Slavery and Feminist Rhetorics: Phillis Wheatley's Construction of Communities through Her Poetry and Letters

by

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Abstract

This thesis explores the intersections of gender, race, rhetoric, life writing, and early black Atlantic literature. I argue that Phillis Wheatley, a literate enslaved woman of African descent, sought to combat the effects of Orlando Patterson's social death theory through poetry and letter writing. Specifically, my thesis focuses on how Wheatley constructed access to two types of imagined communities: communities of the mind and female communities of care. In chapter one, "Communities of the Mind: Accessing the Past, Visualizing the Future, and Creating Imagined Worlds," I argue that Wheatley challenges the effects of social death by writing about two specific mental faculties in her poems "On Recollection" and "On Imagination." In chapter two, "Female Communities Constructed Through Letter Writing," I argue that Wheatley, through epistolary writing, created important, transatlantic relationships with other women in the Atlantic world. Drawing from Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* and Cynthia Huff's critique of Anderson's influential concept elaborated in *Life Writing and Imagined Communities*, I propose that Wheatley crafted access to female-centered imagined communities of mutual care and support through a shared Judeo-Christian culture.

Resumen

Esta tesis explora las interconexiones de género, raza, retórica, escritura de la vida y literatura afrodiaspórica previa al siglo diecinueve. Propongo que Phillis Wheatley, una esclava alfabetizada de ascendencia africana, buscó combatir los efectos de la teoría de la muerte social postulada por Orlando Patterson a través de la escritura de poética y epistolar. Específicamente, esta tesis analiza la manera en la cual Wheatley construyó acceso a dos tipos de comunidades imaginadas: comunidades mentales y comunidades femeninas afectivas. En el primer capítulo, "Comunidades Mentales: Acceso al Pasado, Visualización del Futuro y Creación de Mundos Imaginados," argumento que Wheatley desafía los efectos de la muerte social al escribir sobre dos facultades mentales en sus poemas "On Recollection" y "On Imagination." En el segundo capítulo, "Comunidades Fémeninas Construidas A Través de Cartas," postulo que Wheatley creó relaciones transatlánticas importantes con otras mujeres a través de la correspondencia. En diálogo con los textos *Comunidades Imaginadas* por Benedict Anderson y *Escritura de Vida y Comunidades Imaginadas* por Cynthia Huff, propongo que Wheatley construyó acceso a comunidades imaginadas de afecto y apoyo femenino a través de la fe y la cultura Judeo-Cristiana.

Acknowledgments

I was first introduced to the life and works of Phillis Wheatley in the fall of 2014 during an American Literature survey course taught by Dr. Eric D. Lamore. I quickly became fascinated with the poet, an enslaved woman of African descent who, through her poems, spoke so powerfully and eloquently about slavery from such a fragile and precarious position. Right away, I knew I wanted Wheatley to be the focus of my thesis project—it did not matter what it was about, as long as I had a chance to read more of her poetry and learn more about her life.

Getting to know Phillis Wheatley has been nearly a three-year endeavor. I have read about her success and the praise she has received—and will continue to receive—as a writer. I have also become familiarized with her fears and her darkest moments. Through reading her poems and letters, I have grown to love Phillis Wheatley and consider her one of my closest friends. As a human, I grieve over the pain she endured for so long as a slave. As a woman, I grieve over her missed opportunities, the countless deaths she witnessed, and the anonymity to which she succumbed after her passing. Yet, I could never regret having the privilege of learning about this incredibly brave and talented African and the obstacles she overcame as an enslaved young woman who, at barely eighteen years of age, published her book of poems and became the first woman of African descent to publish a book in the United States.

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Introduction

Phillis Wheatley remains one of the most significant figures in early African American literature. There are, however, several factors that complicate the reading of her poems and letters; among them are her African origins, her condition as an enslaved person for a large portion of her life, and the question of the degree to which she exercised agency. However, a point that cannot be easily disputed are her accomplishments. Her book, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, was the first book to be published in the English language by a person of African descent—the facts that she was a woman, a slave, and barely eighteen years of age when it appeared in print serve as testament to her courage and talent as a writer. This thesis examines the ways in which Wheatley constructed through poetry and letter writing supportive communities that assisted her in different ways when she was a slave in the North American colonies as well as ones that aided her in navigating her post-manumission life.

Forcibly removed from Africa as a child, Wheatley encountered the conditions of slavery around the age of seven or eight. However, through her agency, her efforts, and with the help of other eighteenth-century individuals on both sides of the Atlantic, she was able to transcend the status of servitude. Equipped with wit, intelligence, and talent, Wheatley crafted a voice in her writing that not only helped her create an identity for herself, but which also contributed to revolutionizing the ways in which whites perceived individuals of African descent in the eighteenth century. In a time in which African peoples were believed by many on both sides of the Atlantic to have no intelligence, creativity, or even any qualities that positioned them as humans, Wheatley's book of poetry underscored the feat accomplished by an individual of African descent who was allowed to learn how to read and write.

Upon her forced arrival in New England, she was purchased by the Wheatley family, which was composed of John and Susanna, and their twins, Nathaniel and Mary, to work as a domestic slave. According to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Wheatley led a life comprised of domestic service until her masters presumably took note of her intellect. In his book, *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley*, Gates, Jr. writes that "[f]or reasons never explained, Mary, apparently with her mother's enthusiastic encouragement, began to teach the child slave to read… Phillis, by all accounts, was a keen and quick pupil" (19). The Reverend John Lathrop, who later married Mary Wheatley, wrote a letter in 1773 in which he says that Mary "taught her to read, and by seeing others use the pen, she [Wheatley] began to write… Mary tutored Phillis in English, Latin, and the Bible" (qtd. in Gates 19). It is difficult to argue against the view that Wheatley was an intelligent woman; all evidence suggests that she was extremely gifted. Many additional persons bore witness to Wheatley's intellectual prowess, in particular her master, John Wheatley, whose letter of attestation adorns one of the first pages from the poet's 1773 book. This important letter reads as follows:

> PHILLIS was brought from Africa to America, in the Year 1761, between Seven and Eight Years of Age. Without any Assistance from School Education, and by only what she was taught in the Family, she, in sixteen Months Time from her Arrival, attained the English Language, to which she was an utter Stranger before, to such a Degree, as to read any, the most difficult Parts of the Sacred Writings, to the great Astonishment of all who heard her.
>
> As to her WRITING, her own Curiosity led her to it; and this she learnt in so short a Time, that in the Year 1765, she wrote a Letter to the Rev. Mr. OCCOM, the Indian Minister, while in England.

> She has a great Inclination to learn the Latin Tongue, and has made some Progress in it. This Relation is given by her Master who bought her, and with whom she now lives.
>
> JOHN WHEATLEY.
>
> Boston, Nov. 14, 1772 (Wheatley 6)

As Gates, Jr. explains in his "Foreword" to John C. Shields's *The Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, this letter was crucial for the publication of the book along with a second letter, titled "To the Publick," which was signed by "…eighteen of Boston's most notable citizens" (viii). Among these men were seven reverends such as Mather Byles, Samuel Cooper, and Samuel Mather, and notable Revolutionary figures such as John Hancock, "who would later gain fame for his signature on the Declaration of Independence… and His Excellency, Thomas Hutchinson, governor of Massachusetts, with Andrew Oliver, his lieutenant governor, close by his side" (Gates viii). Twenty-first-century readers of Wheatley's poems and letters might be puzzled as to how an African slave of barely eighteen years of age could bring so many prominent figures together, but it is important to note that the Wheatley family had powerful connections that facilitated the publication of Phillis's book.

Although Wheatley was previously brought into the Wheatley household to work as a domestic slave, once she began to compose poetry she was largely taken away from the typical duties assigned to enslaved persons. Instead, she became something more like a trophy for the Wheatleys, something they could be proud of and show off to others. In his recently published biography, *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage*, Vincent Carretta states that

> [l]ike many evangelical New England slave owners, Susanna Wheatley felt obligated to introduce Phillis to Christianity. Few, if any, contemporaneous owners, however, made an equivalent investment in the religious upbringing of their slaves. Phillis Wheatley's

> owner[s] clearly took a great interest in her behavior and treated her as if she were a family member, apparently without ever making her feel oppressed by that interest. (24)

It was because of the Wheatley family, and due to the privilege of being educated by her masters' children, that she was able to learn to read and write. As Carretta writes, "…Wheatley's writings demonstrate that she was granted an education that went well beyond what was needed in order to be catechized on Christianity. Phillis was obviously precocious, and the Wheatleys offered her an extraordinary opportunity to develop her talents and interests" (37). It was also due to the Wheatleys' special treatment that she was eventually able to explore her imagination and talents through writing poetry and letters. The justification for this special treatment is unknown. However, Carretta speculates that "[they] may have done so as a kind of social experiment to discover what effect education might have on an African. And perhaps they, particularly Susanna, did so because they saw in Phillis the daughter, Sarah, they had lost at the same age nearly ten years earlier" (37). Wheatley's education stands as a testament of his claim; as Carretta explains, "[some] people of African descent were allowed to learn to read…but they were often discouraged from learning to write because of white fears of possible conspiratorial communication among…blacks. Only the most educated white men, and very few white women, learned Latin. Even fewer people of African descent…learned it" (38).

The reasons why the Wheatley family helped in educating Phillis may never be exactly known. Nevertheless, even though the Wheatleys provided Phillis with their support and helped her find a publisher for her book in London, their special treatment may have alienated Wheatley in some ways. Although Wheatley was not treated as a traditional slave and had privileges that were denied to the vast majority of enslaved peoples, she was certainly not considered to be equal to the Wheatleys by other colonials. In this sense, Wheatley found herself in a world in

which her affiliation with her masters and the world they belonged to very likely alienated her physically, intellectually, and spiritually from the African community she experienced as a young child. Instead, the available historical and literary records suggest that Wheatley was mostly—but not totally—immersed in the culture of her masters.

