

Race, Ethnicity and Publishing in America

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The Poetry of Phillis Wheatley in Slavery's Recollective Economies, 1773 to the Present

Max Cavitch

Like Claire Parfait in her essay for this volume, I will be stepping back to a point in time well before black publishing enterprises reached the advanced states of development to which most of the other essays are devoted. I am grateful to Parfait for having already done so much to help us establish that various twentieth- and twenty-first century developments – to which I myself will turn in my concluding remarks – have deep roots in black publishing enterprises of the mid-nineteenth century, such as those of Parfait's subject, the early African American historian William Cooper Nell. My own chief endeavor has been to extend this view back to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century – that is, to an even earlier phase of what we now often refer to as modern print culture, an era during which a new ideological emphasis on the relation of print and identity combined with the proliferation of advanced technologies of production and distribution of printed matter.

Today, we find ourselves living through the late twilight of this era, as print itself becomes a more and more marginal – though no less interesting – medium in a world of late-capitalist, transnational, largely electronic mediatization. This is both good and bad news for various contemporary marginalized cohorts of cultural workers and black publishing enterprises in Europe, North America and South Africa. If nothing else, I would like to underscore in what follows the fact that these recent enterprises have precursors and counterparts in earlier eras and that there may be much to learn about the more recent history of race, ethnicity and publishing from the closer study of the dramatically material precarities faced by earlier black authors writing and publishing in European languages.

One of the very earliest authors of African birth or descent to publish in English was Phillis Wheatley (1753–84). In fact, she was the first slave, the first African American, and only the second woman in British North

America to publish a book of poems. Her book, entitled *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (Figure 9.1), was published in London in 1773, when she was still a slave, and when, therefore, exactly like the copies of her book, Wheatley herself could legally be bought and sold.

Indeed, it is impossible to talk about books as commodities in the era of slavery without also raising various questions about commoditized men and women in the era of the book. When does African American involvement in the printing and book trades begin, and on what terms? How did the possibilities for self-transformation – for which books often stand as emblems – impress themselves upon a class of persons for



Figure 9.1 Frontispiece portrait, Phillis Wheatley, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (London: A. Bell, 1773)

whom being in possession of books or even just the rudiments of literacy often proved fatal rather than liberating, due to broadly restrictive laws and violently punitive sanctions? How is the book trade implicated in the slave trade – in its commercial routes? in its valuations of human life and industry? in its erection of barriers against black literacy and numeracy? These are questions about economic operations in a publishing history and in a literary field that, paradoxically, both objectified black bodies (as merchandise to be bought and sold) and made room for black subjectivity. It sometimes did so simultaneously, as in certain advertisements for slave sales that listed moral virtues such as honesty among a chattel slave's marketable features.

I would like to dramatize the stakes of these rather abstractly posed questions with some concrete examples – examples of the degree to which the history of books and publishing in the era of transatlantic slavery was a history both of foreclosure through brutal objectification and of certain affordances of subjectivity and agency. After moving quickly through three initial examples, I will then give more sustained attention to my fourth example, returning us to Phillis Wheatley by way of a particularly interesting nineteenth-century edition of her book of poems.

My first example is from a book published just a few years after Wheatley's death in 1784: John Newton's *Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade*. Newton (1725–1807) was a reformed slaver and also, not coincidentally, the author of the most famous of all Protestant hymns, 'Amazing Grace'. In his book, Newton describes the ruthlessly efficient packing of slaves in the holds of slave-ships, in terms that no doubt came quite naturally to a literary man like himself. Many of us have studied the dismal images of slaves packed with maximally ruthless efficiency in the lower decks of slave ships (Figure 9.2). It is a phenomenon that Newton witnessed first-hand and described as follows: 'the Slaves lie in two rows, one above the other, on each side of the ship, close to each other, like books upon a shelf. I have known them so close that the shelf would not, easily, contain one more' (1788, pp. 33–4). Just as there is no physical space between them, there is no existential difference between them either: no distinguishing, individuating characteristics. Under such circumstances, human beings are rendered almost entirely fungible. From the perspective of the owners of the ship's cargo, they are like hundreds of copies of the same book.

My second example comes from an editorial by Frederick Douglass (1818–95) – a slave who, through force of talent and commanding physical presence came to symbolize better than anyone the paradox of an enslaved, or commoditized, existential uniqueness. Douglass also

