to Shields, “During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Harvard College, located in Cambridge (a suburb of Boston), was often [called] Cambridge.”<sup>3</sup> As Wheatley peered into the eyes of the Anglo-American male student body, she must have felt a hint of excitement, knowing this would be an opportunity to engage the minds of tomorrow’s leaders. Wheatley was no stranger to the academic rigor of Harvard, even though she lacked access to formal education on a university level due to her gender and skin color. Nonetheless, God’s good providence linked her with a well-educated Harvard graduate named Mather Byles.<sup>4</sup> Byles, an immediate descendant of Increase and Cotton Mather, was a friend of the Wheatleys. The Mathers had a long history of political and social clout in Boston, New England.<sup>5</sup>

Byles arguably negotiated the opportunity for Wheatley to address the Harvard men. She received no honorarium for her work because all financial compensation went to her captors and perhaps anyone who brokered the speaking engagement. One wonders

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<sup>2</sup>*Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, 280.

<sup>3</sup>*Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, 280.

<sup>4</sup>See John C. Shields, “Phillis Wheatley and Mather Byles: A Study in Literary Relationship,” *College Literature* 23 (June 1980): 377–90.

<sup>5</sup>For more information on Mather Byles’s family of origin, see Robert Middlekauff, *The Mathers: Three Generations of Puritan Intellectuals, 1596-1728* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).

if Harvard selected Wheatley as a mere entertainment trifle since many males in this era believed women and people of color were intellectually inferior. Wheatley's courage to speak in such uncomfortable environments offers a lesson in both humility and faith.

At the outset of this dissertation, I challenged the false accusations scholars made against Wheatley's sincere commitment to evangelical theology. Far from an unbeliever, she revealed the fruits of true repentance, and expressed Christological orthodoxy through her writing, particularly this address.

While an intrinsic ardor prompts to write;  
The muses promise to assist my pen;  
'Twas not long since I left my native shore  
The land of errors, and Egyptian gloom:  
Father of mercy, 'twas thy gracious hand  
Brought me in safety from those dark abodes.

Wheatley begins with the normative neoclassical request to receive literary assistance from the muses. Her passion to transfer ideas from her mind to the listeners prompts her to do poetic apologetics. Wheatley knows that "ideas have consequences," to borrow from Richard Weaver (1910–1963), so she crafts her opening statements to fit the perceptions of the men who are present.<sup>6</sup> She begins with a terse biography of her present reality: "'Twas not long since I left my native shore." Wheatley's euphemism locates her in America. She is an alien and a stranger to a foreign land. The audience is likely filled with the sons of wealthy transatlantic merchants who continue to build economic empires by manipulating African bodies and souls.

Wheatley avoids discussing the painful process that brought her from Africa to America. She knows the audience desires an intellectual space consistent with the racist fiction that European Christians must save the heathen of African from their mental and spiritual darkness. Wheatley, however, provides a subtle counter to this presupposition. She labels herself a "native" to the distant shores of Akebulon (Africa). In the history of

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<sup>6</sup>Richard M. Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1943).

Western philosophy, we witness many European thinkers construct narratives that Akebulon is “[t]he land of errors, and *Egyptian* gloom.”<sup>7</sup> The question is, “Does Wheatley affirm this pejorative characterization of her native land?”

There are several social realities—race, class, and gender—that guided Wheatley’s hand and tethered her tongue. The American democratic experiment stitched together a racialized fabric designed to limit the social progress of blacks on American soil. Any shade of black was legally disenfranchised by the Massachusetts Bay colony, and later by leaders of the United States. Through centuries of legal dehumanization, the color of law bifurcated the identity of Africans on American soil. American political leaders constantly grappled with the so-called “negro problem.” They pondered the best practices of dealing with more free people of color in predominantly white spaces. Throughout American history, we have witnessed shifts in the meaning of blackness—usually to educate the *majority culture* rather than to share power with people who have different social experiences.

In this regard, Wheatley’s pensive line unlocks the perennial problem of pain many African peoples face when they exist in an epistemological space created to revere Europe and disdain Africa. Shields notes, “Wheatley’s [socio]political concerns in her poems were not always for the common good; . . . she clearly voices unmitigated concern for her people still in chains.”<sup>8</sup> Moreover, Shields rightly explains that Wheatley’s political poems become more forceful post-emancipation. Shields reads her kidnapping lamentations according to Carl Jung’s “mandala archetype”: “[M]andala (the Sanskrit word for ‘circle’) is an instrument of ‘meditation, concentration, and self-immersion, for

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<sup>7</sup>See Cornel West, *Keeping Faith: Philosophy and Race in America* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 251-70; Beverly Daniel Tatum, *Why Are All The Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria: And Other Conversations About Race* (New York: Basic Books, 1997); Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Random House, 1952); Ashley Montagu, *Man’s Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997).

<sup>8</sup>*Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, 238.

the purpose realizing inner experience . . . [which] often follow[s] chaotic, disordered states marked by conflict and anxiety.”<sup>9</sup> Shields maintains, therefore, that “the mandala archetype manifests itself in her preponderant solar imagery.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, Shields doubts that Wheatley’s wordplay for Son-sun, coupled with the use of the Latin *sol*, are solely descriptive of her zealous commitment to New England Congregationalism.<sup>11</sup> He makes a noteworthy report when he contends that religion informs her poetic stream of thought, but it does not prove a sincere commitment to the evangelical beliefs.

However, the difficulty with Shields’s repudiation of Wheatley’s conversion is the lack of evidence that she eventually rejects biblical Christianity. Unless noted in their testimonies or writings, we cannot assume a utilitarian relationship to Christianity for all enslaved Africans. Wheatley’s oeuvre anticipates the biting critique of Frederick Douglass (1818–1895) against proslavery Christianity.<sup>12</sup> They hated slavery in the world but loved the Savior of the world. Wheatley and Douglass both affirmed Christ as the exclusive way of salvation. For them, Christ was their beautiful Savior and God who called them to speak out against wickedness (see Titus 1:13–14).

### **Subversive Speech and the Providence of God**

Subversive speech in afrosensitive evangelical activism is not based on an anachronistic psychological conjecture. Shields seems to categorize it this way with his *mandala archetype*. Hermeneutically, I attempt to read Wheatley through a grammatical, historical, literary, and theological lens—in other words, at face value unless word

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<sup>9</sup>*Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, 240.

<sup>10</sup>*Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, 241.

<sup>11</sup>*Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, 241.

<sup>12</sup>See David Blight’s introduction and critical analysis of Douglass’s original treatise: David W. Blight, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave, Written by Himself* (Boston: Macmillan Higher Education, 2016).

choice, syntax, and structure suggest otherwise. Hence, when she says, “Father of mercy, ’twas thy gracious hand / Brought me in safety from those dark abodes,” I am led to believe afrosensitive evangelical double-talk is at play.

In afrosensitive evangelical double-talk, Wheatley maintains an orthodox view of the providence of God. She believes, as Psalm 115:3 declares, “Our God is in heaven! He does whatever he pleases!” The difficulty for Wheatley, and many contemporary Afrocentric religious scholars, is processing and explaining God’s permissive or decretive will without making God the object of sin and/or the causation of evil. As demonstrated below, Afrocentric scholars jettison an orthodox view of God’s sovereignty and providence in light of the problem of evil. They cannot fathom a God who allows bad things to happen to good people, forgetting the words of our blessed Lord: “There is no one good but God.” So they revise clear examples in Scripture where God not only allows bad things to happen, but he decrees a frowning providence to take place within a given dispensation to bring about a good return. One need only recall the Egyptians who experienced great loss (health, wealth, and sons) before Pharaoh let the children of Israel go. If one interpreted that passage from an Egyptian vantage point, God would seem cruel to cause so much pain to deliver his people. And yet, the text reveals that God worked within the moral inclinations of Pharaoh by allowing him to pursue what his heart desired most.<sup>13</sup>

Afrocentric scholars, and many black liberation theologians, label such theological premises Eurocentric, evidence of the perceived hegemonic sentiments of Reformation theologians from Luther to Beza. But as argued above, Christian orthodoxy finds its genesis on African, not European soil. If these scholars want to better understand Wheatley’s words during this aggressively dark period of American history, they do well to listen to her older African brother, Augustine. After all, each of her Congregationalist

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<sup>13</sup>See Exod 10:1–12:13.



tutors can arguably trace their theological lineage back to the African *doctores ecclesia*. For example, Augustine's counsel in *Enchiridion* provides a solid framework for interpreting Wheatley's lines. He states,

Nor can we doubt that God does well even in the permission of what is evil. For He permits it only in the justice of His judgment. And surely all that is just is good. Although, therefore, evil, in so far as it is evil, is not a good; yet the fact that evil as well as good exists, is a good. For if it were not a good that evil should exist, its existence would not be permitted by the omnipotent Good, who without doubt can as easily refuse to permit what He does not wish, as bring about what He does wish. And if we do not believe this, the very first sentence of our creed is endangered, wherein we profess to believe in God the Father Almighty. For He is not truly called Almighty if He cannot do whatsoever He pleases, or if the power of His almighty will is hindered by the will of any creature whatsoever.<sup>14</sup>

Augustine's last line captures Wheatley's theological preoccupation. She refuses to allow outward wickedness to create inner confusion about God's merciful hand amid suffering. Wheatley dealt with merciless people from the time she was kidnapped. The Wheatleys purchased her for a trifle; this was a potential act of mercy since she was near death. However, one could also say the Wheatleys nursed her back to health because they wanted to make good on a lifetime investment. Simply put, they desired a masterful product for a minimal payment.