Wheatley's physical separation from Africa when she was a child in combination with her status as an outsider in colonial Boston culture affected the ways in which she sought to explore and create an identity within her writing. In the essay, "Who Can Speak? Authority and Authenticity in Olaudah Equiano and Phillis Wheatley," G. Michelle Collins-Sibley explores how identity and authority were constructed by individuals of African descent within the context of the North American colonies. Collins-Sibley highlights that "… [t]his progressive isolation was especially devastating to a people for whom identity was socially constituted…" (5). It is somewhat unclear as to whether or not Wheatley was exposed to other slaves within the Wheatley's household. In his biography, Carretta explores the possibility that Wheatley might have shared any time with other enslaved peoples in colonial Boston. Carretta references the nineteenth-century book, *Memoir and Poems of Phillis Wheatley, a Native African and Slave*, written by Margaretta Matilda Odell, a great grandniece of Susanna Wheatley. In this book, Odell claimed that "…the Wheatley family owned several slaves in 1761, one of them a coachman named Prince, but ten years later Phillis was their only 'Servant for Life'" (qtd. in Carretta 18). Information on other possible slaves who might have served the Wheatleys is scarce, although Carretta claims that not only did "[t]he Wheatley's [have] an unknown number of other, presumably free, white servants in 1771" (18), but

> Phillis was not the only unfree laborer in the Wheatley household during the 1760s. On 14 August 1766, when Phillis was about twelve years old, John Wheatley placed a

> runaway advertisement in the Boston News-Letter and New-England Chronicle for "Abner Wade, an indented Servant, 19 years of Age, about 5 feet 3 inches high, light Complection, brown Hair tied behind, [who] looks very young for a Person of his Age." (21)

Some twenty-first-century readers may assume that the special treatment Wheatley received from her masters alienated her from any other slaves living in the house as well as prevented her from coming into contact with other enslaved persons in colonial Boston. In 1761, only eight hundred out of the fifteen thousand people who lived in Boston were of African descent (Carretta 1). Carretta elaborates on Wheatley's special treatment, pointing out that

> [a]mple evidence indicates that Phillis was raised above her station…she was treated more like a member of the Wheatley family than as a servant, let alone as a slave…she may well have been allowed to share their [dinner] table…she probably did not spend her nights in an unheated attic…her accommodations may have been similar to those of another extraordinary New England slave, whose owners permitted her…to sleep in a private bed in a hallway. The Wheatleys…allowed her to mix socially with their politically, religiously, and socially prominent guests. (22-23)

Carretta relies on Odell's *Memoir* to back up some of his ideas about Wheatley's possible interactions with other slaves, although he later proceeds to question the legitimacy of some of her statements. Carretta claims that "Odell is the only known source who comments on her personal interaction with other blacks within the Wheatley household" (23). One of Odell's anecdotes mentioned by Carretta involves the mysterious Prince:

> upon the occasion of one of these visits, the weather changed during the absence of Phillis; and her anxious mistress, fearful of the effects of cold and damp upon her already

> delicate health, ordered Prince (also an African and a slave) to take the chaise, and bring home her protégée. When the chaise returned, the good lady drew near the window, as it approached the house, and exclaimed—"Do but look at the saucey varlet—if he hasn't the imprudence to sit upon the same seat with my Phillis!" And poor Prince received a severe reprimand for forgetting the dignity thus kindly, though perhaps to him unaccountably, attached to the sable person of "my Phillis." (qtd. in Carretta 23)

Carretta believes that "Phillis was apparently isolated during her childhood from most of her fellow enslaved people of African descent" (23) in colonial Boston, yet with the help of the Wheatleys, Phillis was able become a member of prominent communities later in life. Collins-Sibley emphasizes that "…in the absence of these communal contexts, they [African peoples] acted affirmatively to forge new communities or assimilate into already extant communities" (7). Faced with the impossibility of being able to assimilate fully into the white community she frequently came in direct contact with and the black community she was mostly distanced from given her special status, Wheatley experienced the effects of social death.

In his seminal book, *Slavery and Social Death*, Orlando Patterson explores the intricate interrelationships between authority, alienation, and the concept of social death. Patterson poses a question that is relevant to Wheatley's story: "If the slave no longer belonged to a community, if he [or she] had no social existence outside of his [or her] master, then what was he [or she]? The initial response in almost all slaveholding societies was to define the slave as a socially dead person" (38). Patterson quotes anthropologist Claude Meillassoux, who seeks to deconstruct the process of social death by arguing that

> [f]rom [a] structural viewpoint…slavery must be seen as a process involving several transitional phases. The slave is violently uprooted from his [or her] milieu. He [or she] is

> dissocialized and depersonalized. This process of social negation constitutes the first, essentially external, phase of enslavement. The next phase involves the introduction of the slave into the community of his [or her] master, but it involves the paradox of introducing him [or her] as a nonbeing... "The captive always appears therefore marked by an original, indelible defect which weights endlessly upon his destiny. This is… a kind of 'social death.' He can never be brought to life again as such... the slave will remain forever an unborn being." (qtd. in Patterson 38)

Patterson suggests that "the slave was ritually incorporated as the permanent enemy of the inside—the 'domestic enemy'…he [or she] did not and could not belong because he [or she] was the product of a hostile, alien culture" (39). In this thesis, I argue that this model provides an important way to understand selected poems and letters written by Wheatley, whose forceful displacement brought her to the so-called New World, a place that, for a good deal of her life, had mostly one role for the young African girl: that of a domestic slave. Snatched from her family, country, and culture, Wheatley was forcefully shoved into an environment in which she was considered a mere object, as Patterson and Meillassoux note above. To twenty-first-century readers the Wheatley family may appear as having been genuinely interested in fostering Phillis's talents through her writing. Here lies an interesting paradox: even though Wheatley's writing and the special treatment she received from her masters might have severely alienated her from other enslaved Africans in colonial Boston, it simultaneously served as a means to combat the effects of this social death, particularly through her deliberate construction of different types of communities that would combat the effects of this type of death. Patterson quotes James H. Vaughan and his analysis of slavery, which states that "slavery involved two contradictory principles, marginality and integration" (46) and calls the institution "'limbic, for

its members exist in the hem of society, in a limbo, neither enfranchised…nor true aliens'" (qtd. in Patterson 46). Patterson adds that

> [i]nstitutionalized marginality, the liminal state of social death, was the ultimate cultural outcome of the loss of natality as well as honor and power. It was in this too that the master's authority rested. For it was he who…mediated between the socially dead and the socially alive. Without the master…the slave does not exist. The slave came to obey him not only out of fear, but out of basic need to exist as a quasi-person, however marginal and vicarious that existence might be. (46)

Patterson emphasizes the complicated relationship between master and slave, between being and non-being, and argues that "[a]lthough the slave is socially a nonperson and exists in a marginal state of social death, he [or she] is not an outcaste" (48). Wheatley's condition as an Other was crucial because it served as an antithesis to those who were considered non-Others. Her marginality defined what was acceptable at that time.

In her essay, "The Rhetoric and Politics of Marginality: The Subject of Phillis Wheatley," Helen M. Burke questions the issue of marginality and how scholars perceive it within the context of current scholarship. Burke quotes Canadian literary and cultural critic Sacvan Bercovitch in order to explore the rhetoric of pluralism. This type of rhetoric, according to Bercovitch, seeks to acknowledge marginality by alternating between two views: "harmony-in-diversity and diversity-in-harmony" (qtd. in Burke 32). However, Bercovitch continues on to argue that "this rhetoric…can become the means of avoiding the challenges that dissenting groups raise, a point that is repeatedly made by critics of pluralist ideology" (qtd. in Burke 32). Burke adds that "[p]luralism disarms the marginal by seeming to accept it, but this acceptance is always on the theoretical or ideological and not on any actual level" (32). In other words,

pluralism creates a fictitious space in which all participants are considered to be equal; yet, it also seeks to eliminate the most essential differences that shape ones' experiences and identities, such as gender, class, and race (Burke 32). As an individual of African descent and a slave living in colonial Boston, Wheatley fulfills all of these criteria. And although Wheatley was the first individual of African descent to publish a book in the English language and the second woman to do so, she still "is…representative of those traditionally excluded from American history and literature on the basis of sex and class. Wheatley's struggle is thus illustrative of the struggle by non-traditional subjects…for recognition in this society" (33). Wheatley was an Other among Others, and not only because of her African ancestry but also due to her gender.

This matter of gendered Otherness is explored by Patricia Hill Collins in her book, *Black Feminist Thought*, which analyzes the conditions that bring about the status of the other for African American women in contemporary times. As Hill Collins explains,

> African-American women's status as outsiders becomes the point from which other groups define their normality…As the "Others" of society who can never really belong, strangers threaten the moral and social order. But they are simultaneously essential for its survival because those individuals who stand at the margins of society clarify its boundaries. African-American women, by not belonging, emphasize the significance of belonging. (77)[1]

Through the act of being "othered," females of African descent stand on one end of the spectrum that lies directly opposite from white American females. These females of African descent are forcefully placed inside a binary relationship. According to this logic, they are black because they are not white and they, although discriminated against, are indispensable in order to make others who are unlike them belong. As Barbara Christian notes, African Americans—in

particular, African American women— "became the basis for the definition of our society's Other" (qtd. in Hill Collins 77). What Hill Collins expresses here is that the condition of Otherness is essential in order to establish what is not considered "Other." Hill Collins explores these binary relationships and states that "difference is defined in oppositional terms. One part is not simply different from its counterpart; it is inherently opposed to its 'other'…Objectification is central to this process of oppositional difference…one element is objectified as the Other, and is viewed as an object to be manipulated and controlled" (77-78). Within these parameters, Wheatley may be understood as a part of a social boundary that separated not only whites from blacks but also separated her from other individuals of African descent in colonial Boston.

As an "Other" in colonial Boston, Wheatley had to learn how to navigate and survive in this culture. This necessity depended on her ability to learn about the ideologies belonging to the dominant groups in colonial Boston and write in ways that appealed to these individuals. One example of how Wheatley wrote about her displacement in colonial Boston and addressed readers in this city may be found in her use of neoclassical elements in her poetry. Many of Wheatley's most recent readers argue that her appropriation of the neoclassical writing styles may be read as a conscious effort to arm herself with the tools necessary not only to gain the acceptance of her masters and her audience, but also to forge an identity and to build communities through her poetry and letters. According to Shields, "Wheatley, who wrote most of her extant verse by the age of twenty, has been censured for her alleged dependence on and imitation of neoclassical conventions and poetics" ("Struggle for Freedom" 230). Burke further argues that it was through her appropriation of neoclassical conventions that Wheatley explored and came to understand her identity in colonial Boston and possessed agency even while enslaved. As Burke writes,

> …[l]ike [many] other culturally displaced persons, [Wheatley] set about making an alien culture her own, [by] adopting a strategy of symbolic appropriation in the best tradition of the melting pot. Wheatley appropriates, first of all, the literary conventions of her time. She uses the heroic couplet popularized by Pope, Dryden, and Johnson as her verse form; the New England funeral elegy as her predominant genre; and the poetics of the mid-eighteenth century sublime as her aesthetic. (34)

Burke's statements place Wheatley in a context in which she may be perceived by readers as a writer who did not merely conform by adopting her oppressor's culture, language, and beliefs— as many scholars have argued— but one who also used these elements as weapons in order to express her beliefs, which included, in certain poems and letters, commentary on the slave trade and the institution of slavery and the acceptance of Africans and enslaved persons in the North American colonies.