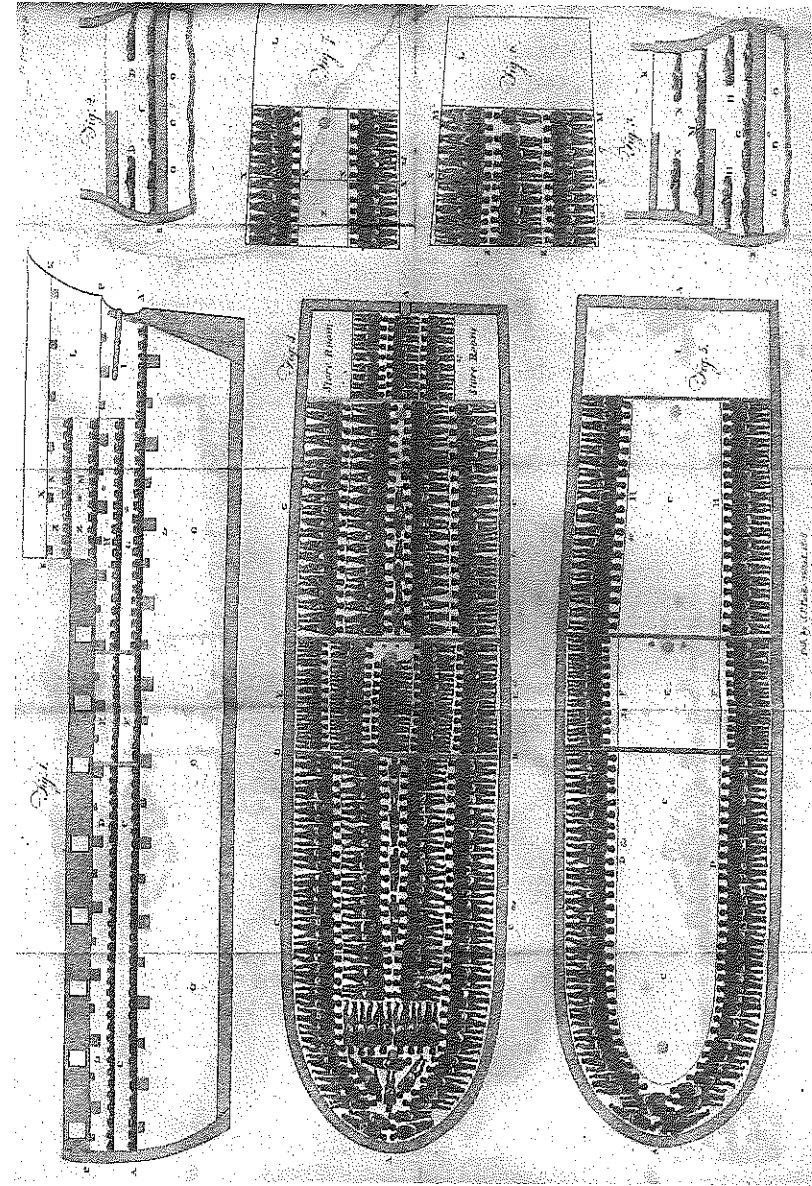


Figure 9.2 From Thomas Clarkson, *The History of the Rise, Progress, & Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-trade by the British Parliament* (Philadelphia: J. P. Parke, 1808). Courtesy of the Chapin Library of Rare Books, Williams College

happened to be very canny about the isomorphisms of body and book, of author and corpus, as the three successive versions (1845, 1855, 1881) of his great autobiography demonstrate. In an early newspaper editorial, Douglass critiques a popular antebellum initiative to distribute bibles to slaves. How, he asks, can one seriously propose giving *any* book to a legal non-person – that is, to someone who has not yet been ‘given’ to himself? ‘The Slave is property. He cannot hold property. He cannot own a Bible. To give him a Bible is but to give his master a Bible’ (1847, p. 86).

My third example involves the case of the first US copyright claim for a black-authored book: the 1825 slave narrative of William Grimes (1784–1865), *Life of William Grimes, the Runaway Slave, Written by Himself*. It was a copyright claim that, as literary scholar Susanna Ashton observes, can be understood, metaphorically at least, as a more comprehensive claim to self-ownership – to Grimes’s being, in other words, the self-possessed owner of a self-authored life (2012, p. 128). However, though it seems, as Ashton notes, to have been properly filed, Grimes’s copyright claim for his book could not have withstood an actual legal challenge, since, under US law, all copyright holders had to be US citizens, which of course, under US law, Grimes was not. (Here we might recall the provocative title of the 1857 broadside, ‘Are Colored Men Citizens?’ that Parfait cites in connection with William Cooper Nell’s book, *Colored Patriots of the American Revolution*.) Nevertheless, Grimes’s copyright claim was a bold, if ultimately ineffectual, challenge to the disfranchisement and dehumanization of African Americans. Moreover, at the end of the book itself, Grimes ratchets up this challenge into a bitter and powerful address to potential consumers:

I hope some will buy my books from charity, but I am no beggar. I am now entirely destitute of property; where and how I shall live I don’t know; where and how I shall die I don’t know, but I hope I may be prepared. If it were not for the stripes on my back which were made while I was a slave, I would in my will, leave my skin as a legacy to the government, desiring that it might be taken off and made into parchment, and then bind the constitution of glorious happy *and free* America. Let the skin of an American slave, bind the charter of American Liberty. (Grimes 1825, p. 68)

As gruesome as this sounds, it is not as unusual as it might seem – at least not from the perspective of book history. For the binding of books in human skin, or anthropodermic bibliopegy, was not unheard of, and even had a certain vogue, in some eras. A number of such volumes are

currently held in notable collections around the world, and there is a far greater number of rumored examples that cannot presently be verified. Three of the proven examples are: a copy of the proceedings against Jesuit priest Henry Garnet, bound in Garnet’s own skin, following his execution for treason in 1606; a seventeenth-century treatise on Spanish law, bound in the skin of its owner, Jonas Wright; and the narrative of American highwayman James Allen, bound in his own skin and presented at his request to one of his surviving victims in 1837 (Figure 9.3).