Next, Wheatley confronts social privilege and anti-supernaturalism in the age of Enlightenment. In the opening line of the second stanza, she addresses the audience with the subtle vocative expression, "Students." A *prima facie* glance at her salutation seems innocuous. One might reason, "She is speaking to Harvard College students." However, when we factor in the students' social location over and against Wheatley's sociopolitical identity, we recognize that these men have received, in the words of Peggy McIntosh, "unearned privilege and conferred dominance" in a culture that privileges

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<sup>14</sup>Augustine, *Enchiridion*, in *St. Augustine: On the Holy Trinity. Doctrinal Treatises, Moral Treatises*, ed. Philip Schaff, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* 3, 1<sup>st</sup> series (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 267.

white men.<sup>15</sup> Wheatley outlines the academic privilege that many people of color and women simply lack. She writes, “Students, to you ’tis giv’n to scan the heights / Above, to traverse the ethereal space.” Notice that these students receive something they did not earn without structural assistance—namely, the right to become formally educated. Wheatley reminds these men to maximize their opportunity to study the cosmos without major interruptions from an owner or some other figure.

As an evangelical, Wheatley counsels these men to remember the one who keeps the world in orbit. She calls them “sons of science” who also need to surrender their lives to the Lordship of Christ. She proclaims the gospel: “How Jesus’ blood for your redemption flows. See him with hands out-stretcht upon the cross.” These two lines bolster the assertion that Wheatley had an authentic conversion. In fact, two ingredients from Bebbington’s quadrilateral are mentioned: conversionism and crucicentrism. She pleads with the listeners to respond the grace of the compassionate Savior who does not reject a repentant sinner: “Immense compassion in his bosom glows; / He hears revilers, nor resents their scorn.” All sinners are welcome at the foot of the cross. Horatius Bonar envisions humanity scornfully mocking the crucified Lamb. He states, “Around the cross the throngs I see mocking, the sufferers grown; yet still my voice it seems to be, as if I mocked alone.”<sup>16</sup>

If one ponders the extent of Wheatley’s acceptance of the Chalcedonian Confession, they need only hear her adulation for the “matchless mercy in the Son of God! / When the whole human race by sin had fall’n.” Wheatley appropriates an Augustinian belief in the universality of sin that produces a moral inability to choose God

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<sup>15</sup>Peggy McIntosh, “Extending the Knapsack: Using White Privilege Analysis to Examine Conferred Advantage and Disadvantage,” *Women and Therapy* 38, nos. 3-4 (August 2015): 232-45. Moreover, white—in American legal history—is an ideological construct that provides a system of advantage within the American political economy.

<sup>16</sup>Horatius Bonar, quoted in John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 60.

apart from sovereign grace. Therefore, salvation must be wrought from above by the revelation of the triune God. Furthermore, Wheatley champions an evangelical epistemological framework in keeping with the assertion of Stephen J. Wellum: “The only way believers can know anything about God is through revelation from above.”<sup>17</sup> In this sense, God the Spirit enables Wheatley to confess the aforesaid lines that “Jesus is God the Son, the second person of the eternal Trinity, who at a specific point in history took to himself a human nature and was born as Jesus of Nazareth in order to accomplish our redemption.”<sup>18</sup>

How does Jesus accomplish redemption for his sheep? Wheatley answers, “He deign’d to die that they might rise again, / And share with him in the sublimest skies, / life without death, and glory without end.” Wheatley issues a powerful statement about Christ’s incarnation, resurrection, ascension, and reclamation of his bride. The bride of Christ will experience eternal bliss with the Father through the substitutionary atonement of the Son by Spirit. Christ, the God-man, gives eternal life to all whom the Father sweetly calls by the blessed Holy Spirit.

As an afrosensitive evangelical activist, Wheatley charges men to leverage their privileges by killing indwelling sin and desiring to present good works before the bema seat of Christ (2 Cor 5:10). She states, “Improve your privileges while they stay, / Ye pupils, and each hour redeem, that bears / Or Good or bad report of you to heav’n.” God is watching the actions of every man because the “eyes of the Lord are in every place beholding the evil and the good” (Prov 15:3). When believers, says Wheatley, properly fear the Lord they will walk circumspectly in the world as wise, not as fools (Eph 5:15). Regenerate believers’ affections are changed so that they learn to flee temptation before it matures into ungodliness and worldly lust (Titus 2:12). Wheatley

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<sup>17</sup>Stephen J. Wellum, *God the Son Incarnate: The Doctrine of Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 33.

<sup>18</sup>Wellum, *God the Son Incarnate*, 39.

commands them to “Let sin, that baneful evil to the soul, / By you be shunn’d, nor once remit your guard; Suppress the deadly serpent in its egg.”

Lastly, Wheatley employs subversion when she writes, “An *Ethiop* tells you ’tis your greatest foe; Its transient sweetness turns to endless pain, / And in immense perdition sinks the soul.” Wheatley offers italics along with African nomenclature in the form of a command to suggest equality and authority from God’s Word. If any of these men loathe African peoples, Wheatley says that an African woman has become their teacher on biblical spirituality through union with Christ. She warns students who prefer the dainty morsels of sin, echoing the writer of Hebrews who sees sin as “fleeting pleasures” (Heb 11:24–26).

Wheatley defends the Christian faith through a commitment to evangelical Christology. She subtly connects true conversion with a proper view of humankind. Wheatley believes all people groups are born into sin based on the sin of their forefather, Adam, and those who respond to the regenerative work of the Holy Spirit will be delivered from the wrath to come through the penal substitution of the second Adam, Jesus Christ (Rom 5:12–21). Wheatley also subversively advocates for African equality in her closing statements.

### **“Atheism”: Exposing the Irrationality of Nonbelief**

This poem is one of Wheatley’s extant works not included in the 1773 collection. Shield explains that there are 38 poems in the original collection, and 15 of the 55 extant poems have been located by contemporary Wheatley scholars.<sup>19</sup> “Atheism” is arguably Wheatley’s most theologically and philosophically dense poem. She epitomizes covenantal apologetics by emphasizing the revelatory nature of a properly basic belief in

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<sup>19</sup>*Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, 129.

God.<sup>20</sup> Wheatley takes atheism to task by presupposing a rational belief in God before interrogating the irrationality of nonbelief. She writes with grace and truth, incorporating Scripture and classical mysticism to answer theological and hermeneutic questions that many Enlightenment thinkers disseminated through transatlantic print media.

Wheatley willingly accepts the burden to give a rational defense for Christian truth against atheism. She attributes warranted rational belief in God to special revelation. She locates potential atheistic defeaters, and answers them with Christocentric logic that speaks directly to the will—passions, values, and emotions.<sup>21</sup>

Wheatley rightly argues that religious experience might be grounds for an accepted belief in God. She knows that her Redeemer lives, so she will not allow a secular worldview to determine her apologetic posture. Often, contemporary apologists fear the label of “circular reasoning” to the extent that they subordinate Scripture to the arguer’s own presuppositional bias. This unwitting subordination stems from the false notion that rational consistency is determined by sources outside the Bible. Atheistic and agnostic interlocutors lob circular reasoning *ad hominem*s to quell the Christian intellectual’s voice. Unfortunately, this apparent desire to receive a hearing from secularists actually leads Christians down a forsaken path. Wheatley wisely avoids this blunder. She argues,

Where now shall I begin this Spacious Field  
To tell what curses unbelief doth yield  
Thou that dost daily fell his hand and rod  
And dare deny the essence of a god  
If there’s no god from whence did all things spring  
He made the greatest and minutest thing  
If there’s no heaven wither wilt thou go  
Make thy Elysium in the shades below

In these lines, Wheatley contends that nonbelief in God is irrational. She seems

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<sup>20</sup>See Kenneth D. Boa and Robert M. Bowman, Jr., *Faith Has Its Reasons: Integrative Approaches to Defending the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 221-311.