One of the objectives of this thesis is to understand Wheatley's agency in new ways. Wheatley exerted her agency in three ways: she constructed a community of the mind via her poems on recollection and the imagination, she built important communities with different types of women in the Atlantic world via letter writing, and she created a network of peoples who helped sell her book of poems via her letter writing. However, Wheatley's agency has been called into question by critics who believe that the author did not object to slavery in obvious ways in her writing or openly criticize slavery in her poems or letters. In the essay, "Challenge to Wheatley's Critics: There Was No Other 'Game' in Town," Sondra A. O'Neale opposes those who have believed that Wheatley failed to defend her African heritage and to criticize the institution of slavery, include such scholar as Eleanor Smith, J. Saunders Redding, and Benjamin Mays. O'Neale maintains that Wheatley "… was indeed a strong force among contemporary

abolitionist writers…[who] incorporated anti-slavery statements in her work within the confines of her era and her position as a slave" (500). As a displaced African slave in the eighteenth century, Wheatley struggled against racism, slavery, and the binary oppositions that drew distinctions between whites and blacks along with those who were able to experience freedom and those who could not. Therefore, she addressed, in various ways in her writing, the importance of community-building in order to recover from what Patterson calls "social death." O'Neale highlights the importance of always taking the contexts in which Wheatley wrote into consideration before passing any judgement on her work. She notes that "[w]hat can be defined as 'black thought' in the twentieth century is not necessarily equally applicable to what was 'black thought' in the eighteenth century" (500). From the perspective of a twenty-first-century reader, it may be easy to criticize Wheatley for not doing "enough" to denounce the horrors of slavery or for expressing her views on a variety of subjects through a so-called "white aesthetic." However, it is crucial to recall that there were no liberties or rights for slaves in the eighteenth century; at this time, it was not unusual for slaves who demonstrated subversive behavior to be whipped, tortured, sold, or even killed by their masters. Through her statements, O'Neale encourages readers to analyze Wheatley's language as methodical and, at times, subversive.

In her essay, "Phillis Wheatley's Construction of Otherness and the Rhetoric of Performed Ideology," Mary McAleer Balkun argues that, contrary to what many critics once believed, "…Wheatley's poetry is not devoid of racial awareness, as had been long suggested" (Balkun 121). In light of this point, readers may identify two patterns of writing within Wheatley's body of poetry. The first pattern is an approach in which Wheatley composes poetry exclusively for others through the appropriation of literary conventions popular of her time (Burke 34). Wheatley's letters addressed to prominent figures fall under this category, as do her

numerous funeral elegies. No doubt it was these public works that first captured the attention of her white readers and helped to establish a reputation for Wheatley as an accomplished writer. And it was this particular readership who Wheatley largely addressed in her poems. As Balkun points out, Wheatley's poems

> … turn out to be not so much about Wheatley herself or her created persona, as has been argued, as they are about her perceived audience. It was an audience familiar with particular language and rhetorical devices—the jeremiad, the plea to the rising generating, the rhetoric of Revolution, to name a few—and one being increasingly exposed to the idea of black equality and liberation. (122)

It was precisely because of Wheatley's understanding of her audience that she was able to achieve success.

This thesis, however, attempts to extend what scholars have argued regarding the dynamics of Wheatley's poems and the ways in which this enslaved poet exercised agency via the writing of poetry and letters. Specifically, this project relies on Patterson's theory of social death as the framework with which to examine selected poems and letters written by Wheatley. I maintain that Wheatley attempted to overcome the effects of social death through the construction of two different types of communities: 1) a "community of the mind" and 2) a group of supportive females in various parts of the Atlantic world. Wheatley constructed both of these communities through the act writing letters and poems.

In the first chapter, "Communities of the Mind: Accessing the Past, Visualizing the Future, and Creating Imagined Worlds," I focus on Wheatley's construction of a community of the mind in her poems, "On Recollection" and "On Imagination." In these two significant poems, Wheatley uses her own mind as a background for the exploration of parts from her past as well

as her desire for freedom. In this chapter, I attend to Wheatley's examination of her mind, specifically the faculties of recollection and imagination. I make the important point that Wheatley wrote these poems in order to explore parts from her past via the act of recollection and experience a type of mental freedom, one she was unable to attain in the physical realm, via the imagination. As Shields writes, "this young poet's intense longing for the spiritual world motivated her to use her poetry as a means of escaping an unsatisfactory, temporal world" ("Struggle for Freedom" 231). In other words, the "community of the mind" Wheatley created in these two poems provided her with an opportunity to process selected parts from her past so that she could envision a virtuous future for herself and an opportunity to experience mental freedom, though it was short-lived, according to her poem on the imagination.

Originally published in 1772 with a revised edition published in the 1773, "'On Recollection' asserts a strong affinity between the poet's memory, analogous to the world of dreams, and the fancy, the associative faculty subordinate to the imagination. Recollection… functions as the poet's storehouse of images; the fancy channels the force of imagination through its associative powers" ("Struggle for Freedom" 254). The poem commences with a command that orders Mneme, the goddess of memory, to assist Wheatley in her writing of the poem. Through a scrupulous examination of the poem, readers might also draw up connections to Plato's anamnesis, a philosophical concept that holds that recollection is the idea that human souls have knowledge from past incarnations and that learning consists of rediscovering that knowledge (Anamnesis). This point is an important one to consider when reading "On Recollection," especially in Wheatley's construction of communities of the mind. In his book, Phillis Wheatley and the Romantics, Shields expresses that Wheatley would have likely been familiarized with several ancient writers, amongst them Plato and Aristotle (2). Shields's

conclusion is based on "the availability of Latin translations of Plato and Aristotle…Wheatley's expert knowledge of Latin and her access to several of the largest libraries of her day would surely have brought her into contact with whatever English or Latin texts by Plato and Aristotle she may have wished to consult" (*Romantics* 2). Based on this point, readers might conclude that she did indeed believe in an intangible community that connected her to other minds, souls, and possibly reincarnations, which could well be supported by a careful analysis of this poem. "On Recollection" begins with the following stanza:

> MNEME, begin. Inspire, ye sacred nine,
> Your vent'rous Afric in her great design,
> Mneme, immortal pow'r, I trace thy glories sing:
> The acts of long departed years, by thee
> Thy pow'r the long-forgotten calls from night,
> That sweetly plays before the fancy's flight. (Wheatley 62)

Interestingly, Wheatley begins the poem by ordering—not pleading—Mneme, the Greek muse of memory, to "begin." As Shields states, "[t]his faculty…gendered female, is, according to Wheatley, one of power" (*Romantics* 45). If readers choose to entertain the idea of Plato's anamnesis, a close reading of lines 1 through 6 shows several likely traces of evidence. The first two lines of the stanza frame Wheatley's command: Mneme, the goddess of memory, must inspire Wheatley's nine muses—yet another allusion to classicism, a common recurrence in her poetry—and references herself as a "vent'rous Afric," a bold reclaiming of her ancestry. "Mneme," for Wheatley, is "immortal pow'r" (62), an everlasting power with whom she seeks to establish a pact, as seen in the following lines which read: "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" (62).

Here, Wheatley expresses her intentions to create an exchange: her glorification of Mneme in return for the goddess's inspiration. In my reading of "Recollection," however, I discuss that Wheatley makes it clear that there is an ethical dimension in the work of Mneme. While Wheatley certainly explores her own mind in this poem, she also informs the reader that individuals who have shunned Mneme will eventually be punished by a divine figure. With this added component, "Recollection" allows Wheatley to reconnect with her past, including her enslavement, but also exposes the crimes of hypocritical white Christians. According to this poem, these crimes will forever be "writ in brass" (Wheatley 63), instead of overlooked and ignored. Therefore, I address in this chapter both aspects of "Recollection": the ability of Mneme to help Wheatley access parts from her past and assist her in writing poetry but also the ethical dimension of this mental faculty that identifies those who have committed the "worst tortures that our souls can know" (63).

In a similar fashion, "On Imagination" also delves into parts of Wheatley's mind. In particular, I argue that "On Imagination" is the most celebrated expression of freedom in Wheatley's poetry. Written in late 1771 and published in 1772, this poem reflects Wheatley's growth, gained in part by her life experiences, her access to a number of large colonial libraries, and through her continuous writing. In the poem, Wheatley takes flight with the many allusions to height, ascendance, and movement, while taking readers on a journey through imagination's powerful devices. "On Imagination" begins with the following lines: "THY various works, imperial queen, we see, / How bright their forms! How deck'd with pomp by thee! / Thy wond'rous acts in beauteous order stand, / And all attest how potent is thine hand" (Wheatley 65). In the poem, Wheatley refers to imagination as a "queen," who is "potent." Amidst the mental realm of imagination, Wheatley achieves a type of mental freedom that takes her away

from colonial Boston. In lines 9 through 12, readers find that "Now here, now there, the roving Fancy flies, / Till some lov'd object strikes her wand'ring eyes, / Whose silken fetters all the senses bind, / And soft captivity involves the mind" (65). This stanza contains two paradoxes that highlight the contrast between that which is real and that which can be experienced through the act of imagination. In line 11, "fancy" possesses "silken" chains. This imagery symbolizes that imagination is capable of binding all senses, fully engaging humans to the very act of imagining. Imprisonment by the imagination, according to this poem, is soft and gentle, unlike physical bondage. As Shields writes, "…her poetics become adapted to her personal predicament and serves her as a source of freedom, a momentary means of escape from harsh reality into the imaginary, happy world of the poem" (Romantics 41). In this second poem of the mind, I explore how Wheatley uses the language and rhetoric of slavery not only to champion any type of physical captivity but to celebrate how the imagination provides her with an essential liberating outlet. Freedom, according to this poem, can be achieved in the recesses of one's mind, not in the physical world of colonial Boston.

The second chapter, "Construction of Female Communities Through Letter Writing," examines the complex relationships between Wheatley and other important females who played significant roles in her life, including Susanna and Mary Wheatley, Selina Hastings, Countess of Huntingdon, and Obour Tanner. The majority of these females, who are, according to existing historical records, central to Wheatley's development as a person and a writer, were white, with the exception of Tanner, who was a fellow enslaved person with whom she corresponded for a significant part of her adult life. Some scholars believe that Tanner, like Wheatley, was also aboard the slave ship, Phillis, which carried both of these individuals of African descent to colonial Boston (Carretta 41). I utilize the scholarly work of Hill Collins in my analysis of

Wheatley's relationships with Tanner and the others noted above. As Hill Collins writes, "…Black women's efforts to construct individual and collective voices have occurred in at least three safe spaces…one location involves Black women's relationships with each other. In some cases, such as friendships and family interactions, these relationships are informal, private dealings amongst individuals" (112). There is also a "…shared recognition [which] often operates among African-American women who do not know one another but who see the need to value Black womanhood" (Hill Collins 113). Wheatley and Tanner were marginalized, enslaved women of African descent who, through letter writing, shared a safe space in which they could voice their concerns—ones usually about their commitments to Christianity and concerns about securing a place in Heaven following their deaths. Although it is unclear whether these two women ever met personally, the letters indicate that they served as sources of comfort and support for one another.