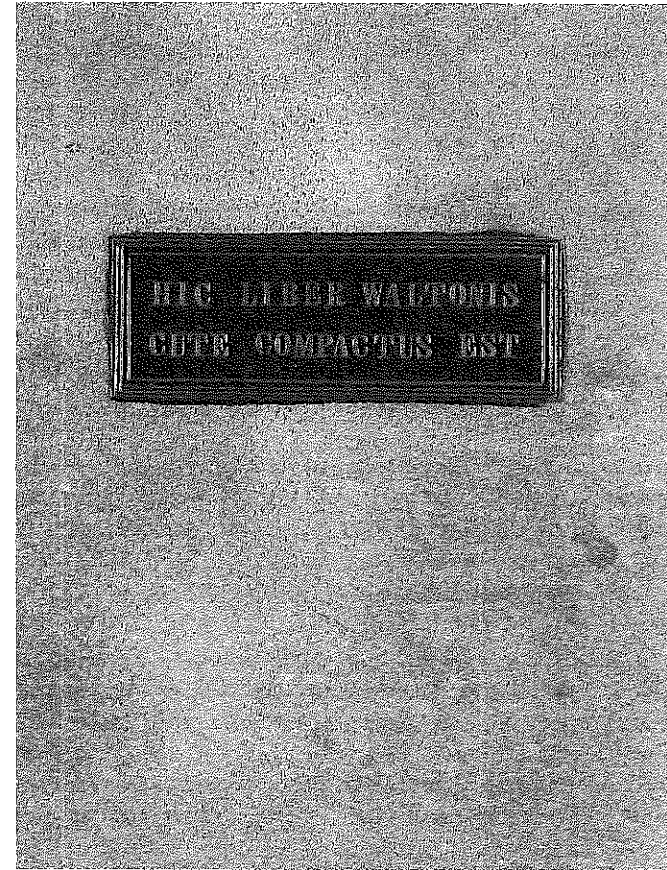


Figure 9.3 Cover, James Allen, *Narrative of the Life of James Allen, alias George Walton, alias Jonas Pierce, alias James H. York, alias Burley Grove, the highwayman: being his death-bed confession, to the warden of the Massachusetts state prison* (Boston: Harrington & Co., 1837). Collection of the Boston Athenaeum. Reprinted by permission

James Allen was a Jamaican mulatto, and this is the earliest extant volume known to be bound in the skin of a person of African descent. But rumors abound of earlier instances – for example, of white American slaveholders binding their family bibles in the skins of their favorite slaves. Whether or not these rumors have any basis in fact, William Grimes is likely to have heard them. He may also have heard of the vogue for anthropodermic bibliopegy in Revolutionary France, including the rumored existence of copies of the French Constitution bound in human skin (Thompson 1949, pp. 122, 129). The fact that, in Grimes's vision, the scarring of his own skin by slavery's lash renders it unfit for the binder's use as a covering for the US Constitution is a wicked, double-edged irony.

Wicked ironies also abound, of course, in the history of Phillis Wheatley's career and publishing history. But what I have to say about her – as my fourth, more extended example – concerns, not anthropodermic bibliopegy, but more mundane forms of book-binding. Nevertheless, it is vital that we keep in mind the literal, as well as tropological significance of commoditization, depersonalization and defacement in any discussion of early African American print culture.

In the decades following the initial publication of Wheatley's *Poems* in London in 1773, there were many subsequent editions and reprintings of her book, and also of selections from both her collected and uncollected poetry and correspondence. In 1838, the year of Frederick Douglass's escape from slavery, abolitionist Isaac Knapp published one of these new editions of Wheatley's poems (Figure 9.4). It was the third American edition in just four years, and it included, as had the previous two, a biographical sketch of the author by Margaretta Matilda Odell, a self-described 'collateral descendent' of Susanna Wheatley, the wife of Phillis's owner (Wheatley 1838, p. 34). Writing in the early 1830s, Odell asserted that cultural memory of Wheatley's poetry (at least among whites) had grown profoundly attenuated. 'Here and there,' she wrote, 'we find a solitary pilgrim, belonging to the days of the years that are gone, treasuring Phillis's poems as a precious relic' (Wheatley 1838, p. 29). But Odell's impression was out of date. Through the distribution efforts of anti-slavery publishers like Knapp and his close associate William Lloyd Garrison, Wheatley had already begun to emerge from the reliquary imagination of 'years that are gone' to enter the progressive, incorporationist imagination – and publishing marketplace – of the new abolitionism. During the year 1832, Garrison and Knapp reprinted most of Wheatley's previously published poems in their newspaper, *The Liberator*. These reprintings, in turn, helped to inspire George Light's 1834 edition, the first to include Odell's *Memoir*.¹

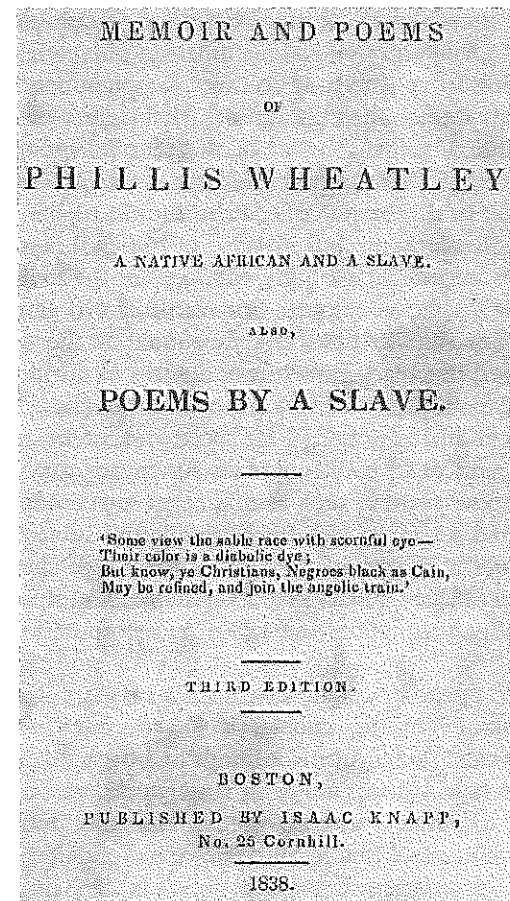


Figure 9.4 Title page, Phillis Wheatley, *Memoir and Poems of Phillis Wheatley, a Native African and a Slave. Also, Poems by a Slave* (Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1838). Courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia

Another edition followed in 1835, virtually identical in content, adding only the text of President George Washington's famous 1776 letter to Wheatley, thanking her for the poem she wrote for him (Wheatley 1835). In 1838, Knapp published his edition, which further supplemented Wheatley's poems with the addition of the text of a more recent volume, *Poems by a Slave* (1837), by North Carolina slave-poet George Moses Horton (c.1798–1883). As an incorporationist abolitionist, Knapp opposed making expatriation a condition of freedom (which was the

position of the more numerous colonizationist abolitionists), favoring instead the full social and political assimilation of emancipated slaves. In appending Horton's poems to Wheatley's, Knapp undoubtedly sought to heighten the volume's incorporationist (that is, anti-colonizationist) appeal by multiplying instances of black accomplishment – binding together the poems of two remarkable slaves, each identified as such on the title page. In this branch of the abolitionist movement, arguing against enforced emigration and in favor of full civil participation for black Americans meant, increasingly, to argue for their eligible characters. During the 1830s, as colonization continued to gain popularity, incorporationist abolitionists like Knapp counted on the appeal of writings by slaves and free blacks to white audiences in northern cities like Boston and Philadelphia – white readers of abolitionist inclination who wanted assurances of the potential for social and intellectual elevation among black Americans.² Books by black Americans may have been a particularly effective form of such assurance, at least among those who associated printed artefacts with freely circulating subjects, and print presence with all the characteristics of self-ownership. The endeavor to eliminate prejudice against black character helps account for Wheatley's sustained visibility, throughout the 1830s, in incorporationist publishing enterprises.

As the decade opened, it had been nearly 15 years since the latest American edition of Wheatley, and nearly 30 years since her poems were commonly reprinted there. A brief attempt had been made in 1827, in the pages of the first African American newspaper, *Freedom's Journal*, to recall Wheatley to public notice among its readers by publishing three biographical sketches of Wheatley and two of her poems. But this effort proved short-lived, and it was the last time any of Wheatley's poems were reprinted or Wheatley herself mentioned in the newspaper. (Samuel Cornish's departure as editor and John Russwurm's redirection of the newspaper's agenda toward colonizationism help explain Wheatley's disappearance from its pages.) So it is perhaps not surprising that, like Odell, abolitionist and women's rights activist Lydia Maria Child was also tempted in the early 1830s to conclude that it would 'be absurd to put Phillis Wheatly [sic] in competition with . . . modern writers; but [she was willing to grant] her productions certainly appear very respectable in comparison with most of the poetry of that day' (1833, p. 171).

But, like Odell, Child was out of touch with more recent developments. Knapp and Garrison had already begun putting Wheatley 'in competition' with various contemporary poets, such as *Liberator* regulars Hannah Gould, Lydia Sigourney and John Greenleaf Whittier, by

reprinting Wheatley's poems serially in their newspaper, alongside these very popular poets. Between February 11 and December 22, 1832, 37 of Wheatley's poems appeared – one in almost every issue of *The Liberator* over this ten-month period.³ Through these periodical reprintings of her poems, Garrison and Knapp re-collected Wheatley – and the faded memory of her intellectual, aesthetic and religious accomplishments – out of the reliquary imagination of 'years that are gone' and for the progressive, incorporationist imagination of the new abolitionism. In doing so, they may have helped to inspire George Light's 1834 edition, which, in its Introduction, looked forward to the day when 'the African shall be as the American, and the black man as the white' (Wheatley 1834, p. 8).

The 1834 and 1835 editions were both avidly promoted in *The Liberator* as 'anti-slavery publications', and they were repeatedly advertised for sale alongside works by Child, Whittier and Garrison himself. And the 1838 edition, as I have begun to explain, incorporated work by yet another contemporary – Horton – whose poetry also appeared in *The Liberator*.

In 1838, Horton was still a slave, living in North Carolina, purchasing his own time from his owner out of the money he made composing love poems for amorous but unpoetical college boys at the University of North Carolina. Ironically, given Knapp and Garrison's anti-colonization stance, Horton's first volume of poetry had been published in an attempt to raise money for Horton's emancipation and immediate emigration to Liberia. In his introduction to the 1829 *Hope of Liberty*, reproduced in Knapp's 1838 edition, Joseph Gales wrote that it was Horton's 'earnest and only wish to become a member of that Colony, to enjoy its privileges, and apply his industry and mental abilities to the promotion of its prospects and his own. It is upon these terms alone, that the efforts of those who befriend his views are intended to have a final effect' (Wheatley 1838, p. 119). Their efforts were unsuccessful, and Horton's biographer doubts that Horton himself ever intended to emigrate (Sherman 1997, p. 13). Perhaps this back-story of a failed colonization effort was another motivating factor in Knapp's decision to add Horton's poems to Wheatley's.

To my knowledge, this was the first time that Wheatley's poems had been published together in book form with the work of another black poet. But it was not the first time her book had been conjoined with another's in a single bound volume. In 1801, her poems had been appended to an abridged English translation of an early French abolitionist novel by Joseph Lavallée.⁴ And in 1814 they appeared at the end of an edition of Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*. This

1814 Halifax edition of Equiano and Wheatley may, in fact, be the first book publishing effort to *materially* establish a tradition of Afro-British authors – a tradition that had been recognized in other ways (for example, through comparative critical commentary) since the late eighteenth century.⁵ Thirty-five years later, free black abolitionist author and educator William G. Allen produced a critical and explicitly canonizing anthology of selected works by Wheatley and Horton. Allen's commentary – building on the previous, canonizing accounts of black literary production by Henri Grégoire and Lydia Child – argues that black intellectual and moral authority is traditional: 'What [the African] is capable of becoming,' he writes, 'the past clearly evinces' (1849, p. 7).