<sup>21</sup>Boa and Bowman, *Faith Has Its Reasons*, 298.

to metonymically connect the field of inquiry with the male audience who sits spellbound by her brilliance. Many European scholars had begun to question the validity of the supernatural or mystical. It is important to note that the latter term should not be confused as mysticism, which refers to an “unmediated link between the person and the absolute.”<sup>22</sup> Mystical, in this sense, is employed in common parlance and simply refers to “an unexplained or unexplainable event, something supernatural, a premonition, a miracle, or a vision.”<sup>23</sup> As such, Wheatley demonstrates David’s maxim: “Fools say to themselves, ‘There is no God’” (Ps 14:1). Of course, David was unconcerned about philosophical atheism when he penned those words. In context, he seems to say that God is not taken aback by unbelief or overly concerned about unbelievers’ attitudinal affinities. As an evangelical activist, Wheatley faithfully pursues the elect wherever they may be found. That is to say, one cannot read “Atheism” with one’s mind solely fixated on philosophical atheism. Instead, the poem should be read from an evangelistic and apologetic starting place. Surely, this outlook incites her pathos: “To tell what curses unbelief doth yield / Thou that dost daily feel his hand and rod / And dare deny the essence of a god.” Wheatley exposes the detrimental effects of atheism on personal ethics and emotional security. According to the orthodox Christian worldview, the curse of unbelief will certainly yield eternal, conscious torment in the lake of fire as well as a life doggedly committed to unbiblical definitions of truth, justice, and love. Moreover, she explains that the conscience must intentionally deaden the voice of God each time he speaks through general and special revelation. This deadening process calcifies an ontological denial of the eternal God.

Wheatley also adheres to a presuppositional use of Socratic questioning. This

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<sup>22</sup>Winfried Corduan, *Mysticism: An Evangelical Option?* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1991), 28.

<sup>23</sup>Corduan, *Mysticism*, 28.

anticipates Francis Schaeffer's noteworthy presuppositional apologetic framework. Schaeffer rightly argues that "historic Christianity stands on the basis of antithesis. . . . The basic antithesis is that God objectively exists in contrast (in antithesis) to His not existing."<sup>24</sup> Wheatley offers the same thesis to her listeners at age 14. Certainly, her evangelical theological brilliance should be honored and heralded by all who share her evangelical heritage. At the poem's core is an essential commitment to an authoritative text as the foundation of right thinking about God. Albert R. Mohler, Jr., in *The Coming Evangelical Crisis*, writes, "Though evangelicalism has never been reducible to theological conviction alone, it cannot remain evangelical and be satisfied with anything less than theological fidelity."<sup>25</sup> Christian theological fidelity begins with the presupposition that the Bible is absolutely trustworthy and inerrant.

Wheatley questions the irrationality of nonbelief by making an appeal to the complexity and beauty in creation. Wheatley's stylistic technique is a fine example of Socratic method. According to William Edgar, "Socratic method [is] an approach in which one asks a series of questions, leading the adversary down a path" with hope of disarming an opponent.<sup>26</sup> Wheatley asks, "If there's no god from whence did all things spring / He made the greatest and minutest thing." According to Wheatley, the comprehensive care of God is from first to last. Nothing small or great exists without God's special care. There are, for example, sea creatures on the ocean floor that humans will neither see nor adore. And yet, God created them for his pleasure and glory, not ours (Rev 4:11). Everything exists for the praise of his glorious grace, not the betterment of

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<sup>24</sup>Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Francis A. Schaeffer Trilogy: The Three Essential Books in One Volume* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990), 7-9.

<sup>25</sup>R. Kent Hughes et al., *The Coming Evangelical Crisis: Current Challenges to Authority of Scripture and the Gospel*, ed. John H. Armstrong (Chicago: Moody Press, 1996), 33.

<sup>26</sup>William Edgar, *Reasons of the Heart: Recovering Christian Persuasion* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Pub., 2003), 16.

the human race. God observes the happenings of the smallest insects with delight, giving his crowing jewel vice-regency over his spectacular design (Ps 8:4–8).

As noted above, Wheatley frequently connects judgment with unjust beliefs. In this case, she pinpoints the injustice of rejecting the God who draws near.<sup>27</sup> The triune God cares enough about his creation to create a place where all who believe can experience eternal bliss in his presence. She says, “If there’s no heaven wither wilt thou go / Make thy Elysium in the Shades below.” Wheatley begins to intermingle classical mythology with a biblical worldview. She manufactures an inner dialogue with classical myths to alert the educational elites who denied the reality of a true and living God. In classical mythology, Elysium refers to the abode of the blessed after death. Wheatley’s thematic correlation is not syncretism. She simply invokes a neoclassical theme to teach a greater theological principle. Wheatley goes on to say hades will shock the unrepentant soul.

With great astonishment any soul is struck  
O rashness great hast thou thy sense forsook  
Hast thou forgot the preterperfect days  
They are recorded in the Book of Praise  
If twas not written by the hand of God  
Why was it sealed with Immanuel’s blood.

In this section, Wheatley commands the audience to take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ. For in the Word of the Lord, the reader discovers “preterperfect”—more than perfect—days. She then appeals to Psalms’ dual authorship: “They are recorded in the Book of Praise / If twas not written by the hand of God / why was it seald with Immanuel’s blood.” Wheatley believes the Psalter was inspired by God and sealed by the blood of Christ. In so doing, her evangelicalism speaks boldly regarding the supremacy, sufficiency, and simplicity of Scripture. She rightly correlates

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<sup>27</sup>For a clear discussion on the primary marks of biblical spirituality, see Michael A. G. Haykin, *The God Who Draws Near: An Introduction to Biblical Spirituality* (Webster, NY: Evangelical Press, 2007).



the relationship between bibliology and Christology—namely, if Scripture lacks complete trustworthiness from Genesis to Revelation, then how can we trust what Scripture says concerning the Jesus? Wellum correctly argues that the “Jesus of history is identical with the Jesus of the Bible or the Christ of faith.”<sup>28</sup> Contemporary Christians in a religiously pluralistic society need not consider Lessing’s ditch as a viable answer to the search for the so-called “historical Jesus.” Instead, the inner-witness of the Spirit works in tandem with the self-attestation of Scripture. Wellum goes on to say, “Traditionally, in doing Christology, the biblical text in its final form has served as the warrant for our dogmatic constructions.”<sup>29</sup> Believers have the ability to understand who Jesus is only when he is faithfully presented throughout the entire biblical storyline.<sup>30</sup>

Tho 'tis a second point thou dost deny  
Unmeasur'd vengeance Scarlet sins do cry  
Turn now I pray thee from the dangerous road  
Rise from the dust and seek the mighty God  
By whose great mercy we do move and live

Wheatley emphasizes the severity of denying the biblical Christ. She seems to echo a prophetic metaphor in Isaiah 1:18, where Isaiah declares to Israel: “Though your sins be like *scarlet* [emphasis added], you can become white like snow; though they are as easy to see as the color scarlet, you can become white like wool.” In this setting, Isaiah is warning Israel about devaluing repentance, remission, and restoration. He says to them that Yahweh is willing to wash away every aspect of their sins and restore them to ethical purity when they remember the covenantal curses and blessings promised in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 27–28.<sup>31</sup> Yahweh’s mercy will replace arrogance with humility and

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<sup>28</sup>Wellum, *God the Son Incarnate*, 46.

<sup>29</sup>Wellum, *God the Son Incarnate*, 46.

<sup>30</sup>Wellum, *God the Son Incarnate*, 46.

<sup>31</sup>For a riveting discussion on Old Testament ethics, see Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 253-80.

submission, which will enable them to experience the fullness of joy (Ps 17:11).

Similarly, the learned audience at Harvard College who dared to deny both the Creator-creature distinction and the absolute sovereignty and goodness of God, will one day cry out in anguish on account of God's justice. Perhaps we should consider a verse from the "Book of Praise" that informs Wheatley's verse: "Surely the Lord is just; he loves to do just deeds; the upright will experience his favor" (Ps 11:7). She beckons them to repent, recalling imagery from Proverbs: "There is a way that seems right to a person, but its end is the way death." In Wheatley's thinking, these men are heading down a dangerous road that leads to eternal destruction. It seems Wheatley remembers the words of the relational apologist, the Apostle Paul on Mars Hill, when he utilizes a secular poet to make a theological point: "For in him we live and move about and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we too are his offspring.'"<sup>32</sup> All they need to do is accept that every human under the sun lives, moves, and has their being because of the kind hand of their Creator.