According to Carretta, "…Wheatley's surviving correspondence reveals that they [her and Tanner] developed an increasingly affectionate epistolary relationship" (Carretta 41). It is apparent that because of the lack of significant black females in Wheatley's life that the young woman who was renamed Phillis turned to alternative female sources, such as her platonic, long-distance relationship with Tanner, and her bond with Susannah and Mary Wheatley, to construct a feminine unit that was as close to a family as circumstances made possible. My argument in this chapter, then, is that Wheatley constructed a diverse feminine community in order to combat the effects of social death. Lastly, this thesis proposes that Wheatley built a female community to aid her through her life and through the use of female gendering in her poetry. Shields argues that Wheatley was "…committed to equality of the sexes [which] is signaled by the demonstrated fact that she promotes again and again female principals as goddesses and as

gendered intellectual aesthetic concepts…we have observed that our poet has gendered fancy, imagination, 'Love,' 'Reason,' and recollection as all female principals" (Romantics 57). Instances of this gendering in her poetry—specifically, in "On Imagination" and "On Recollection"—will be deconstructed in this chapter.

Finally, this thesis aims to add to the current scholarship on Wheatley, particularly in regards to the ways in which scholars have studied her as a conscientious writer who sought to challenge her condition as an enslaved person through use of a quill. Wheatley's construction of these two communities—one of the mind, which exalted the mental and spiritual connections between her and other great thinkers of the past, and one consisting of females, who were present physically as well as spiritually in her life—were two substantial ways through which the poet attempted to understand and overcome her status as an enslaved person in colonial Boston as well as the effects of social death. In the conclusion to this thesis, I propose an additional framework that may be used to examine other ways in which Wheatley created imagined, supportive communities, particularly through her writing of elegies. I maintain that Wheatley utilized grief as a way to connect to other individuals who experienced loss through a supportive community of care.

Note

1. According to Hill Collins, "…images of Black women as the Other provides ideological justification for race, gender, and class oppression" (77). This point relates to "…binary thinking, [which] categorizes people, things, and ideas in terms of their difference from one another" (Keller qtd. in Hill Collins 77). In this thesis, I use the term "othered" as a verb which signifies the act of objectification and separation of a subordinate group.

Communities of the Mind: Accessing the Past, Visualizing the Future, and Creating Imagined Worlds

In this chapter, I argue that Wheatley challenged social death through constructing communities of the mind in her poems, "On Recollection" and "On Imagination." As Patterson states, "[t]he process of social death…must be seen as a process involving several transitional phases" (38). The slave is violently removed from his or her community and then reintroduced "into the community of his [or her] master"—this time as a "nonbeing" (38). In my close readings of these poems, I identify two faculties of the mind Wheatley employed to contest the effects of social death. First, Wheatley uses the poem, "On Recollection," to explore parts from her past through the act of remembering and, by taking stock of her present situation, visualizes a future led by "Virtue." Furthermore, Wheatley leaves the physical world and explores a less confining, alternative world through the act of imagination, as seen in the poem, "On Imagination."

These particular faculties of the mind are of great importance in Wheatley's writing. The power vested by these faculties allows Wheatley a way to process her enslaved status and temporarily escape from it. Before Wheatley could think about the possibility of achieving physical freedom, she needed to build a mental space of independence where she could envision what freedom meant for her. On this point, John C. Shields argues that "Wheatley articulates the theme of freedom" ("Struggle for Freedom" 231) in her poetry in four ways.[1] This chapter discusses an additional articulation of freedom found in Wheatley's poetic work, which advances Shields's theory of Wheatley's poetics. For Wheatley, "On Recollection" does more than just reconstruct parts of her past so that she may analyze it in a poem; the poem shapes her conception of herself in the present and shapes the trajectory of her future. In "On Imagination,"

Wheatley envisions an ideal world, which she accesses through the faculties of her mind. Within this mental realm, Wheatley experiences freedom—albeit briefly; through imaginative flight, she temporarily experiences mental liberation and hopes for complete freedom. Significantly, a community of female gendered deities—some mythological, some imagined—facilitate this process. These female figures have tremendous strength and lend their powers to Wheatley to aid her quest to achieve a sort of metaphysical liberty, a freedom from the confinements of her physical enslavement. In this manner, Wheatley forges a female community of the mind, one that complemented the female community of human beings she later constructed in life through the act of letter writing and publishing.

The poem, "On Recollection," participates in this construction of Wheatley's community of the mind and serves a dual function. On the one hand, the poem represents Wheatley's attempt to process her past—one that was damaged by the Middle Passage—through the assistance of the goddess Mneme's power, which unveils "each horrid crime" of those who "scorn her warnings and despise her grace" (Wheatley 63). Through this attempt at processing her past in a poem about memory and remembering, Wheatley contests the effects of Patterson's social death by forging a literary path that, through the act of recollection, allows her to take stock of her past and assess the future. In a similar fashion, "On Imagination" represents both Wheatley's temporal escape from her physical enslavement as well as a joyful embrace of the "soft captivity" (line 12) that the faculty of imagination offers.

"On Recollection" and "On Imagination" are two out of forty poems included in her book, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, so it is necessary to understand them as part of the volume. The 1773 publication of Wheatley's *Poems* was an impressive literary and artistic accomplishment—especially in light of the brutal experiences confronted by enslaved

Africans and their descendants, particularly black women. As an enslaved black woman, Wheatley's success as an author was an unprecedented event. In her book, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, bell hooks uncovers the history behind black women's socially and politically defined place in the British colonies—one stained with the horrors of slavery, physical abuse, and rape—and how these events influenced the shaping of modern African American women's identities. Enslaved peoples from Africa were, according to hooks, forcefully taken to the British colonies during the first half of the seventeenth century. The enslaved population was mostly concentrated in the southern colonies—such as present day Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia—where the main economical focus was based on agriculture, specifically rice, tobacco, and indigo (Lemon 137, 139). An atrocious life filled with pain, hardships, and enforced labor awaited the Africans who had been kidnapped, sold into slavery, and brought against their will to the North American colonies. However, before their arrival to the colonies, enslaved Africans had already suffered long periods of abuse, deprivation, and disease. As hooks illustrates,

> [t]he traumatic experiences of African women and men aboard slave ships were only the initial stages of an indoctrination process that would transform the African…into a slave. An important part of the slaver's job was to effectively transform the African personality…so that it would be marketable as a "docile" slave in the American colonies…[C]rucial in the preparation of African people for the slave market was the destruction of human dignity, the removal of names and status, the dispersement [sic] of groups so that there would exist no common language, and the removal of any overt sign of African heritage. (19)

The perilous voyage between the African continent and the so-called New World was one of the first wretched rituals in which African peoples were forced to participate. Famine, disease,

sexual abuse, negligence, torture, and murder were all the "methods of terrorization [which] succeeded in forcing African people to repress their awareness of themselves as free people and to adopt the slave identity being imposed upon them" (hooks 19). Undoubtedly, the Middle Passage was an experience that "had a tremendous psychological impact on the psyches of black women and men. So horrific was the passage from Africa to America that only those women and men who could maintain a will to live despite their oppressive conditions survived" (hooks 20).

In the North American colonies, certain affluent peoples purchased slaves as domestic servants in their homes. A number of enslaved black women and girls—as is the case with the young girl who was renamed Phillis Wheatley—were sold to become domestic workers. Slave traders "regarded the black woman as a marketable cook, wet nurse, housekeeper [and so] it was crucial that she be so thoroughly terrorized that she would submit passively to the will of the white master, mistress, and their children" (hooks 20). In the eyes of some individuals who live in a mostly post-slavery world, domestic slaves were treated more "fairly," had "easier" lives, and engaged in less arduous, physical responsibilities than of those who were forced to work on plantations in Georgia or South Carolina, for instance. However, the situations of enslaved domestic workers in the North were not necessarily "safer" or "easier" than the ones who experienced life plantation slavery in the South. As hooks explains, "[t]he popular notion that black slaves working in the white household were automatically the recipients of preferential treatment is not always substantiated by the personal accounts of slaves" (23-24). In addition to the terrorizing white master and the power he held—which he could freely exert over the enslaved woman's body however and whenever he saw fit—there was the figure of the mistress, who, in some cases, "played an active role in physical assaults of black women as did white men" (hooks 38). hooks maintains that "[s]ome mistresses responded to the distress of female

slaves by persecuting and tormenting them. Others encouraged the use of black women as sex objects because it allowed them respite from unwanted sexual advances" (36). For many white colonial Americans, "[m]odesty, sexual purity, innocence, and a submissive manner were the qualities associated with [white] womanhood and femininity" (hooks 49). However, "institutionalized sexism was a social system that…legitimized [the] sexual exploitation of black females. The female slave lived in constant awareness of her sexual vulnerability and in perpetual fear that any male…might single her out to assault and victimize" (hooks 24). In spite of these horrifying conditions, enslaved black women "endeavored to attain" the aforementioned positive qualities associated with white women "even through the conditions under which they lived constantly undermined their efforts" (hooks 49).

Through the course of her brief life, Wheatley attempted to dismantle these Eurocentric norms associated with the enslaved domestic worker—she became educated and began to write poems and letters. hooks's arguments are essential for this analysis of Wheatley's use of a rhetoric in her poems and letters that consistently highlights the importance of powerful female figures. Her poems frequently allude to mythological beings, and she chooses to gender powerful deities as female instead of male. For example, Mneme—the goddess of recollection—in "On Recollection" is referred to as "her" (line 10) while in "On Imagination," the faculty of imagination is referred to as an "imperial queen" (line 1) Additionally, Wheatley commonly refers to the nine Greek muses, all female, who provide inspiration for her writing. The poetic choice of gendering these deities as females challenged the gender norms of colonial America, ones which often associated male figures with power.

Wheatley's allusions to Greek mythology in her poems were likely a reflection of the education she received from her masters. As Julian D. Mason, Jr. points out, it was John and Susanna Wheatley's daughter, Mary, who

> …became Phillis's…tutor in religion and language…Phillis proved to be an apt pupil with a quick mind, studying the Bible, English…Latin…and Christian principles…she gained as good an education as (and probably a better one than) most Boston women had…especially after she began writing poetry…Apparently, she became well acquainted…with the works of Horace, Virgil, Ovid, Terence, and various contemporary English poets, especially Pope…and probably Milton. (4)

As Paula Bennet confirms in her essay, "Phillis Wheatley's Vocation and the Paradox of the 'Afric Muse,'" "[i]n light of her African origins and slave status, not to mention her sex, Wheatley had an unusually rich education, most of which, according to her owner, John Wheatley, 'her own curiosity led her to'" (64). Wheatley's intelligence coupled with the education she received allowed her to compose poetry, which eventually resulted in her publishing a book of poems with the support and patronage of prominent transatlantic figures.