Published over a decade earlier, Knapp's Wheatley/Horton edition has no explicitly canonizing apparatus. And indeed from a bibliographic perspective we need to recognize the significant difference between Knapp's simple binding together of previous editions of these two authors' works and Allen's later critical anthology, which selects from, reorganizes, historicizes and interprets their works. I'm interested here in the way that Knapp's 1838 edition anticipates, without yet being equivalent to, William Allen's explicitly canonizing practice of recollection.

The 1838 edition yokes Horton's poems with Wheatley's: the poems of two slaves, each identified as such on the title page. Wheatley is referred to by name; but Horton is referred to only as 'a slave', communicating a sense of Wheatley's priority and Horton's subordinateness to her. This is, however, a different kind of subordination from that experienced by Wheatley herself in the earlier joint editions of her work. It has a different temporality. In both the 1801 Lavallée/Wheatley edition and the 1814 Equiano/Wheatley edition, Wheatley's 1773 poems were appended to – they had, that is, a supplementary relation to – more recent works: Lavallée's novel and Equiano's *Narrative* were both first published in 1789. Of course, their precedence over Wheatley in these editions is not *simply* a matter of chronology, so the arrangement of the 1838 Wheatley/Horton edition cannot be construed as a mere reversal of chronological precedence. Nevertheless, this shift in the way that Wheatley is aligned with other authors is one expression of a demonstrably increased emphasis, by the 1830s, among abolitionist writers and publishers, on traditionality as a ground for black character and authority in the present. The book is an incarnation and commodification of that traditionality.

This argument, I believe, helps make sense of what might otherwise seem to be a counterintuitive arrangement of Wheatley and Horton's work for a radical like Knapp. For the thematics and tone of Horton's poetry are generally much more in keeping than Wheatley's with the

aims and sentiments of 1830s abolitionism. Despite Horton's more urgent rhetoric, however, it is Wheatley's poetry that Knapp foregrounds, having drawn, perhaps, a couple of reasonable conclusions: specifically, that Wheatley's greater familiarity with Northern readers (thanks to the 1832, 1834 and 1835 reprintings) and her valorizing connection with the Revolutionary past (signaled by the George Washington letter) would help legitimate the abolitionist appeal and salability of contemporary slave poetry like Horton's. Reciprocally, Horton's contemporaneity helps establish Wheatley's authority as traditional. Thus this volume not only had strategic uses for contemporary abolitionism, but implications, as well, for Wheatley's broader reception history, from the mid-nineteenth century, to the more recent and contemporary eras of black publishing history.

For Phillis Wheatley has never ceased to be a figure of intense and enduring interest in American literary history, from the appearance of her earliest poems up to the present moment. Washington and Voltaire were among her first appreciative readers, while Thomas Jefferson infamously maligned her in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*. And opinions have remained divided ever since, though the terms of that divisiveness have changed with the times. Many nineteenth-century abolitionists, as we have seen, celebrated Wheatley as proof positive of black intellectual achievement, while later black nationalists professed contempt for her perceived submissiveness. Early twentieth-century literary historians held her imitativeness in low esteem, and to many of the more radical writers of the Civil Rights era, such as Amiri Baraka, Wheatley's formalism and piety were anathema. Yet Wheatley also continued to have her vocal champions, including W. E. B. Du Bois and Margaret Walker. In recent decades her poetry has been a staple of American literature anthologies, and critical interest in Wheatley has never been stronger than in recent years.

In the realm of African American publishing, there has been no more intriguing artifact of this intense interest than Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s book, *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley*, based on his 2002 Thomas Jefferson Lecture, for it is a book that binds together enduring tensions between sentimental feelings of likeness and riskier, more complex identifications with Wheatley and with the tradition she is held by Gates and many others to represent. It is a particularly fascinating book because of the way it extends and amplifies the fantasy of memory that has been such a significant part of Wheatley's reception history – what Gates himself has long referred to (indeed, we might say, has long remembered) with great drama and scholarly purpose, as 'the primal scene

of African-American letters' (Gates 2003, p. 5). With this phrase, Gates implicitly acknowledges what recent scholars including Joanna Brooks so convincingly argue: that Wheatley's trial by those 18 Boston grandees, whose names appear in the front of the 1773 edition to verify her authorship of the poems it contains, is on the order of myth: a memory already given of a traumatic event endlessly repeated in Wheatley's reception history. On the front cover of his book – impossible to overlook, and unwise to pass by without commentary – it is Gates himself who seems poised to question Wheatley as he looks down and slightly askance at her diminutive image (Figure 9.5). Gates, of course, is wittily adopting the pose of the grandees' earlier evaluative gaze, the continuity of which it is Gates's chief aim in his book to historicize. Gates is