Whose Loving kindness doth our sins forgive  
Tis Beelzebub our adversary great  
Witholds from us the kingdom and the seat  
Bliss weeping waits us in her arms to fly  
To the vast regions of Felicity

Wheatley continues her poetic waltz between biblical imagery and Greek mythology. In this stanza, through the use of "loving-kindness," she invokes the beautiful Old Testament imagery of the covenantal loyalty of Yahweh toward his people. In the Old Testament, primarily in Psalms, the Hebrew term transliterated *chesed* connotes a love that never fails.<sup>33</sup> Beelzebub (Satan) cannot thwart the kind hand of God who promises heavenly bliss (Felicity) to all those who believe.

Perhaps thy Ignorance will ask us where

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<sup>32</sup>Paul quotes Aratus (ca. 310-245 BC), *Phaenomena* 5.

<sup>33</sup>Cf. Pss 40:10, 86:2, 89:19, 145:17.

Go to the corner stone it will declare  
Thy heart in unbelief will harder grow  
Altho thou hidest it for pleasure now  
Thou takst unusual means, the pat forbear

Wheatley affirms that the goodness of the Lord draws people to repentance (Rom 2:4), enabling them to forsake the ignorance of unbelief for the beautiful “cornerstone” of Christ. Wheatley highlights the exclusivity of Christ when she employs this cornerstone imagery.<sup>34</sup> Unbelief causes the heart to grow callous to the biblical Christ. It normalizes the pursuit of pleasure outside of God.<sup>35</sup> There is nothing wrong with pursuing pleasure in the proper object, but unbelief encourages covenant-breakers to serve the idols of their heart.

Unkind to Others to thyself severe  
Methinks I see the consequence thou art blind  
Thy unbelief disturbs the peaceful mind  
The endless Scene too far for me to tread  
Too great to Accomplish from so weak a head

Unbelief encourages self-centeredness and communal unkindness. Wheatley illustrates that misusing others is a telltale sign of spiritual blindness. One wonders if this is another subversive indictment against slavery in light of the gospel and all its vertical, horizontal, and cosmological implications. She shows that a properly basic commitment to truth and love results in a Spirit-shaped outlook that produces life and peace (Rom 8:5). As Wheatley writes, “Unbelief disturbs the peaceful mind.” This disturbance requires a different kind of law enforcement. The moral law of God must confront the lawlessness of unbelief if those trapped in atheism will have their chains unlocked.<sup>36</sup> In typical neoclassical fashion, she adds sarcasm to reveal a truth about every human being.

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<sup>34</sup>Cf. Ps 118:21-23; Isa 28:16; Matt 21:42; Mark 12:10-11; Luke 20:17; Acts 4:11; Eph 2:20; 1 Pet 2:7.

<sup>35</sup>See John Piper, *The Pleasures of God: Meditations on God's Delight in Being God*, rev. ed. (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Pub., 2000).

<sup>36</sup>For helpful discussions on secularism, see Hunter Baker, *The End of Secularism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2009); Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 2007).

Namely, God’s vast knowledge compared to ours is past finding out. Humanity can only speak what God reveals because “all truth that is truth is God’s truth.” Wheatley, in the spirit of Psalm 131, humbly admits her limitations: “The endless Scene too far for me to tread / Too great to Accomplish from so weak a head.”

If men such wise inventions then should know  
In the high Firmament who made the bow  
That covenant was made for to ensure  
Made to establish lasting to endure  
Who made the heavens and earth a lasting spring

In eighteenth-century neoclassical poetry, “poets displayed restraint, balance and other traits of classical literature . . . . They were more witty [*sic*], more restricted in form, and more biting.”<sup>37</sup> Wheatley characteristically continues with a biblical bite against naturalistic theories that divorce God from reason. She quips that men who think themselves wise actually become fools when they attempt to interpret general revelation without the aid of special revelation. No one can understand the mystery of the cosmos apart from God’s counsel. As Herman Bavinck writes, “Mystery is the lifeblood of dogmatics. . . . In truth, the knowledge that God has revealed of himself in nature and Scripture far surpasses human imagination and understanding.”<sup>38</sup> A century prior, Wheatley expressed the same theological sentiment. She knows these learned students are dumbfounded by the covenantal rainbow sign. They have no understanding that it reveals God’s enduring mercy to all living creatures in the *postdiluvian* era (Gen 9: 8–17). There is no other plausible way of interpreting this verse without a foundational belief in a living God.

Of Admiration, to whom dost thou bring  
Thy thanks, and tribute, Adoration pay,  
To heathen Gods, can wise Apollo say

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<sup>37</sup>Christina Somerville, *Poetics* (Kingsport, TN: Lampstand Press, 2013), 207.

<sup>38</sup>Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, *God and Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 29.

Tis I that saves thee from the deepest hell  
Minerva teach thee all the days to tell

For those who assume syncretism in Wheatley, they need only read these verses theologically. She utilizes sarcasm to judge those who put more confidence in intellectualism than the sovereign Lord of the universe. Wheatley recognizes the inability of Greek mythological deities to deliver atheists from God's coming wrath against unbelief. These "heathen Gods"—namely, Apollos and Minerva—lack control over humanity's eternal destiny. In the thought of the ancient Greeks, Apollos might control the sun or light, and Minerva might serve the Romans as a goddess of invention, meditation, and intellect. But neither has eyes that see nor ears that hear. They are idols. And, like Dagon, these false gods will fall broken before the sovereign Lord (1 Sam 5:2–7).

Doth Pluto tell thee thou shalt see the shade  
Of fell perdition for thy learning made  
Doth Cupid in thy breast that warmth inspire  
To Love thy brother which is Gods [*sic*] desire

Wheatley continues her assault against classical myth. She states that Pluto, the Roman god of the underworld, cannot provide them shade from God's eternal heat. She seems to use a more shocking term with "perdition," since it brings to mind how Jesus describes Judas in the High Priestly prayer (John 17:12). Judas came to utter ruin because he hardened his heart against the biblical Christ.

Next, Cupid is the child of Venus and Mars. He served the pantheon of gods as the giver of *epithumia*, *eros*, and *phileo*—desire, sexual love, and brotherly affection. Wheatley questions the origin of their desires, and hopes they would perish the thought of Cupid as the progenitor of brotherly affection.

Look thou above and see who made the sky  
Nothing more lucid to an Atheist's eye  
Look thou beneath, behold each purling stream  
It surely cannot a Delusion Seem

Although general revelation lacks sufficiency to save, it does accost the

conscience in such a manner that onlookers ask, “Who made this? Why am I here? What went wrong?” Wheatley reminds the atheist that “the heavens declare the glory of God; the sky displays his handiwork” (Ps 19:1) when she writes that there is “nothing more Lucid to an Atheist’s eye” than to ponder the mystery of the sky. Although Romanticism had not yet become popular, Wheatley’s verse counters forthcoming Romantics like Coleridge who understood the perception of reality as created by human imagination.<sup>39</sup> Wheatley rejects the falsity that life is a delusion or dream. After all, she has observed the very real bondage of and tyranny against African peoples. She also knows that the vast American wilderness is real.

Mark rising Phoebus when he spreads his ray  
And his commission for to guide the day  
At night keep watch, and see a Cynthia bright  
And her commission for to guide the night  
See how the stars when they do sing his praise  
Witness his essence in celestial Lays

Wheatley ends her poem by invoking additional mythological characters. Of course, Wheatley chooses not to belabor the fallaciousness of interpreting the solar system through Greek or Roman folklore. She invites the solar god, Phoebus, which is a synonym for Apollo, and the moon goddess, Cynthia, to become the fictional protectors of the celestial Lays.

Frankly, if someone read this poem without an awareness of covenantal apologetics or presuppositionalism, the closing lines could shift their thoughts toward syncretism. However, when these lines are read in light of Wheatley’s sincere commitment to evangelical and Augustinian beliefs, it seems as if she is continuing to manipulate neoclassical style to motivate further contemplation about the afterlife. Wheatley’s ultimate desire in this poem is to allow God’s revelation to shed eternal light

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<sup>39</sup>Somerville asserts, “Romanticism is not a worldview, or rather, it is not and never claimed to be a coherent and systematic set of beliefs. It is instead an artistic movement . . . Many believed, or at least professed, that the supernatural realm is most really real, though God is not necessarily at the center of it.” Somerville, *Poetics*, 215-16.

on darkened minds.

Wheatley exposes the illogical conclusion that the world could have come into being without a creator by interlocking competing theistic narratives while remaining committed to a *teleological* argument. She firmly believes there is an adequate cause for our existence, which, contra David Hume, points to a singular and eternal God.<sup>40</sup> The Greek mythological characters become familiar intellectual first steps toward creating a theistic conversation. Wheatley makes subversive allusions to Christian theistic paradigms while deploying explicit references to Scripture, Immanuel, and God. In so doing, Wheatley embodies the traits of an afrosensitive evangelical activist whose theological ethics force her into apologetic conversations with an extremely diverse cast of people.