While extant documentation records Wheatley's impressive education, scholars have limited access to historical sources that would allow them to faithfully and factually reconstruct the psychological dynamics at play in the Wheatley household and to determine how the treatment Phillis received by the Wheatleys differed from that received by other slaves. However, one surviving source references the multiple enslaved peoples living in the Wheatley household when Phillis was purchased. Margaretta Odell's 1834 biography, *Memoir and Poems of Phillis Wheatley*, mentions the existence of other enslaved peoples in the Wheatley household.[2] Specifically, Odell's memoir mentions Prince, "an African and a slave" (13), who

was asked to bring Phillis home on one occasion using a carriage. Odell narrates how Wheatley's "anxious mistress" (13), Susanna, "drew near the window, as it [the carriage] approached the house and exclaimed—'Do but look at the saucey varlet—if he hasn't the impudence to sit upon the same seat with my Phillis!' And poor Prince received a severe reprimand for forgetting the dignity…perhaps to him unaccountably, attached to the sable person of 'my Phillis'" (13). This anecdote illustrates the existence of a hierarchy of slaves within the Wheatley house, one which possibly, on some level, alienated Phillis from other slaves due to the privileges she received. However, this preferential treatment along with her unorthodox upbringing in the Wheatley home—which allowed her to learn to read and write poetry—certainly did not mitigate the effects of the traumatic experiences she endured in the Middle Passage nor the ones from being a slave in colonial Boston. Among some of these experiences were being forcibly brought as a child to the Americas against her will and being expected to learn the language and cultural traditions of white colonists.

The education Wheatley received was as significant as its results: the writing and publishing of a book by an enslaved African woman. As noted by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., during the fall season of 1772, Wheatley likely set out to complete one of the most intimidating quests of her life to that point: to defend the authorship of her poems as an enslaved black female in front of a room full of "the most respectable characters in [colonial] Boston" (*Trials* 5).[3] The verdict reached by this group of white men—among which sat Thomas Hutchinson, Governor of Massachusetts, the Reverend Mather Byles, nephew of the minister and the extensively published colonial author, Cotton Mather, and John Hancock, eventual signer of the Declaration of Independence and who would later become a patriotic hero—would not only decide the fate of Wheatley and her poems, but would also impact dominant eighteenth-century perceptions of

African peoples and their relationship to the creation of literature. As Gates, Jr. writes in his essay, "In Her Own Write," "Europeans had wondered aloud whether or not the African 'species of men'…could ever create formal literature...[i]f they could…then the African variety of humanity was fundamentally related to the European variety. If not, then it seemed clear that the African was destined by nature to be a slave. This was the burden shouldered by Phillis Wheatley" (123). Although the content of the so-called interview remains unknown to scholars today, the results of the hearing are documented. The two-paragraph "Attestation" that preceded the first poem in Wheatley's book serves as a testament to her talents and capacities as a writer and as a thinker. The document recognizes that "the POEMS…were…written by PHILLIS, a young Negro Girl, who has but a few Years since, brought an uncultivated Barbarian from *Africa*, and has ever since been, and now is, under the Disadvantage of serving as a Slave in a Family in this Town…She has been examined…and is thought qualified to write them" (Wheatley vi).

Gates, Jr. maintains that Wheatley's "successful defense" of her knowledge and ability to write poetry against the likely questioning of colonial Boston's most prominent men eventually resulted in the creation of two literary traditions when her 1773 book appeared in print: "…the black American literary tradition *and* the black woman's literary tradition," a fact that is extraordinary as "both of these traditions were founded simultaneously by a black woman" ("In Her Own Write" 123). Gates, Jr.'s commentary provides a significant lens that may be used in the examination of Wheatley's role as the first woman of African descent to publish a book in the English language, one which served as the foundation on which subsequent Afro-diasporic writers—as well as a number of nineteenth-century white abolitionists—built upon to strengthen their arguments. Gates, Jr. adds, "[t]hat the progenitor of the black literary tradition was a

woman means, in the most strictly literal sense, that all subsequent black writers have evolved in a matrilineal line of descent, and that each, consciously or unconsciously, has extended and revised a canon whose foundation was the poetry of a black woman" ("In Her Own Write" 123). Gates, Jr.'s points here hold great value regarding the larger argument in this thesis: that Wheatley gendered the mental faculties of recollection and imagination as female, she associated the creative process with female deities in selected poems about her mind, and she wrote a number of important letters to different women in the Atlantic world. Mneme, the goddess of recollection, the "imperial queen," imagination, the muses, and different women in the Atlantic world with whom Wheatley corresponded, in other words, helped the poet combat the effects of social death and construct supportive communities that aided her in understanding her status as a member of the African diaspora.

Wheatley's identity as a writer was deeply impacted by her upbringing, which took place in Boston, the heart of the American Revolution. A number of her poems responded to political events and the deaths of members of the community that surrounded her. Around the year 1765, the population of the city of Boston was about 15,520 people; only 1,000—or 6.45%— of them people were black (Gates, Jr., *Trials* 18). Gates, Jr. writes that "[b]etween Phillis's arrival in 1761 and her death in 1784, 'no black children…could be counted among the more than 800 young scholars enrolled in the city's two grammar or Latin schools and the three vocational writing schools'" (qtd. in *Trials* 18). The Wheatleys were a prominent family in Boston's social circles; this family chose to give the girl eventually renamed Phillis Wheatley an education—a circumstance known to many other Bostonians of the time who wished to talk with her or see her compose poetry in front of them. As Shields points out, "in her 'adoptive' Boston, she was celebrated for her learning and her talent" ("Struggle for Freedom" 229). Not only was the

Wheatley family part of an important transatlantic network of peoples[4]—one which consistently influenced Wheatley's writing, specifically her writing of elegies about deceased persons from this network—but "[t]he location of the Wheatley home also provided another education, one about much that was going on in Boston" through which Wheatley was exposed to the "growing friction with the British" (Mason 4). The Wheatley's household was "located on the corner of King Street and Mackerel Lane…just a few blocks from the Old State House. Both the Stamp Act riots of 1765 and the Boston Massacre of 1770 took place down the street from her front door" (Gates, Jr., *Trials* 17-18). Shields notes that "[f]rom…her sale into the Boston family of John Wheatley in 1761, until her death in 1784, Wheatley witnessed the American struggle for independence. Her own poetry documents major incidents of that temporal battle for freedom" ("Struggle for Freedom" 232). Additionally, however, Wheatley's poems also document her own battle for her personal freedom. This battle took her once more across the Atlantic Ocean—only this time, it was not the Middle Passage, but rather a type of reverse Middle Passage in which she traveled from Boston to London in 1773 to oversee the publication of her book. Shields documents that "[w]hile visiting the mother country in the summer of 1773 and seeing her *Poems* through the press, she received the attention of some of England's most illustrious citizenry" including "Benjamin Franklin, to whom she would later propose to inscribe her second book of poetry (never published) [and who] called on her during a diplomatic visit to London" ("Struggle for Freedom" 230).

The citizens of colonial Boston, the privileges Wheatley received in the form of an education, and her transatlantic travels were hardly the only events that shaped Wheatley's writing. Undoubtedly, her African origins and enslaved status impacted her writing about identity in poems such as "To Maecenas" and "On Being Brought from Africa to America." In

his book, *Becoming African in America: Race and Nation in the Early Black Atlantic*, James Sidbury states that "[d]uring the second half of the eighteenth century, a group of [transatlantic] African-descended authors and activists…began to present themselves as 'Africans' despite the negative connotations that term carried in many whites' minds… [Their texts] discussed or alluded to their pasts in Africa or their heritages as children of the slave trade" (6). These writers—including James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, Quobna Ottobah Cugoano, Olaudah Equiano, Ignatius Sancho, and Phillis Wheatley—sought to create "…an alternative understanding of 'Africanness' that could provide a source of pride and unity for the diverse victims of the Atlantic slave trade" (Sidbury 6).[5]

Gronniosaw, Cugoano, Equiano, Sancho, and Wheatley assumed a heavy weight on their shoulders: the responsibility of transforming the word African, "a term so laden with connotations of primitivism and savagery[,] into a source of pride" (Sidbury 7). To accomplish this task, complicated by the harsh realities of slavery for all of the aforementioned individuals of African descent, "required these authors to counter conventional Enlightenment portrayals of Africans' place—or absence of a place—in the progressive universal history of humanity forged by Enlightenment thinkers. In short, the authors had to re-place Africa within the Enlightenment's grand narrative of human history" (Sidbury 7). Sidbury further explores this idea of Africanness in his commentary on Wheatley: "[she]…accepted that label and subtly altered what it meant to be 'African' within what [she] wrote…the [African] identity is present and acknowledged" (7).[6] Wheatley's *Poems*, Sidbury continues, "carried the burden of 'proving' that blacks shared the same natural intellectual capacities as whites… it was significant that [she] appeared on the cultural stage at least in part as [an] 'African' writer, something that helped

initiate a tradition through which black writers and activists would…elaborate a language of African identity" (18).

In order to fully understand Wheatley's connections to Africa and before analyzing "On Recollection" and "On Imagination," it is essential to comprehend how she wrote about Africa in a poem called "On Being Brought from Africa to America," which she wrote before composing "On Recollection" and "On Imagination." In "On Being Brought from African to America," Wheatley comments on her past as well as how she perceived herself following her enslavement in the North American colonies. In this poem, Wheatley seeks to assign a place for individuals of African descent within the Christian community. As Sandra O'Neale claims in her essay, "A Slave's Subtle War: Phillis Wheatley's Use of Biblical Myth and Symbol," "Wheatley not only illustrates her conscious manipulation of prevailing associations of blackness, but also uses biblical myth to make some of her most comprehensive comments on slavery" (147). The poem commands her white readers, especially ones who "view [her] sable race with scornful eye" (line 5), to "Remember Christians, *Negros*, black as Cain" (line 7) have the potential for redemption and "May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train" (line 8). Readers could interpret these lines as Wheatley's admission of the "idea that Africans were damned by their descent from Ham, the son of Cain" (Bennet 74), as seen in line 6 of the poem: "'Their colour is a diabolic die'" (line 6).[7] However, Wheatley disputes the argument used by some eighteenth-century-white Christians to justify slavery—that Cain's "mark" signifies their damnation and justifies the enslavement of African peoples. O'Neale suggests that Wheatley uses Cain to "'subver[t] prevailing racial attitudes.... If, in the opinion of whites, Cain's act [murdering his brother Abel] was the most heinous sin and if black skin was the inherited demarcation of that sin, Wheatley. . . insists that Christ's sacrifice was the sufficient atonement'" (qtd. in Bennet 74).