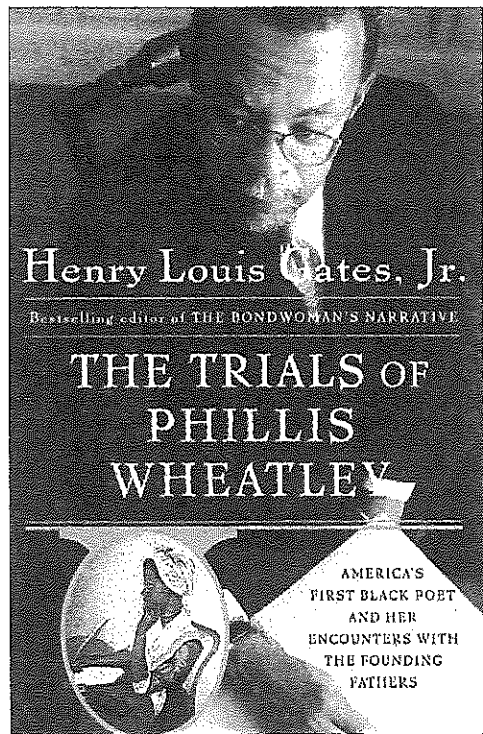


Figure 9.5 Dust jacket cover, from Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley: America's First Black Poet and Her Encounters with the Founding Fathers*, copyright © 2003. Reprinted by permission of Basic Civitas Books, a member of the Perseus Books Group

mocking our indulgence in disidentification with Wheatley's 'trial'. Yet at the same time, due to the angle of the shot, we ourselves are made to look down on Gates and to see he has displaced Wheatley, adopted her reflective pose, and – inviting what could be a highly instructive discomfort – situated *himself* as the interrogated marvel poised to write.⁶

What appears to be Gates's simultaneous adoption of different subject positions makes his book's cover an ironic tableau of the reading relation that Dominick LaCapra calls 'empathic unsettlement', which names a mode of responsiveness to the traumatic experience of others. To achieve this responsiveness, the reader (or the historian or secondary observer) must remain aloof from the binary logic of identity and difference. She must not mistake the empathy necessary to have an affective response for 'unproblematic' or 'unchecked' identification; nor must she allow the objectivity that helps prevent unchecked identification to become an exclusive objectivism that 'denies or forecloses empathy' (LaCapra 2001, p. 37–42).

On the cover of Gates's book, his portrait's own massively disproportionate relation to the diminutive image of Wheatley proclaims that there is no unchecked identification here. On the contrary, it figures Gates's treatment of Wheatley as potentially overwhelming to her and inappropriately aggrandizing to him. At the same time, it seems self-consciously to exaggerate this risk for comic effect. It pokes fun at the scholar's egoism while asserting his ironic distance from the object of his research. But this strategy should do more than make us laugh. For it dallies disarmingly with some serious transference implications for the reader of Gates's book as well as for Gates himself.

LaCapra sketches two ways of 'coming to terms . . . with one's transference implication in the object of study: acting out and working through' (2001, p. 142). Acting out manifests itself in a compulsion to repeat, in an obtrusion of past events on one's experience of the present. Is there, thus, in Gates's apparent mimicry of Wheatley's pose an uncritical identification with her – an unconscious attempt to relive the 'primal scene of African-American letters' as a valorization of the African American person of letters? Working through entails a process of gaining critical distance on a past event that may nevertheless continue to be acted out in the present. 'One of the most difficult aspects of working through,' as LaCapra puts it, 'is the ability to undertake it in a manner that is not tantamount to betraying the trust or love that binds one to lost others – that does not imply simply forgetting the dead or being swept away by current preoccupations' (2001, p. 144). Is Gates's adoption and adaptation of Wheatley's pose proof of an

aspiration to a memorial as well as critical fidelity that would make scholarship on the past commensurate with political or ethical goals in the present?

There is of course a deep philosophical and critical background that helps ensure our own implication, as Wheatley's readers, in the problematics of identification for which Gates's book's cover creates such a rich and arresting interludic space. The most legible part of this background is the African American signifying practice upon which Gates (1988) based his early theory of 'Afro-American literary criticism'. The story the cover tells is of the transmission of a signifying figure – a figure of revisionary commitment to irony. The chain of transmission begins with Wheatley's obligation to verify orally before a white audience the authenticity of the scene of writing that is captured in her author-portrait (see again Figure 9.1). Her portrait, in turn, provides Gates with his opportunity to signify upon that inquisitory 'primal scene' on the occasion of the publication of an oral performance of his own: his 2002 Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities at the Library of Congress. His own author-portrait on the cover of *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley* signifies, or tropes in a double-voiced way, upon the scene the book commemorates: Gates's state-sponsored address from the center of national power and cultural prestige on the long-disprized tradition of writing by American slaves and their descendants.

Gates depends upon his reader's readiness – perhaps over-readiness – to accept the implicit racial lineage that his book's cover both celebrates and deconstructs. The message seems to be that Gates is one of Wheatley's literary-cum-literal descendants; her trials are his trials as well, modified greatly though they have been in accordance with the changing forms of black subjection in the US from Wheatley's day to his. Gates looks to Wheatley, literally, for the pattern of his own person. Seated in an eighteenth-century chair, right arm stretched out before him resting on what look like the blank pages of an antique book, Gates watches and mimics Wheatley's writerly pose. The differences, though, are strikingly overdetermined, specifically with respect to gender. For instance, the typography not only announces 'Henry Louis Gates, Jr.' to be the son of a father, but it also identifies him as the 'Bestselling editor of the bondwoman's narrative' – a narrative whose author, Hannah Crafts, goes unnamed. The authority by which the male editor's name displaces that of the female author for whose work he assumes responsibility and credit ('Bestselling editor', a kind of counterpart to the contemporary consecrating power of Oprah Winfrey, whose on-air Book Club Laurence Cossu-Beaumont discusses in her essay for this volume)

cannot help but hark back to the authority asserted over Wheatley's *Poems* by the 18 Boston grandees who staked their reputation on her authorship of them. Clad in the elegant masculine attire of the professional class, Gates seems to regard Wheatley with a skepticism one suspects bears a considerable resemblance to the looks supposedly turned on Wheatley by those earlier Massachusetts gentlemen. And it may not be going too far to observe that the position of Gates's left hand, resting on his crotch, out of sight but pointed to dramatically by one corner of the book that lies open before him, suggests a studied carelessness about sexual difference. The hand on which rests the head in Wheatley's contemplative pose drops down, in Gates's pose, into a genteel riff on gangsta masculinity – behind which, of course, lie many horrific centuries of sexual violence in forms of both rape and castration.