### **“An Address to the Deist”: Critiquing a Disinterested Deity**

Somerville describes Wheatley as the “American Enlightenment era poetess.”<sup>41</sup> In this address, Wheatley chastises the false notion that God cannot be known by revelation.<sup>42</sup> According to Somerville, “[C]lassical deism does not deny God’s existence; rather, it denies His interest in human beings and human affairs.”<sup>43</sup> She goes on to explain that the “general trend of the Enlightenment seems to have been not so much

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<sup>40</sup>See Robert A. Pyne, *Humanity and Sin: The Creation, Fall, and Redemption of Humanity* (Nashville: Word Pub., 1999), 12; Ronald H. Nash, *The Word of God and The Mind of Man* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Pub., 1982), 17-24.

<sup>41</sup>Somerville, *Poetics*, 210.

<sup>42</sup>I am indebted to Somerville’s helpful interaction with James W. Sire’s explanation and examination of Deism from a Christian worldview. Sire’s insight will aid future students of Wheatley to read her through a distinctly evangelical Christian framework. Wheatley scholars often overlook this poem because they presuppose the incredulity of Christian theism on Wheatley’s theological and ethical preoccupations. See James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalog*, 4th ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 45-58; Somerville, *Poetics*, 211-13.

<sup>43</sup>Somerville, *Poetics*, 212.

toward atheism as toward a sense that God is an impersonal First Cause.”<sup>44</sup> This concept of an impersonal God does not necessitate a loving relationship between the Creator and creature. As William Paley explains, God is a watchmaker who creates a watch only to leave it lying in the sand.<sup>45</sup>

Wheatley discerns the negative implications of an impersonal god on biblical Trinitarianism and social activism. Simply put, if God lacks compassion for his creation, then there is no need to acknowledge Him as the sovereign, benevolent creator who models loving unity in diversity. Wheatley comprehends how this godless worldview will bolster the problem of slavery in the West rather than mitigate the great evil. She writes,

Must Ethiopians be employ'd for you?  
Much I rejoice if any good I do.  
I ask O unbeliever, Satan's child  
Hath not thy Saviour been too much revil'd

Wheatley begins the opening line with what appears to be self-deprecation but in reality is double-speech and sarcasm. As explained above, Wheatley makes us of her ethnic identity and role as unemployed chattel. She seems to offer the listeners a wordplay between “Ethiopians” and “employ'd.” Wheatley’s poem poses questions like these: “Why would British-American intelligentsia desire words from an enslaved black woman, especially since African peoples are intellectually inferior? How can a barbarian offer substantive words concerning the Christ of Scripture to those who revile him? Why am I being used as your sable muse?” And yet, Wheatley remains concerned about the souls of men, so she is clear that Satan keeps humanity in bondage to selfishness and idolatry. Wheatley calls unbelievers who revile the biblical Christ “Satan’s child.” Before one appropriates Wheatley’s verbiage to a bygone era that does not comport with Christianity, one should remember the words of the Apostle John: “But every spirit that

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<sup>44</sup>Somerville, *Poetics*, 212.

<sup>45</sup>Pyne, *Humanity and Sin*, 12.



does not confess Jesus is not from God, and this the spirit of the antichrist, which you have hear is coming, and now is already in the world” (1 John 4:3).

Th’ auspicious rays that round his temples shine  
Do still declare him to be Christ divine.  
Doth not the great Eternal call him Son  
Is he not pleas’d with his beloved One—?  
How canst thou thus divide the Trinity

Wheatley reflects a proper grasp of general revelation. She revels in the fact that sunbeams shine translucent light on the transcendent Light of the world. The heavens are still telling a story about the glory of God, but here Wheatley makes an appeal to special revelation: “Doth not the great Eternal call him Son.” This is a direct attack against Deism and its typical rejection of an orthodox Christology. First, Wheatley affirms the divinity of Christ. Second, she affirms the humanity of Christ in personal relationship to the eternal Father. As such, she seems to recognize the eternal generation of the Son. John Frame would applaud Wheatley since he argues that “Jesus is the Son of God, not only in his earthly life, but also eternally. His sonship is ontological, not merely economic.”<sup>46</sup> In other words, at age fourteen Wheatley sagaciously delineates the difference between the immanent—or ontological—Trinity and the immanence of God. Frame reminds students to avoid this potential foible: “The two concepts are nearly opposite to one another. The immanent trinity is the Trinity apart from creation; the immanence of God as a lordship attribute is God’s involvement with his creatures.”<sup>47</sup> In other words, the Father is pleased with the beloved Son because they are ontologically one yet distinct in their persons. Wheatley’s Trinitarian orthodoxy leads her to a triumphant doxology:

The blest the Holy the eternal three  
Tis Satan’s snares are fluttering in the wind

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<sup>46</sup>John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God: A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Pub., 2002), 707.

<sup>47</sup>Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 706n41.

Whereby he doth ensnare thy foolish mind  
God, the Eternal Orders this to be  
See thy vain arg'ments to divide the three

Like any good Augustinian, Wheatley insinuates that foolish thinkers attempt to mutate the ontologically and morally immutable God. The triune God cannot be divided by the feeble minds of men. Dust particles do not intimidate the sovereign Lord (cf. Gen 2:7; Ps 90:1–3; Eccl 3:20). Unlike many apologists who forget that debating ideas about biblical orthodoxy is spiritual warfare, Wheatley names the cosmic foe who ensnares minds against the Holy Trinity. In her previous poem, she called the great adversary “Beelzubub.” In this address, however, she twice calls him Satan. In the spirit of the Apostle Paul, Wheatley is not warring according to the flesh. The weapons of her theological warfare are not carnal but divinely powerful for destroying rival worldviews. In other words, this address contains no subversion. Wheatley confronts ideological fiction (Deism) with theological truth (Trinitarianism).

Cans't thou not see the Consequence in store?  
Begin th' Almighty monarch to adore?  
Attend to Reason whispering in thine ear  
Seek the Eternal while he is so near.  
Full in thy view I point each path I know

For Wheatley, this poem seeks to take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ because it is a matter of everlasting life and eternal death (2 Cor 10:5). There are dreadful consequences in store for the unbeliever. Wheatley is not content with seeing even her worst enemies suffer hell's fire. She pleads with them to find safety in the Almighty king of heaven and earth, and subtly challenges the deistic conception of “Reason.” She capitalizes reason to emphasize both the Christian's reasonable “faith once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3), and the work of the Holy Spirit on the conscience. In her two lines “Attend to Reason whispering in thine ear / Seek the eternal while he is so near,” Wheatley directs the listener to the faithful path of true reason.

Lest to the vale of black despair I go  
At the last day where wilt thou hide thy face

That Day approaching is no time for Grace  
Too late perceive thyself undone and lost  
To late own Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

In this stanza, Wheatley situates her apology around the imminent return of Christ and the coming day of the Lord. Wheatley pictures unbelievers looking for cover as they face the dreadful judgment of God. Though they will call for grace and pardon, it will be too late for contrition. Their hardened hearts against the triune God will receive just recompense. Thomas Schreiner explains the dual nature of the day of the Lord: “[T]he day of the Lord represents Yahweh’s covenant judgment or covenant salvation. . . . [It] is integrally linked to the theme of God’s rule and kingdom, for the Lord reasserts his rule over the world on the day when He judges the wicked and saves his people.”<sup>48</sup> Clearly, the first line echoes Isaiah 63:1–8, which shows up elsewhere in another poem.<sup>49</sup> She writes,

Who trod the wine-press of Jehovah’s wrath?  
Who taught us prayer, and promis’d grace and faith?  
Who but the Son, who reigns supremely blest  
Ever, and ever, in immortal rest?  
The vilest prodigal who comes to God

In order to clarify the full gospel, Wheatley provides the dreadful news of the coming wrath and the wonderful promise of saving grace. She borrows a page from the story of the prodigal son when she invites scorners to the loving arms of Christ. He will not reject repentant sinners who confess their utter inability to save themselves from the penalty of sin. Christ has the ability to save because He is alive. Wheatley opposes those who question the full deity of Christ and the immortality of the soul. Even now, Christ is alive in a fully human body making intercession for those who are washed in his blood. Wheatley also uses biblical theology to connect the Old and New covenants through the

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<sup>48</sup>Thomas Schreiner, *The King in His Beauty: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 2013), 403.