Wheatley was not the only African author to write against the fallacy of applying the mark of Cain to the pro-slavery movement. In the 1787 book, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*, Cugoano argues that all of humanity is descended from the same bloodline and that all variances in skin color are "the work of an Almighty hand…it may be reasonably, as well as religiously inferred, that He who placed them in their various situations, hath extended equally his care and protection to all…it becometh unlawful to counteract his benignity, by reducing others of different complexions to undeserved bondage" (30). Cugoano analyses the origin of the mark of Cain and concludes that those "…whose insolence leads them to think, that those who are black, were marked out in that manner by some signal interdiction or curse, as originally descending from their progenitors" (30) are wrongfully interpreting the mark of Cain as a justification for the enslavement of Africans and the transatlantic slave trade. Cugoano maintains that regardless of "…the mark set upon Cain to have consisted in a black skin, still no conclusion can be drawn at all, that any of the black people are of that descent, as the whole posterity of Cain were destroyed in the universal deluge" (31). In a similar fashion, Cugoano and Wheatley argued against the wrongful belief that blackness equated sin and demanded that their readers accept the possibility of salvation for black peoples. Wheatley's "On Being Brought from Africa to America" laid the foundation for arguments articulated on this topic by other early black Atlantic authors like Cugoano.

In "On Being Brought from Africa to America," Wheatley also both acknowledges and challenges what Patterson refers to as the "violent uprooting" (38) experienced by enslaved persons. Wheatley, in this poem, outlines a transitionary period in her life: her identity changed from an African to a member of the African diaspora resulting from enslavement and the passage

between Africa and the Americas, which "brought [her] from [her] pagan land" (line 2). Wheatley claims that the forced voyage "taught" her about a "redemption [she] neither sought nor knew" (line 4). However, Wheatley did not visualize her "Pagan land" (line 1) as "hopeless and powerless" (Watson 123). As Collins-Sibley states, Wheatley upholds her reader's religious "principles… even as she has reminded them of the African and pagan origins in the opening lines of the poem" (18). In this manner, Wheatley uses her status as a displaced African and Christian as a source of authority. Her experience with the Middle Passage—combined with the "redemption" offered to her through her conversion to Christianity—allows Wheatley to condemn those who believe African peoples to be undeserving of Christianity. The significance of the poem's argument lies in the possibility of redemption to apply to all human beings, regardless of the color of their skin. Importantly, Wheatley expands the Christian community to include individuals of African descent in "On Being Brought from Africa to America." This poem begins to illustrate how Wheatley used language to build certain communities in her poetry.

This reading of "On Being Brought" carries with it serious implications concerning displacement and survival by Wheatley in her poems. In the essay, "Diaspora Subjectivity and the African American Canon," Will Harris writes that Wheatley "subverts the notion of an inherent evil in blackness by highlighting what for slave holders are the suppressed contradictions of divine grace and black intelligence (the capability of 'refinement' which Wheatley mentions in the last line of the poem)" (38). Similarly, Watson argues that "Wheatley's speaker turns from a meditation upon the incorporeal soul to take on a historical, racialized body…[and] openly challenges the simplistic proslavery equations that set black skin equivalent to sin and bestiality" (123). An analysis of this poem might suggest that Wheatley considered

herself to have transcended her traumatic infancy as well as gained the knowledge and authority necessary for readers to take heed of the arguments found in her poems. Membership in the Christian community lessened the weight of trauma of the Middle Passage and enslavement, according to this reading. But, her memories of her enslavement are not completely cast aside or forgotten. Balkun adds that "[t]he refusal to publicly criticize her masters or those involved in the slave trade reinforces Wheatley's authority as a spokesperson for Christianity" (125). Wheatley's purposeful crafting of herself as an authority figure is accomplished through her use of Christian rhetoric, one which orders the Christian reader to alter their conception of the Christian community. Yet, Collins-Sibley poses an interesting question: "[t]he answer to the question of authority, of who can speak—not only who can speak for Africans but also who can speak at all in the Atlantic World—relies upon yet another question, who will listen?" (19). Wheatley as well as other individuals of African descent who published in the eighteenth century carried a large weight on their shoulders. Like her displaced black Atlantic colleagues, Wheatley was burdened with determining the potential talent, intellect, and value of Africans through her writings and actions, whether she wanted to or not. "On Being Brought from Africa to America" highlights this struggle; Wheatley inadvertently became a spokesperson for individuals of African descent.

Still, Wheatley's maturity as a poet and thinker eventually turned her efforts inward to explore the workings of her mind, especially in the poems, "On Recollection" and "On Imagination." By the time "On Recollection," which was written in 1771 and published in 1772, and "On Imagination" was published in 1773, Wheatley was no longer interested in who would listen but rather what she had to say.[8] Instead, she chose to explore the concept of freedom in her poems about the mind such as in "On Recollection" and "On Imagination." These poems serve as testaments to her attempts to liberate her mind and her spirit prior to her actual liberation from

slavery in 1773 following the publication of her book.[9] Much has been written—in the form of both praise and harsh critiques—about Wheatley's book of poetry and her adoption of neoclassical writing conventions.[10] However, instead of debating whether or not Wheatley was successful in using neoclassical writing conventions, this thesis maintains that Wheatley utilized gendered deities to explore her past as well as mental freedom. On this matter, Shields adds that, in some of her poems, "[w]hat 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. This use of poetry as a means to achieve freedom constitutes a poetics of liberation…" ("Preface" xxx).

As Shields states, Wheatley constructs alternative worlds through her poetry. Wheatley does not attempt to accomplish this feat alone, however. She is granted the ability to construct new worlds and achieve poetic freedom through the assistance of female deities. In this way, Wheatley constructs what I call a community of the mind composed of powerful goddesses, who assist Wheatley in the application of two mental faculties: recollection and imagination. In this chapter, I argue that Wheatley sought to process her past and set the groundwork for her future in the poem, "On Recollection." In this poem, she invokes the Greek goddess of memory, Mneme, to aid the "vent'rous *Afric* in her great design" (line 2). Wheatley utilizes this phrasing to refer both to herself and to illustrate her identity as an African. Bennet argues that "through juxtaposed images of captivity and liberation [her poems]…project a paradoxical concept of religious and poetic transcendence" (66). "On Recollection" plays with these paradoxes in several instances; the speaker of the poem pays special attention to the contrasting imagery of light and dark, provides eloquent descriptions of flight, makes multiple allusions to Greek mythology, and forewarns those who "scorn… [Mneme's]…warnings" (line 26). As Shields argues, the poem

"demonstrates her subtle turn towards interiorization, signaling the first period of her poetic maturity and abandonment of her earlier unsuccessful struggle to find full acceptance with the Boston crowd" (*Romantics* 45). The first eight lines of the poem read as follows:

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 play before the *fancy's* sight. (lines 1-8)

Unlike other poems, such as "To the University of Cambridge"—in which she timidly claims that "the muses promise to assist [her] pen" (line 2)—Wheatley does not plead for inspiration in "On Recollection." On the contrary, Wheatley courageously commands the muses to inspire her poetic efforts, while she consequently promises to praise and "sing" the nine muses' glories in return for their aid. These actions demonstrate her poetic maturity and her desire to explore the workings of her own mind in this poem. Through her assertive language, Wheatley demonstrates her confidence in her abilities as a writer and as an explorer of her mental faculties. As noted above, the poem begins with an invocation to Mnemosyne, or Mneme, the Greek muse of memory. The nine muses, who readers encounter through Wheatley's poems such as "An Hymn to the Morning" and "To Maecenas," were Greek "goddesses upon whom poets…depended for the ability to create their works" (Schachter 477). As Shields explains, "[i]n order to accomplish the five-stress iambic line of heroic verse, Wheatley opts to open

‘Recollection’ with the older form of memory’s name, ‘Mneme,’ rather than choosing the four-syllable, less ancient ‘Mnemosyne’” (*Romantics* 45). The poem’s first line highlights Wheatley’s command to Mneme to begin and for the nine muses to “[i]nspire” the “vent’rous *Afric*” in order to assist “in her great design” (line 2) with her “immortal pow’r” (line 3).[11] Through the act of recollection, the speaker states that “The acts of long departed years, by thee / Recover’d, in due order rang’d we see” (lines 5-6); here, Wheatley wants to recover the memories of her past, the “departed years,” a feat that is achievable through Mneme’s assistance. Mneme’s power brings forth “…the long-forgotten calls from night, / That sweetly play before the *fancy’s* sight” (lines 7-8). The act of memory manifests itself through Wheatley’s dreams or “calls from night” (line 7); the nighttime invokes the powers of recollection and provides Wheatley with the means to explore her past in an ordered and comprehensible fashion. As the poem explains, “*Mneme* in our nocturnal vision pours / The ample treasures of her secret stores” (lines 9-10). Shields claims that “[r]ecollection for Wheatley functions as the poet’s storehouse of images; the fancy channels the force of the imagination through its associative powers. Both the memory and the fancy, then, serve the imagination” (“Struggle for Freedom” 254). Lines 13 to 14, “And, in her pomp of images display’d, / To the high-raptur’d poet gives her aid,” illustrate this process through which Wheatley draws on recollection for inspiration to write her poems. Recollection assists the poet in writing the poem celebrating Mneme.

“On Recollection” may also be read as a written manifestation of Wheatley’s attempts to process her diasporic status as well as parts of her past through the act of remembering. Recollection grants Wheatley temporary mental access to the memories of her past, as she knew she did not have control of her life and could not simply return to return to Africa if she wished to do so. One extant letter, which was written after Wheatley’s manumission, indicates that the

poet chose not to return physically to Africa once she was emancipated. In October 30, 1774, she wrote to John Thornton, who suggested that Wheatley should return to Africa to complete missionary work. In the letter, Wheatley explains why she chose not to accept the invitation: "[u]pon my arrival, how like a Barbarian shou'd I look to the Natives; I can promise that my tongue shall be quiet/for a strong reason indeed/being an utter stranger to the language" ("Much Hon'd Sir [John Thornton] [Oct 30, 1774]" 184). At the time this letter was written, Wheatley could have returned to Africa if she wished, as she was physically free. However, I maintain that Wheatley's use of recollection in "On Recollection" refers specifically to a way in which the poet could process parts of her past in order to comprehend and envision the future. Wheatley's reconstruction of her past in "On Recollection" did not likely involve a physical reconnection to her African homeland. Instead, it helped her grapple and come to terms with her status as a member of the African diaspora as well as certain elements of her past including her enslavement.

The mental exercise Wheatley engages in "On Recollection" allowed Wheatley to reassess her past via the act of recollecting and to determine that "Virtue" would guide her "future" days. Wheatley establishes that the powerful act of memory enables her to recall past events stored within memory through "nocturnal visions" (line 9). This point is especially significant given her status as an enslaved person, as the act of recollection allows her begin to process a past involving her enslavement and displacement in order to shape her future. The poem states that Mneme "To the high-raptur'd poet gives her aid" (line 14); that is, the muse of memory aids Wheatley in this process of mental and social reconstruction, which takes place "Through the unbounded regions of the mind" (line 15). The act of recollection provided the groundwork for mental liberation prior to being physically free after the Wheatley family

emancipated her. In turn, "On Recollection" traces the community formed between Wheatley, the speaker of the poem, and the act of recollection to process past events, provide order to her past, and offer a clear direction for her future.