The writerly pose Gates mimics and subverts also draws on the eighteenth-century iconography of reflection – what Michael Fried (1980) has called 'absorption' with reference to certain contemporary developments in French painting. Wheatley seems held in the grip of inspiration – of a thought or vision suspended, as it were, over the page to which the point of her quill remains patiently addressed. Writing is not only the occasion of her absorption but also evidence of how she is *not* spending a significant portion of her time: not engaged, that is, in the tasks of domestic servitude for which her clothing as well as her color mark her out. Susanna Wheatley, the wife of Phillis's owner, not only permitted but encouraged this truancy, granting Wheatley the means of acquiring the kind of education few women of her era, and virtually no slaves, could have hoped to achieve.

That the use to which she put her education – the writing and publication of poems – was famously excoriated by Thomas Jefferson charges the occasion of Gates's Thomas Jefferson Lecture with an almost unendurable irony. To endure it, and to help us endure it, Gates cultivates a stance of empathic unsettlement with respect to both historical figures. Risky humor helps. 'Who knows?' he quips at one point about his affinity with Jefferson. 'Judging from all the DNA disclosures of the last few years, I may even be related to him' (2003, p. 2). But Gates knows he has to avoid an unproblematic identification with Wheatley as well as with Jefferson. Neither the objectification of Jefferson as perpetrator nor an imitation of Wheatley's victimage can serve the ethical and political purposes to which Gates has devoted his scholarship. Scholarship itself must be seen as a necessary but not a sufficient means of pursuing such purposes – a recognition that may inform one of the cover's most inscrutable details.

The pages of the book that lies open before Gates appear blank, the perfect background for the typography of his own book's subtitle: 'America's first black poet and her encounters with the founding fathers'. But beneath these words, one can discern the faint traces of an inscription several lines long. The inscription is too faint to be readable, but one can clearly see that the lettering is, from Gates's point of view, upside down. What are we to make of this quietly subversive detail? That Gates is surreptitiously showing us an inscription he knows we cannot read? That the W. E. B. Du Bois Professor of the Humanities at Harvard University is aping illiteracy? That cultural transmission cannot overcome the awkwardness and ultimate inutility of language? That the staging of this scene is at a distant, even cynical remove from the trials of scholarship?

The principal trial (effort, test and anguish) of scholarship, as of ethics, is knowledge of other minds – of their reality and of their subjective experience. 'Let us treat the men and women well,' Emerson recommends, 'treat them as if they were real: perhaps they are' (1983a, p. 479). Let us proceed, he seems to be saying, as if the question were not worth asking. 'Perhaps' is the fulcrum on which, for some of Emerson's readers, there may seem merely to turn the polar arrogances of humility (I'm incapable of knowing) and condescension (I'm incapable of caring). Yet it is in fact, I would argue, the point of embarkation for a pragmatics of identification that scholars like Gates and Emerson and we ourselves may use to map the territory between the impossible extremes that Max Scheler (1954) calls 'the *idiopathic* and the *heteropathic*'. Idiopathic identification, according to Scheler, would come about 'through the total eclipse and absorption of another self by one's own, it being thus, as it were, completely dispossessed and deprived of all rights in its conscious existence and character'. Heteropathic identification would exist 'where "I" (the formal subject) am so overwhelmed and hypnotically bound and fettered by the other "I" (the concrete individual), that my formal status as a subject is usurped by the other's personality, with all its characteristic aspects' (1954, pp. 18–19). In psychoanalytic terms, idiopathic identification proceeds through incorporation; heteropathic identification proceeds through projective identification.

Both the pathos and the pathology of identifications – that is, both the suffering they entail and the suffering they inflict – are fundamental to literary performance and therefore to the theory and criticism of such performances. Identifications also bear an ethos and an ethology – that is, traces of individual and group characters and their self-conscious and unconscious histories – that are expressively enabled in distinct ways

by particular literary forms and idioms. Literature itself might best be understood as a potentially limitless set of discursive strategies for the ethical disinhibition of identificatory mobility. This doesn't mean that literature can or should have an unproblematized relation to identification. I don't think this understanding of literature, in other words, need automatically collapse into one or another of its idealizing variants: for example, Emerson's:

All that Shakspeare says of the king, yonder slip of a boy that reads in the corner feels to be true of himself. (1983b, pp. 238–9)

or Gates's:

And so we're reminded of our task, as readers: to learn to read Wheatley anew, unblinkered by the anxieties of her time and ours. That's the only way to let Phillis Wheatley take the stand. The challenge isn't to read white, or read black; it is to read. (2003, p. 89)

The cover of Gates's book speaks more truly than any such peroration. It reminds us that our task as readers is to learn to read her and our anxieties anew, the anxieties with which identities are lived – to take the stand with Wheatley, so to speak, even as the very proposition of doing so smacks of the insult of sympathy, the narcissistic turn of compassion veering toward idiopathic identification.