<sup>49</sup>*Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, 60-61, 297-98; John C. Shields, *Phillis Wheatley’s Poetics of Liberation: Backgrounds and Contexts* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 2008), 132.

person and work of Christ. Simply put, she is not a Zionist. Jews who fail to acknowledge Jesus as Lord and Savior will make their abode in hell. Jews who denied him in the first century will suffer eternal judgment, just like all who deny him in the last days. Wheatley is certain of this. She announces,

Is not cast out but bro't by Jesus's blood  
When to the faithless Jews he oft did cry  
Some own'd their teacher some made him a lye  
He came to you in mean apparel clad  
He came to save us from our sins, and had

Some deists believed that God becoming man was far too complex for average people to understand. Therefore, they attempted to simplify Christian orthodoxy with commonsense principles. Some enjoyed the humility of Christ, but discounted His ultimate act of submission. They did not recognize what Paul writes to the church in Philippi: "Although he existed in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped," but instead emptied himself (Phil 2:6). Put simply, God became a man. Wheatley offers the Lion and Lamb to any deist who has ears to hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Compassion more than language can express.  
Pains his companions, and his friends distress  
Immanuel on the cross those pains did bear  
Will the eternal our petitions hear?  
Ah! wond'rous Destiny his life he laid  
"Father forgive them," thus the Saviour pray'd  
Nail'd was king Jesus on the cross for us  
For our transgressions he sustain'd the Curse.

Shields discredits Wheatley's theological and ethical preoccupations. Instead of reading this poem with reverence for the "God who draws near," he reads Wheatley through seemingly deistic eyes. He speaks ill of biblical Trinitarianism and misreads her conception of the doctrine.<sup>50</sup> He contends Wheatley is in survival mode, writing only

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<sup>50</sup>Shields asserts, "Making a strong if repetitive, declaration of the Christian Jesus' power over evil, at one point Wheatley inserts this diverting line: God 'Sees thy vain arg'ments to divide the three.'"

what she believes her masters desire to hear about Jesus, not what she sincerely believes. Shields contends, “‘An Address to the Deist’ would have probably been more convincing, though its subtext more clearly reveals a catechumen trying to please a spiritual ‘monitor.’”<sup>51</sup>

Deists’ suspicion included Scripture, too. Carretta says, “Deists were consequently dubious about the orthodox belief that the Bible was of supernatural origin.”<sup>52</sup> One wonders if this statement should be taken as a universal since, as Sire explains, many deists held conflicting views concerning God and humanity. He notes, “Some believed in the immortality of the soul; some did not. Some believed God left his creation to function on its own; some believed in providence. Some believed in a personal God; others did not.”<sup>53</sup> Moreover, E. Brooks Holifield offers a unifying principle among deists, namely, that while “all deists rejected Christian Trinitarian theology, they agreed upon no single conception of God.”<sup>54</sup>

Wheatley was positively shaped by her theological environment. She had a penchant for the European classics as well as classical Reformed orthodoxy. Her training in biblical theology gave her the intellectual skills to write apologetic verse from a presuppositional framework. Wheatley remained committed to the message of hope in the

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This articulation of the heresy of tritheism, which holds that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are three separate beings (gods if you will), rings all too much like a misstep made by a student of the Congregational faith.” Shields, *Phillis Wheatley’s Poetics of Liberation*, 132. In context, Wheatley is saying that it goes against biblical reason to reject the hypostatic-union of Christ. He is fully God and fully man, as well as a member of the Godhead. Wheatley is saying vain arguments attempt to subordinate the ontological unity of Christ to the Father and Spirit. Thus, it is not the enslaved African teenager who errs; but rather the contemporary literary scholar who misses the theological point.

<sup>51</sup>Shields, *Phillis Wheatley’s Poetics of Liberation*, 132.

<sup>52</sup>Vincent Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 56.

<sup>53</sup>Sire, *Universe Next Door*, 48.

<sup>54</sup>For an extremely helpful discussion on deism from a historical perspective, see E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 159-72.

Christian gospel even though the frowning providence of race-based slavery held her genius in bondage. And yet, Wheatley did not allow her physical chains to strangle her view of Christ. The poems above display the brilliance of an enslaved African's love for those caught in the bondage of sin. Wheatley's love for the triune God and those created in His image compelled her to share the truth of gospel with those who did not yet believe.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

Phillis Wheatley embodies the theological and ethical preoccupations of an afrosensitive evangelical activist. She seeks to transform the culture with an indefatigable commitment to theological ethics and human equality. Wheatley's poetry subversively attacks transatlantic political imaginations that treated African peoples as instruments for building the British Empire in pre-revolutionary America. She enters the marketplace of transatlantic discourse when, through God's providence, her owners John and Susanna Wheatley observed her uncanny intellectual acumen. Wheatley displays a natural ability to "gain agency with the audience by carefully constructing . . . poems" that charm "her white readership, while covertly espousing her own politics."<sup>1</sup> She rejects slavery by analogy through direct and open comparison between British and American tyranny. Once again, Wheatley indicts the crown while prosecuting colonial leaders.

This dissertation lays a hermeneutical framework for reading Wheatley as an afrosensitive evangelical activist both theologically and ethically. A theological reading requires propaedeutic awareness of Augustinian spirituality, biblical anthropology, Christology, Trinitarianism, and a general knowledge of New England Congregationalism. Ethically speaking, readers should avoid the conclusion that Wheatley's mind became brainwashed by Eurocentric mischaracterizations of global blackness. Such notions mistake Wheatley's meekness for cultural misorientation when she exemplifies theological virtues—faith, hope, and love—in an Augustinian manner. Afrosensitive evangelical spirituality combines moral virtues and theological ethics.

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<sup>1</sup>Kathrynn Seidler Engberg, *The Right to Write: The Literary Politics of Anne Bradstreet and Phillis Wheatley* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2010), 65.

Jesus's mandate to love God and neighbor is evident among these advocates for social justice. Augustine and Wheatley offer readers a theologically and ethically robust display of gospel-centered neighbor love.

Though the Christian's general posture toward even fallen governments should be submission (Rom 13:1–7), Scripture provides warrant for believers to repudiate unjust governments that tear the fibers of love from the fabric of humanity. For the sake of both God and others, the church must engage issues that distort biblical love. Like Augustine, Wheatley refuses to remain prophetically dormant when gross sin infiltrates the church and society at large. Though they were twelve centuries removed from one another, they both articulate a political theology based on neighbor love. According to Mark Doorley, “Augustine is, arguably, the first Christian thinker to articulate a political theology that can assist in navigating the limits of wisdom for Christians, or people of any faith, in political activism.”<sup>2</sup>

Augustine sets the stage by forthrightly speaking the truth in love in the public square. Unlike Wheatley, Augustine's social location as a Roman Catholic bishop in the African church affords him social privileges. To that end, he pens his perennial political theology *The City of God*. In this work, Augustine imagines the interrelationship of two invisible cities—the city of God and the earthly city—composed of unfallen angels and saints (city of God) alongside fallen angels and humans (earthly city). These two cities temporarily exist together until the eschaton. Augustine believes that the city of God had the necessary element of virtue within its sociopolitical economy. The earthly city, however, lacked virtue and therefore could never meet the requirements of a just society.<sup>3</sup> When the Goths attacked the Eternal City in A.D. 410, the Roman theopolitical

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<sup>2</sup>Mark Doorley, “The Pursuit of Social Justice,” in *Augustine and Social Justice*, ed. Teresa Delgado, John Doody, and Kim Paffenroth (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015), 12.

<sup>3</sup>Doorley, “The Pursuit of Social Justice,” 12; Sergey Trostyanskiy, “The Philosophical Tenets and Content of Augustine's Social Doctrine,” in *Augustine and Social Justice*, 34.



community blamed the church for their misfortune. Roman citizens cuddled a pantheistic worldview that regarded the uniqueness of the one true God as a capricious abstraction. Many assumed the gods were at war with the Christian God, which incited the gods to aid the Goths in bringing down the great city. Rome's heretical beliefs aided and abetted the sociopolitical persecution of Christians. Augustine did not shrink back politically when his fellow citizens turned their backs on the Christian minority population to support the false loves of the majority culture. Against the accusation of inconstancy, he concludes that an eschatological hope inspires kingdom living despite the consequences.<sup>4</sup> He leverages his influence for the good of the church.

In a similar vein, Wheatley subversively criticizes false opinions about African inferiority. She believes that enslavers revised African narratives to establish the ascendancy of whiteness, so she confronts inconsistent religious, moral, and political ideas based on a high Christology and biblical ethics.

Afrosensitive evangelical spirituality discovers and disseminates the unchained voices of diasporic and continental Africans to a listening world. As stated above, evangelical historians debate the meaning of evangelicalism, but the majority agree that Bebbington provides a reliable starting. Since evangelicalism is the movement of like-minded Christians who represent the "faith once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3), we do well to remember that true evangelicals love peace and virtue. Evangelical activists care for the least of these—the oppressed, marginalized, and disenfranchised people groups of the world. They enter the psychological and emotional pain of persecuted image-bearers with the hope of the gospel.