Moreover, this stanza contains powerful imagery of flight—"The ample treasures of her secret stores; / swift from above she wings her silent flight" (lines 10-11)—that expresses the ways in which Wheatley seeks to combat the powerlessness she encountered in the physical world in order to experience a type of freedom and understanding about her past in the mental realm. Meanwhile, Mneme's act of "Diffusing light celestial and refin'd" (line 16) represents the light that guides Wheatley's battle against her status as an enslaved African. Such "celestial" and "refin'd" light also assists Wheatley in the act of writing the poem, which celebrates the powers of recollection. According to Wheatley, the act of recollection is situated within the collective memory of "ev'ry tribe beneath the rolling sun" (line 18), or every person on Earth. Wheatley makes an effort to point out the inclusion of every person within this characteristic of humanness. The poem claims that "The heav'nly *phantom* paints the actions done" (line 17) of all of mankind. According to the poem, all humans possess the ability of recollection; therefore, every individual is responsible for his or her past actions, whether they are considered good or evil. In this regard, Wheatley includes individuals of African descent as possessing mental qualities shared by all humans. Wheatley states that Mneme is "enthron'd within the human breast, / Has vice condemn'd, and ev'ry virtue blest" (lines 19-20). The act of recollection, according to the speaker, is unescapable—it is ingrained in the heart and conscience of every human being. Mneme is all-seeing and her blessing is "Sweeter than *Maro's* entertaining strains, / Resounding through the grove, and hills, and plains" (lines 23-24). For Wheatley, memories of the past explored in a poem about the act of recollecting are more pleasurable than Virgil's (or

Maro's) poetry.[12] Wheatley also references Maro in her poem, "To Maecenas," which introduces her volume of poetry. Lines 21 and 22 of "To Maecenas" read, "Great *Maro's* strain in heav'nly numbers flows, / The *Nine* inspire, and all the bosom glows." Virgil's "heav'nly" work is inspired by the muses, the very muses that Wheatley commands in the first lines of "On Recollection." In "To Maecenas," Wheatley ponders "O could I rival thine [Homer's] and *Virgil's* page, / Or claim the *Muses* with the *Mantuan* Sage" (lines 23-24). In the end, Wheatley demands for Maecenas to "grant…thy paternal rays, / Her me propitious, and defend my lays" (lines 54-55). She no longer awaits to be acknowledge for her talent, but rather "snatch[es] a laurel from [Maecenas's] honour'd head / while [he] indulgent smile[s] upon the deed" (lines 46-47). In "On Recollection," Wheatley makes it clear that the act of recollection and the writing about the act of recollecting are more pleasurable to her than Virgil's poetry. Her "great design" (line 2) seeks to reconnect Wheatley with her memories of her past via the assistance of a feminine figure—in this case, Mneme. In "On Being Brought from Arica to America," Wheatley reflects on the result of being displaced because of the transatlantic journey that dehumanized enslaved peoples, one which amputated connections to their homes. In "On Recollection," Wheatley, with the help of Mneme, attempts to reclaim and process her memories of home through the act of recollection by which she actively struggles to resist against complete dehumanization.

Mneme is a complex character in the poem. One the one hand, lines 19 through 24 exalt the seemingly benevolent nature of Mneme, whom dwells "enthron'd within the human breast" (line 19) and whose music is "Resounding through the groves and hills, and plains" (line 24). However, Wheatley also uses the goddess of memory to issue a warning to those who choose to shun or ignore Mneme's power, mainly those who do not want to engage in the process of

recollection and attempt to reject the goddess. As Robert L. Kendrick points out, the poem demonstrates that "the power of memory can also function in a punishing capacity, laying bare the sins and injustices committed by those who '[s]corn her warnings and despise her grace'" (243). This point is important, as it argues in favor of Wheatley's awareness of her enslaved status as well as her rejection of this status and her denouncement of the "horrid crime[s]" (line 27) committed by "the race" (line 25)—presumably, white—in the name of slavery. In this third stanza, Wheatley clearly establishes a relationship between recollection and morality. Lines 26 and 27, "But how is *Mneme* dreaded by the race, / Who scorn her warning and despise her grace?," express Wheatley's belief that white peoples have deliberately ignored the warnings of Mneme by not having learned anything from their pasts and their mistakes. Additionally, she denounces that slavery is a "horrid crime" (line 27) which poisons humanity, as represented by the wormwood contained within Mneme's hands. The poem states that "By her [Mneme] unveil'd each horrid crime appears, / Her awful hand a cup of wormwood bears" (lines 27-28). As noted by Lytton Musselman, wormwood is also "a Biblical plant mentioned seven times in the Hebrew Bible, always with the implication of bitterness" (149).[13] Wheatley makes a powerful statement in line 28, "Her awful hand a cup of wormwood bears," in announcing that slavery has slowly poisoned the hearts of humanity and has stained their consciences and their opportunities for salvation. The following language in the poem, "Hers the worst tortures that our soul can know" (line 30), provides the reader with a powerful image; a tarnished human conscience is a torture worse than that of slavery. The act of reminiscing about "each horrid crime" (line 27) involves "ev'ry tribe" (line 18)—no human being can escape this punishment. Mneme refers to the slaver, or those who have participated in the trade of humans, as the "wretch[es], who dar'd vengeance of the skies" (line 43). Recollection on memories of enslaving

others affects those who robbed peoples of their freedom; no one involved in this process is, according to the poem, exempt from Mneme's "wrath divine" (line 50).

Even Wheatley herself is not relieved of carrying the weight of shame on her shoulders in this poem. Line 31—"Now eighteen years their destin'd course have run"—seems to hint at Wheatley's age; "On Recollection" was likely written in 1771, a date which corresponds to Wheatley's eighteenth birthday. The years pass "In fast succession round the central sun" (line 32), but they are not in vain; Wheatley wonders, "How did the follies of the period pass / Unnotic'd, but behold them writ in brass!" (lines 33-34). [14] According to the poem, memory and the act of recollecting are powerful agents; one can never fully escape the power of recollection or reflecting on one's past. The "follies" (line 33) committed by the slaver are "writ in brass" (line 34), meaning that the exposure of their crimes is permanent and belongs to the public memory because they are found in the pages of Wheatley's book of poems; the poem "On Recollection" serves as a textual monument to these "follies" (line 33). Wheatley states that "In Recollection see them fresh return, / And sure 'tis mine to be asham'd, and mourn" (lines 36-37).

Though this reference to Wheatley's past is only one part of "On Recollection," Odell's memoir provides valuable information that likely connects to this reference of Wheatley's shame and mourning in the poem. In her memoir, Odell recreates the conditions in which Wheatley was sold at an auction in colonial Boston. Relying on narratives by those related to the Wheatley family, she describes how Susanna Wheatley traveled to the auction on that day, as she was looking to purchase a young slave. Mrs. Wheatley

> …found several robust, healthy females, exhibited at the same time with Phillis, who was of a slender frame, and evidently suffering from change of climate. She [Phillis] was, however, the choice of the lady, who acknowledged herself influenced to this decision by

> the humble and modest demeanor and the interesting features of the little stranger. The poor, naked child (for she had no other covering than a quantity of dirty carpet about her like a filibeg [kilt]) was taken home in the chaise of her mistress, and comfortably attired. She is supposed to have been about seven years old, at this time, from the circumstance of shedding her front teeth. (Odell 9-10)

The inhumane conditions that enslaved peoples were subjected to upon their arrival in the so-called New World involved being publicly displayed and often completely (or mostly) naked on auction blocks to allow potential buyers to inspect thoroughly their "merchandise" before committing to a purchase. Their mouths, ears, and bodies were scrutinized for illness, injuries, or any other non-marketable characteristics which would decrease the value of the enslaved person in the buyers' eyes. Wheatley's state of undress—the "dirty carpet" that Odell describes in her memoir—symbolizes her initiation into colonial slave culture. As hooks explains, "[t]he nakedness of the African female served as a constant reminder of her sexual vulnerability. Rape was a common method of torture…the threat of rape or other physical brutalization inspired terror in the psyches of displaced African females" (18).

The act of witnessing these "follies" (line 34) brings Wheatley personal shame in "Recollection." Yet, as Franke argues in her essay, for Wheatley "…the folly of a worldly life is the precondition for repentance and, thus, for private virtue" (244). It is this shame growing from her recollection of her past that allows Wheatley to scorn eloquently those who have committed this type of folly as exposed in "On Recollection." In this poem, Wheatley informs her readers that she remembers the "follies" committed against her. By recalling and recording these transgressions in her poem, Wheatley writes for a broader community of persons who shared her diasporic status and her experiences with enslavement. Therefore, the poem can be read as a

community-building text between the writer, those who share her experiences as an enslaved and displaced person, and the reader who has learned of these "follies."

Nonetheless, Wheatley does not allow these "follies" of the past to impede her from celebrating the blessings that Mneme offers. She calls Mneme "…Virtue, smiling in immortal green" (line 38) and once again commands her to "Do thou exert thy pow'r, and change the scene" (line 39). Here, Wheatley no longer wishes to feel shame concerning the past. On the contrary, she states that her memories and the knowledge she has acquired through the act of recollection will "Be thine employ to guide my future days, / And mine to pay tribute of my praise" (lines 40-41). By claiming ownership of her memories, Wheatley not only exposes the mistakes of those who have scorned Mneme's power and have chosen not to reflect on the consequences of their past actions, but she also acknowledges the importance of learning from the past in order for "Virtue" "to guide [her] future days" (line 40). In return for this wisdom, Wheatley promises to pay tribute to "Virtue" through the very act of composing the poem "On Recollection." Wheatley accesses knowledge of the past, which presently grants her the power to guide her future days on virtuous paths with the knowledge of what she has experienced. "On Recollection" celebrates the power of Mneme while simultaneously functioning as a warning to those who advocate in favor of slavery. Mneme's power allows Wheatley to reflect upon her past in order to learn what needs to happen in her future.