The protocols of readerly sympathy inculcated in those who taught and encouraged Wheatley to read and write in the 1760s were predicated on literary pleasure's newly discovered utility to social ideals of self-management. Adam Smith had theorized this pleasure, and writers of sentimental literature continued to promulgate it in works that taught how lovely – how 'right' – it could feel to monitor behavior (one's own and that of others) for signs of – and even to engender there – affective harmony. This 'sympathetic discipline', as Christopher Castiglia calls it (2002, p. 37), became by the early nineteenth century not only crucial to the cultural logic of separate-spheres ideology, but also, by the 1830s, essential to the success of the post-colonialist abolitionism in the service of which Knapp produced his 1838 edition of Wheatley and Horton's poems. In a provocative essay, Castiglia argues that among the cultural legacies of reform-minded liberalism is not only the antebellum shifting of attention from structural inequalities to interiorized moral failings, but also the much more recent and ongoing deflection by mass entertainment

of attention to the ethological connection between the earlier shift and contemporary pleasures of the imagination. The reading audience has become – in his valedictory identification, on our behalf, with a presumptively white mass subject – a consuming audience, one ‘allowed the pleasure of imagining ourselves outside the necessity of ethical resolution’ (2002, pp. 50–1).

But why, as Stephen Best asks, ‘must our relation to the past be ethical in the first place?’ (2012, p. 454). I would not in any way contend with Castiglia’s implication that commodity culture obscures structural inequalities – and not only those based on racialized perception – with the amoral permissiveness of mass entertainment. But I am strongly disinclined to view subjection to that permissiveness as a precondition of ‘the pleasure of imagining ourselves outside the necessity of ethical resolution’. This pleasure, it seems to me, is as fundamental to the experience of literature as it is fraught with the risks of unchecked or unproblematized identifications. Precisely through its suspension of the requirement for ethical resolution, literature makes possible the play of identification through which we encounter in our own experience the history of the forms – including the material forms – of its problematization. Literature is our best, ludic approach to understanding the anxiety with which identity is lived. Thus, one of the most important arguments that I have tried to develop in this essay is that literary history and criticism are best seen and practiced as being in the service of, among other goals, the ethical disinhibition of identificatory mobility. *Ethical*, because in eschewing critical dogma it does not eschew critical discernment; *disinhibition*, because the ethology of reading is part of the intersubjective history of unconscious life.

Notes

1. A contemporary advertisement for this edition in the *Liberator* emphasizes the fact that copies of the original London edition of Wheatley’s *Poems* are ‘exceedingly rare’ (March 29, p. 51).
2. Article III of the Constitution of the American Anti-Slavery Society – to which Knapp was signatory – reads in part that: ‘This society shall aim to elevate the character and condition of the people of color, by encouraging their intellectual, moral and religious improvement, and by removing public prejudice, that thus they may, according to their intellectual and moral worth, share an equality with the whites of civil and religious privileges’ (*Anti-Slavery Almanac for 1838*, pp. 30–1).
3. Of the 39 poems included in the 1773 London edition, only two – ‘A Rebus, by I.B.’ and ‘An Answer to the Rebus, by the Author of these Poems’ – were omitted.
4. Lavallée’s *Le nègre comme il y a peu de blancs* was originally published in three volumes in Paris in 1789.
5. In the Introduction to his edition of Equiano’s *Narrative*, Vincent Carretta writes: ‘By 1789, a recognized tradition of Afro-British authors had been established, with new writers aware of the work of their predecessors, and an Afro-British canon was being created by commentators, who argued about which were the most representative authors and works’ (Equiano 1995, p. xvi). Carretta has also identified a short 1776 abolitionist tract that contains quotations from both Phillis Wheatley and black Anglican minister Philip Quaque, making them as Carretta puts it ‘the first authors of African descent to have their writings published together’ (2011, p. 164).
6. For ease of reference, I will use Gates’s name to stand for whatever combination of author input, designer savvy, marketing requirements, and inadvertency produced the features of the book’s cover design I find so charged with significance. The jacket design credit goes to Rick Pracher; the photo credit to Jared Leeds.

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Epilogue – An Experience in Literary Archaeology: Publishing a Black Lost Generation

Samuel Blumenfeld

Back in the early 1990s, in a former life, I was a reader for the *Série Noire*,¹ a crime fiction and mystery series published by Gallimard, in France. My task was to read about 20 novels a week and tell the publisher which one could indeed be added to the series and which were the 19 others that should not even have been submitted to us. Gallimard's *Série Noire* is a very important series and part of its tremendous impact on the literary market is due to its historical past. From the start, the series included Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler and Jim Thompson among others, when these writers were largely unknown in the United States or, if they were published in the United States, had no literary recognition. It was also a series which published Chester Himes when Himes could not even find an American publisher, could not even live in his own country. When you worked for the *Série Noire*, even at the lowest level, as a simple reader, you had the acute sensation that you had embarked on a genuine mission: it was your duty to find American literary treasures that had not yet been discovered in their native country. It was your duty to give them not only French recognition, but in a way, the world recognition the mythical dimension that such a mythic series as the *Série Noire* could actually provide. The fact that someone like Himes would not exist today, had he not been discovered by Marcel Duhamel, the historical founder of the *Série Noire*, emphasized in my eyes the special link of the series to American literature, and also to black American culture.

I embarked on my career as reader for Gallimard in 1991. Every week I would receive a pile of books, and would wonder what they were, knowing that most of them were not even worth the time I was going to spend on them. One day, though, I was rewarded beyond my most extravagant expectations: I found a stack of 14 books written by Donald