With that said, we should note that pain cannot touch our lives apart from God's sovereign decree or permission. God did not forsake Wheatley during her painful voyage from Africa to America. Nor did God forsake her on the auction block, when she

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<sup>4</sup>William Edgar, *Reasons of the Heart: Recovering Christian Persuasion* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Pub., 2003), 31.

suffered at the hands of sinful men and women. God was fully aware of the wickedness that amplified racial trauma in her heart, mind, and soul. This led Wheatley to make survival adjustments to thrive in an oppressive society. Eric Hairston argues, “It strains reason to imagine that Wheatley emerged from the Middle Passage unscarred, given what we now know of trauma.”<sup>5</sup> Hairston takes Wheatley’s abuse seriously by positing the likelihood of post-traumatic stress disorder: “It is extremely likely that some remnant memories of her African life, abduction, and Middle Passage captivity haunted Wheatley, and her poetry offer evidence of the experience.”<sup>6</sup> Like all characters of antiquity, Wheatley was shaped by her sociopolitical surroundings. She endured unimaginable psychological trauma through the slave trafficking process. And yet, she affirmed the absolute sovereignty and goodness of God despite being bombarded with racialized misreadings of Scripture and theology.

As we have seen, the myth of modern racial reasoning prejudiced later scholars’ approach to Augustinian studies. The plausibility structure of the day argued that the so-called “Dark Continent” lacked internal epistemological value. This belief likely led scholars to overlook nuances in both Augustine and Wheatley’s writings that elucidate a positive disposition toward the ethics of African identity formation.<sup>7</sup> Wheatley spoke against the pervasive ideas that undergirded the economic system of transatlantic slavery: white supremacy and black inferiority. Wheatley agrees with the Apostle John who affirmed that one cannot uphold a love for God while hating those created in His image (1 John 4:19-21). Combining evangelical theology with a deep love for African freedom, Wheatley embodies the theological and ethical preoccupations of an

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<sup>5</sup>Eric Ashley Hairston, “The Trojan Horse: Classics, Memory, Transformation, and African Ambition in Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral,” in *New Essays on Phillis Wheatley*, ed. John C. Shields and Eric D. Lamore (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2011), 82.

<sup>6</sup>Hairston, “The Trojan Horse,” 82.

<sup>7</sup>Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 62-154.

afrosensitive evangelical activist in eighteenth-century colonial New England.

Afrosensitivity, therefore, offers a presuppositional posture of humility that Western evangelical thinkers must employ if they are to read African diasporic evangelical literature rightly. Afrosensitive intellectuals overcome the oft-ignored contributions of African people within evangelical scholarship. As a result, they search near and far for historiographical works written by both continental and diasporic Africans.<sup>8</sup> Ultimately, afrosensitivity seeks to overcome the intellectual divide between African diasporic thought and contemporary Western evangelical scholarship. Afrosensitive evangelical spirituality fills this intellectual void by critiquing and exposing evangelical works on people of color that either displaces cultural agency or contradicts Christian orthodoxy.

Afrocentric spiritualists like J. Deotis Roberts state the Bible is simply “a message from God through humans in history.” He avers that one should never take the Bible literally but one should always take it seriously.<sup>9</sup> Roberts explains, with a Barthian flourish: “The Bible is the living Word of God in so far as it bears witness to God’s revealing the divine mind and will to us in Jesus Christ.”<sup>10</sup> This elusive language about Scripture enables Roberts to center his spirituality *against* the authority and inerrancy of Scripture. Instead, he prefers terms that view Scripture in a utilitarian fashion. According to this schema, the Bible is God’s Word but only experientially, not essentially, because it exclusively reveals God’s mind and will to Christians. In this sense, Roberts moves toward an instrumental usage of the Bible as conversation partner when he conceptualizes “Africentric [*sic*] ministry” and spiritual formation. He craftily keeps the Bible in play

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<sup>8</sup>Ebiegberi Joe Alagoa, *The Practice of History in Africa: A History of African Historiography* (Port Harcourt, Nigeria: Onyoma Research Publications, 1995), 1-10.

<sup>9</sup>J. Deotis Roberts, *Africentric Christianity: A Theological Appraisal for Ministry* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2000), 42-43.

<sup>10</sup>Roberts, *Africentric Christianity*, 44.

without ever making it an essential tool for pursuing a Godward life.<sup>11</sup> Roberts casts off Christ-centered hermeneutics by allowing black suffering to trump the ways in which Jesus and the apostles interpreted Scripture.

Carlyle Fielding Stewart III, another Afrocentrist theologian, devalues the role of Scripture in shaping the spiritual consciousness of African peoples with much greater contempt. In his work *Black Spirituality and Black Consciousness*, Stewart argues for “the formation of a hermeneutics of existence or a black cultural soul.”<sup>12</sup> He envisions this process as taking place during “translation sites”<sup>13</sup> in which older African peoples create cultural space to preserve and explain ancient narratives associated with the African saga on American soil. One could label these translation sites as attempts to preserve memory, which Stewart deems “essential to black sanity and soul survival in America.” These sites “are the infrastructures of African-American consciousness and spirituality.”<sup>14</sup> Stewart is concerned about African peoples maintaining a connection with their heritage. He is unconcerned about any transcultural and transnational Christian heritage achieved through the crucifixion of a Jewish man named Jesus. Strikingly, Stewart jettisons Scripture for Sub-Saharan African social constructs and ideas. He believes African awakenings will finally satisfy the soul cravings of African peoples worldwide. In so doing, he avoids and undermines Scripture at critical junctures.

For many of these thinkers, Afrocentric spirituality promulgates Afrocentric thought over and against the exclusivity of Jesus Christ. Africa becomes the dominant voice, not biblical Christology. Conversely, the Apostle Paul, under the inspiration of the

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<sup>11</sup>For a helpful book on biblical spirituality and social responsibility, see John Piper, *A Godward Life: Savoring the Supremacy of God in All of Life* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Pub., 1997).

<sup>12</sup>Carlyle Fielding Stewart, III, *Black Spirituality and Black Consciousness: Soul Force, Culture and Freedom in the African-American Experience* (Trenton, NJ: African World Press, 1999), 17-19.

<sup>13</sup>Stewart, *Black Spirituality and Black Consciousness*, 18.

<sup>14</sup>Stewart, *Black Spirituality and Black Consciousness*, 19.

Holy Spirit, governs the spiritual life by Christ-centered meditation (Col 3:1–4).

Afrocentric spirituality proffers a version of Christian spirituality that subordinates the revelatory nature of Scripture, thereby proving their discipleship paradigm is contrary to the mind of God. Paul describes those who embrace a different gospel as untrustworthy because they employ a faulty foundation for true Christian spirituality (Gal 1:6–7; James 4:1–3). Afrocentric thinkers who respond condescendingly against Paul’s ideas are without merit. Some Afrocentrists and liberationists even accuse Paul of endorsing sociocultural racism.<sup>15</sup>

Molefi Asante believes that “new speaker” or “different speaker” categories have their genesis in Eurocentric schools of thought.<sup>16</sup> If anyone speaks outside of sanctioned discourse, the opposing speaker is dismissed as an intellectual dilettante. Asante contends, “In reality, the social fabric of oppression is dictated by symbols of hierarchy and intellectual theories rooted in Eurocentric viewpoints.”<sup>17</sup> The problem with this reading, however, is that most audiences employ skepticism when unfamiliar speakers take the platform.<sup>18</sup> To say this primarily relates to Eurocentric hegemony defies both the testimony of Scripture and what seems to be a common experience for all newcomers. For instance, the Athenian rhetoricians and philosophers labeled Paul a

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<sup>15</sup>For more information, see Glenn Usry and Craig Keener, *Black Man’s Religion: Can Christianity Be Afrocentric?* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1996).

<sup>16</sup>Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), 30-31.

<sup>17</sup>Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*, 30-31.

<sup>18</sup>In fact, Lesslie Newbigin, in his work *Gospel in a Pluralist Society* engages this reality as he recalls the difficulty that any speaker encounters when attempting to penetrate the unfamiliar culture with new ideas. He states, “Peter Berger, a sociologist of knowledge, explains the social conditioning of societal beliefs as ‘plausibility structures,’ patterns of belief and practice accepted within a given society, which determine which beliefs are plausible to its members and which are not . . . Thus when, in any society, a belief is held to be ‘reasonable,’ this is a judgment made on the basis of the reigning plausibility structure.” Lesslie Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1989), 8. The test of reasonableness seems to be a natural response to new information.

“babbling” (Acts 17:16–21). The term “babbling” connotes the idea of one who has nothing substantive to offer a debate. In Classical and *Koine* Greek, σπερμολογος was often employed “in a pejorative imagery of persons whose communication lacks sophistication and seems to pick up scraps of information here and there. . . . σπερμολογοι are people who spend their time around stores and markets to pick up scraps from the produce and live off them.”<sup>19</sup> The sages on Mars Hill accused Paul of being a second-rate thinker and an academic dilettante.

How will Afrocentrists account for this Athenian, or Eurocentric, attack on a non-Afrocentrist Messianic Jew? It would be anachronistic to suggest that Asante makes this move against Paul. However, it is worth mentioning that Eurocentrism did not give rise to the Athenian ridicule of Paul’s gospel-centered worldview. They questioned Paul’s arguments because of their own presuppositional biases toward rationalism and hedonism. Paul confronted their worldview, so they responded with vitriol.

Nonetheless, if European worldviews are unreliable, then the implication is clear: Afrocentrism inherently rejects the authority of Scripture because of the New Testament’s origins in Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian thought. As a converted Jew, Paul read the gospel rightly through the prophetic utterances of Old Testament theology. He surrendered his will to God and, through both special revelation and his effectual calling on the Damascus road, corrected his faulty worldview. An agitator of Christ became an adherent of the gospel (Acts 9:1–16). By grace, Paul had his worldview transformed into a Christocentric worldview, which also takes place in the life of Phillis Wheatley.

A Christocentric worldview trumps both Afrocentrism and Eurocentrism

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<sup>19</sup>Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, ed. and trans. Frederick W. Danker based on a trans. William F. Arndt, F. Wilber Gingrich, and F. W. Danker, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. “σπερμολογος.”

because neither of the aforesaid epistemologies have the wherewithal to answer life's ultimate questions or provide a solution to humankind's greatest dilemma—sin. In this case, cultural agency must subordinate itself to universal truth. Redemption is available by grace alone through faith in Christ alone—not correct cultural hermeneutics. Without the redemptive work of Christ on the behalf of sinners, and without getting a glimpse into the diverse gathering of worshippers in heaven (Rev 5:9–10), cultural agency will often become an idol of the heart as opposed to a viable instrument to uproot hegemonic ideological constructs. A biblically informed hermeneutic will identify elements of grace in all cultures, especially the oft-denigrated black African experience. In her poetry and prose, Wheatley remained committed to evangelical theology and Christian ethics.

Anthony Carter agrees that African peoples commit spiritual suicide when they develop a system of theology and ethics devoid of a sincere commitment to divine inspiration: “The primary source of any sound theology is the special revelation of God contained in the Bible. Therefore, the Bible must be our ultimate authority. Whether black or otherwise, our theology is correct only insofar as it is derived from sound exegesis of the Word of God.”<sup>20</sup> Perhaps we have stumbled across the major impasse of Afrocentric spirituality. Afrocentric spiritualists profess that the Bible has been pervasively corrupted, rendering Scripture theologically untrustworthy. For example, Cain Hope Felder says, “To be sure, the Bible does represent a foundation for the Word of God. Moreover, from the faith claims of the biblical tradition, the Bible does constitute the most important *ancient locus* for the Word of God. However, even this is not synonymous with the view that the Bible is categorically *the* Word of God.”<sup>21</sup> Felder's liberal approach to hermeneutics requires African peoples to exchange *sola Scriptura* for

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<sup>20</sup>Anthony J. Carter, *On Being Black and Reformed: A New Perspective on the African-American Christian Experience* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Pub., 2003), 7-8.

<sup>21</sup>Cain Hope Felder, *Troubling Biblical Waters: Race, Class, and Family* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 14.

the uninspired words of men.<sup>22</sup> Felder argues that liberating oneself from the chains of biblical inerrancy provides Afrocentric spiritualists—and any other reader—the courage to stand over and against the Bible as the locus of authority.

He is not alone in this approach. For instance, Samuel K. Roberts, in his work *African American Christian Ethics*, makes similar claims concerning what he envisions as an intellectually immature approach to Scripture. Roberts asserts that the “hermeneutical task depends greatly on what questions the present-day believer brings to the hermeneutical moment.”<sup>23</sup> He therefore discounts the reliability of a literal hermeneutic because exegetical methods have been skewed by the Eurocentric bent of the interpreter. Roberts contends,

Much of the African American experience with respect to biblical interpretation has implicitly endorsed the spirit of “canon within a canon.” One must keep in mind that the Bible is not a univocal book; that is to say, there is no total consistency throughout the Bible, reflecting as it does many points of view recorded over many centuries and reflecting many contexts . . . . Christian African Americans have always sought to understand the peculiar message that the Bible held for them in their peculiar journey on the American shores. Insofar as they have sought a “word” from the Bible, they have been concerned to bring the following questions to the hermeneutical task: Which particular texts, authors, genres, and periods of history covered in the Bible are of most relevance to African Americans? Why would the texts, authors, genres, and periods of history have authoritative value for African Americans?<sup>24</sup>

Both Felder and Roberts place overlook the distinction between divine revelation and human aspiration. When skepticism results in the denial of Scripture and its self-authenticating, divinely inspired message (cf. 2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:20–21), an exegetically reverential and ethically transformative spirituality is necessarily undermined. Carter rightly claims that “we [African-American Christians] must not come to the Bible as skeptics, demanding that it satisfy our independent judgment. Rather we

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<sup>22</sup>Felder, *Troubling Biblical Waters*, 14.

<sup>23</sup>Samuel K. Roberts, *African American Christian Ethics* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2001), 142.

<sup>24</sup>Roberts, *African American Christian Ethics*, 142-43.



must submit to the Bible as our examiner, which reveals our inadequacies of understanding.”<sup>25</sup> Carter advances an afrosensitive evangelical commitment to biblicism and Christocentrism, and therefore rejects an anthropocentric hermeneutic. On the other hand, Afrocentric spirituality intentionally subjugates Scripture, and therefore leads adherents away from true spiritual liberation.

In short, the very foundations of Afrocentric spirituality exchange the sufficiency of Scripture for an irreverent cultural hermeneutic. This is perhaps the most detrimental aspect of “telling of one’s own story,” as the universal truth of Scripture becomes subjugated to experience. Afrocentric spiritualists approach the Bible as a peripheral conversational partner, not the preeminent voice in the conversation. Afrocentrism and Christocentrism are simply incompatible epistemologies. Simply put, a need remains for a hermeneutic that honors Christ through investigating *the souls of black folk*.

Phillis Wheatley is the mother of the African-American literary tradition. On December 5, 1784, at the age of 31, she died in abject poverty in a boarding house in Boston after giving birth to her third child. The infant died shortly thereafter. Vincent Carretta remarks on her death: “Phillis’s gravesite, like that of most of her contemporaries of African descent, was unmarked and remains unknown.”<sup>26</sup>

Afrosensitive evangelical spirituality critiques Eurocentrism, Afrocentrism, nationalism, unilateralism, and racism to exhume marginalized evangelical voices from unmarked historical graves.

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<sup>25</sup>Carter, *On Being Black and Reformed*, 8-9.

<sup>26</sup>Vincent Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 190.

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## ABSTRACT

### THE LITERARY RECEPTION OF THE SPIRITUALITY OF PHILLIS WHEATLEY (1753-1784): AN AFROSENSITIVE READING

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This dissertation explores the theological and ethical preoccupations of Phillis Wheatley in colonial New England. Chapter 1 frames the conversation around relevant research and states the project thesis to explain Wheatley's background and eventual role as mother of African-American literature. Wheatley manipulates neoclassical Greek mythological images to subversively critique British-American racial hierarchicalism.

Chapter 2 explains the meaning of an Afrosensitive hermeneutic, exploring the epistemological development of Afrocentric thought as a Eurocentric counterfactual. Bebbington's quadrilateral is the exploratory portal used to discern Wheatley's commitment to evangelical theology.

Chapter 3 assesses Wheatley's critique of exemplary or closed American exceptionalism through the lens of chattel slavery. Critical race theory becomes the analytical lens to understand the intersection of religion, race, class, and gender on Wheatley sociopolitical imagination.

Chapter 4 develops a conversation on social justice and neighbor love between Wheatley and St. Augustine (AD 354-430) of Hippo. Although Wheatley never directly quotes, she exemplifies Augustinian spirituality in her response to injustice. They both desire to restore the image of God through a comprehensive view of the gospel—vertical, horizontal, and cosmological.

Chapter 5 addresses Wheatley's staunch commitment to Christian orthodoxy and social activism. She honored Christ as the exclusive way of salvation through literary apologetics in select poems. She also leveraged her privilege amongst societal influencers to advocate for the immediate emancipation of African peoples. Wheatley believed that enslavers lacked a comprehensive understanding of love. Hence, she confronted inconsistent religious and philosophical beliefs through her poetry and prose.

Chapter 6 summarizes the dissertation by demonstrating the theological and ethical commitments of a contemporary afrosensitive evangelical spirituality by critiquing key figures within the realm of Afrocentric spirituality, illustrating why afrosensitive evangelical spirituality reverences biblical authority while exercising cultural agency when examining African diasporic narratives.



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