Additionally, "On Recollection" serves as evidence that Wheatley possessed a nuanced awareness of slavery and that she denounced the injustices of this system in her poetry. In the final parts of this poem, she specifically scorns "The wretch, who dar'd the vengeance of the skies" (line 44) and documents those who "At last [awake] in horror and surprize" (line 45). In this final stanza, Wheatley recognizes the potential of repentance found within every human

breast, but warns that some will not be able to escape Mneme's punishment when she writes that "By her alarm'd, he [the "wretch"] seems impending fate, / He howls in anguish, and repents too late" (lines 46-47). Shields maintains that "Wheatley, while looking harmless, has accomplished the construction of a powerful indictment of slavery [in 'On Recollection']" (*Romantics* 47). In these lines, Wheatley denounces those who participate in the institution of slavery. She can do so because she has the authority to speak on these matters. As a person who has been blessed and shielded by Mneme, as one who is protected by a divine figure (the Old Testament God or Zeus), and as one who has personally experienced the "follies" of slavery addressed in "On Recollection," Wheatley is granted the power to warn the "wretch[es]" (line 44), who prefer to justify the act of slavery and continue participating in this institution. According to Wheatley's poem, those who likely endorse the institution of slavery will awaken from their slumber——"in horror and surprize" (line 45)—to find that they are to be judged by a divine figure (a "wrath divine") for their actions. These "wretch[es]" will see their "impending fate" (line 46), but their repentance will be fruitless. They will be punished, as the poem makes clear. On the other hand, those with a "…holy…upright heart" (line 50) will be blessed by all of Mneme's "...joys [that] are hers t'impart" (line 49). In other words, those who heed Mneme's warnings, reflect on their actions, and seek to walk a path of righteousness based on the processing of one's past actions will be "thrice blest…" (line 50) and "shelter'd from the wrath divine!" (line 51).

Through the rhetoric she employs in the poem, Wheatley declares her intent to condemn slavery through the powers of Mneme, the goddess of recollection. In addition, her experiences as an enslaved person provide her with the authority to impart judgement on those who have participated in the trafficking of human beings. Through this connection with Mneme and the ability provided by the goddess to access the memories concerning her enslavement, Wheatley

uses the power of recollection to guide her future actions as well as provide moral footing for herself and for her readers. Kendrick argues that the poem "…works as a call for the reader to evaluate honestly his or her own…shameful acts" (244). What is more, her experience as a victim of slavery allows her to voice Mneme's warnings to those who "scorn" them by likely continuing to enslave individuals of African descent and to reject the possibility for their redemption. In turn, Wheatley accesses these memories through the act of recollection—a process that takes place within the private confinements of her mind as she explores the act of recalling alongside the goddess, Mneme.

Through the act of writing, then, Wheatley constructed a community of the mind with Mneme, which allowed her to process her past in productive ways and chart a virtuous path for her future. However, according to "On Imagination," Wheatley's community of the mind also includes the faculty of the imagination. In a similar fashion to recollection, imagination allows Wheatley to visualize her future; yet, imagination also allows the poet to temporarily escape the restrictions of slavery. "On Imagination" marks her attempts to escape from the earthly plane on which she finds herself confined. The poem also expresses her unbounded journey outside of the "rolling universe" (line 18). Like "On Recollection," "On Imagination" begins by praising a mental faculty, the imagination, who is also gendered female. As Wheatley writes, "Thy various works, imperial queen, we see, / How bright their forms! how deck'd with pomp by thee!" (lines 1-2). Lines 3 and 4 of the poem recall the grace of "Thy wond'rous acts in beauteous order" (line 3) and the "pow'r" of "thine hand" (line 4) of an "imperial queen." Imagination, a faculty gendered female by the speaker, "is a regal presence in full control of her poetic world" (Shields, "Struggle for Freedom" 253). Through the act of imagination, Wheatley unleashes her creative

faculties; the power of imagination is "potent" (line 3) because it allows her a temporary escape from her reality in captivity.

Similar to her goal in "On Recollection," Wheatley, in "On Imagination," demands the muses' blessings in the beginning of the poem: "Ye sacred choir, and my attempts befriend: / To tell her glories with a faithful tongue, / Ye blooming graces, triumph in my song" (lines 6-8). This "imperial queen"—a personification for imagination—possesses the power to construct a "beauteous order" that contrasts with the stanza that follows, through which Wheatley "…distinguishes the imagination from its subordinate, the fancy" (Shields, "Struggle for Freedom" 253). Lines 9 and 10 illustrate how "Now here, now there, the roving Fancy flies, / Till some lov'd object strikes her wand'ring eyes." While the first stanza praises imagination's harmony and order, the following lines pay attention to the "roving Fancy" (line 9). Fancy "…flies about here and there, searching for some appropriate and desired object worthy of setting into motion the creative powers of her superior" (Shields, "Struggle for Freedom" 253). The next two lines of the poem—"Whose silken fetters all the senses bind, / And soft captivity involves the mind" (lines 11-12)—showcase two interesting oxymorons. On the one hand, the faculty of imagination binds the senses, fully engaging the speaker of Wheatley's poem who participates in the act of imagining. This type of mental captivity contrasts with Wheatley's enslaved status, which shackles her to a physical realm and does not allow her to ascend to another, post-earthly plane on which imagination reigns. For Wheatley, this type of "soft," mental captivity is appealing; imagination's mental captivity produces a pleasurable opportunity for contemplation and escape. This contemplation allows the poet to celebrate the powers of imagination in this particular poem. At one point near the end of the poem, however, Wheatley will come to mourn this inability to remain in a mentally-constructed, alternative world for

extended periods of time. The poem makes it clear that imaginative flights are only temporary escapes.

Still, the powers of imagination combat the negative effects of Wheatley's imprisonment. The powers of imagination are so great that Wheatley wonders "…who can sing thy force? / Or who describe the swiftness of thy course?" (lines 13-14). These two questions suggest that Wheatley is uncertain about who can sing imagination's powers; initially, she feels unworthy of engaging in the act of imagination and writing about its powers. Nevertheless, she eventually gains confidence and finds herself "Soaring through air to find the bright abode, / We [the speaker of the poem and imagination] on thy pinions can surpass the wind, / And leave the rolling universe behind" (lines 15, 17-18). Through the act of imagination, Wheatley creates a new world, a new reality through her writing. Imagination, then, is an essential part of Wheatley's community of the mind. The poet praises the faculty of imagination because it allows her to leave behind "one view" (line 21), one narrow way of seeing and experiencing life and, with the help of this mental faculty, experiences "new worlds" that "amaze th' unbounded soul" (line 22). According to the poem, imagination literally allows her to access new places and "leave the rolling universe behind" (line 18). Imagination is crucial to Wheatley, who was unable to experience physical freedom at the time this poem was written. Therefore, her efforts turned to the desire to experience and theorize mental freedom.

And yet, crafting access to these "new worlds" is not without complications. Line 23 warns that "*Winter* frowns to Fancy's raptur'd eyes" (line 23); Winter possibly represents colonial Boston and its citizens, who represent the very oppression from which Wheatley looks to mentally escape from.[15] Regardless of Winter's disapproval, "The fields may flourish, and gay scenes arise" (line 24); colonial Boston cannot fully hinder imagination's power or Wheatley's

temporal escape from its clutches with the help of the imagination. Fancy's "…frozen deeps may break their iron bands, / And bid their waters murmur o'er the sands" (lines 25-26). In these lines, Wheatley claims that imagination even possesses the power to "break" "iron bands." This imagery suggests that the power of the imagination breaks the "bands" associated with slavery. The act of breaking these "bands" symbolizes her undertaking of a mental space of freedom that anticipated her achievement of freedom in the physical plane. However, a close look at lines 23 through 32 reveals that the potential of flight as provided by imagination appears conditional. In his essay, "Phillis Wheatley's Use of the Georgic," Eric D. Lamore provides insight on the importance of the poet's use of the word "may"—a word she uses six times in this stanza. Lamore sustains that regardless of the fact that "…*Winter* frowns to *Fancy's* raptur'd eyes" (line 23), Wheatley may change the scene—"fields may flourish" (line 24) and "all the forest may with leaves be crown'd" (line 30) "provided that Wheatley exercises her imagination" (134). In this sense, Wheatley becomes more than a mere spectator; she takes on an active role in the process of constructing a community of the mind with imagination that allowed her to pursue the acquisition of mental freedom in a space that contrasts on different levels with colonial Boston.

As a result of the rejection of Winter's disapproval, "Fair *Flora* may resume her fragrant reign, / And with her flow'ry riches deck the plain" (lines 27-28). As noted by Shields, in "William King's *An Historical Account of the Heathen Gods and Heroes*[,]…'Flora was a Courtezan [*sic*], who got a great Sum of Money by her immodest Practices.' Her celebrations 'came to that Excess of Indecency…' that they became characterized 'by Persons appearing naked'" (193) (qtd. in "Subversion of Stylistics" 262). According to King, Flora represents a form of unbridled, uncensored freedom. In turn, Wheatley offers a celebration of the female who is unrestricted by societal norms and who, just as imagination does, roves freely in her "fragrant

reign" (line 27). In a similar fashion, Wheatley becomes the Flora of the unbounded regions of her own mind. Wheatley's uncensored mental liberty is contrasted sharply with the pious, compliant persona she was expected to adopt in her life as a domestic slave in colonial Boston. And yet, Flora is not alone in her cause, for "*Sylvanus* may diffuse his honours round, / And all the forest may with leaves be crown'd" (lines 29-30). Sylvanus, the Greek god of plowed fields, governs the boundaries "separating civilization from the uncultivated, boundless wilds of the forests and plains" (Shields, "Subversion of Stylistics" 262). It is Sylvanus who provides the plowed, fertile fields on which Flora may plant her "flow'ry riches" (line 28)—Sylvanus watches over Wheatley, safeguarding her escape from the "frozen deeps" (line 25) and "iron bands" (line 25) of civilization and into the limitless expanses of her mind.[16] In Wheatley's poem, the wild, governed by the mythological Sylvanus, becomes an ideal escape from the repressive civilization in which she finds herself. This idealization of nature would be popularized decades later by authors such as Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman.

At first glance, there seems to be an apparent hierarchy concerning these faculties of the mind. The ordering of poems in Wheatley's book places "On Recollection" before "On Imagination." Initially, it seems that the poet considers the goddess of memory, Mneme, to be the strongest faculty of the mind available to her. However, Wheatley's poetic and mental maturity eventually lead her to discover the even greater faculty of imagination. In the poem, Wheatley praises on a number of levels the powers of imagination; lines 33 to 34, "Such is thy pow'r, nor are thine orders vain, / O thou the leader of the mental train," clearly establish that imagination is the conductor of this particular community of the mind. Lines 35 to 36, "In full perfection all thy [Imagination's] works are wrought, / And thine the scepter o'er the realms of thought," serve as a testament that, in Wheatley's mental realm, imagination is the sole ruler and

even more powerful than recollection. Within Wheatley's community of the mind, imagination is the "imperial queen" (line 1) and holds the highest place within the hierarchy of goddesses and muses ruling over the poet's mental realms. Without the "imperial queen" (line 1), Wheatley would be unable to compose poetry, for as the speaker of the poem states, "Before thy throne the subject-passions bow, / Of subject-passions sov'reign ruler Thou" (lines 37-38). Wheatley bows down to the power of imagination. The speaker of "On Imagination" even experiences "joy" when being commanded by imagination, an image that contrasts starkly with the other orders that Wheatley received in her daily life from her masters. In contrast, Wheatley actually looks forward to imagination's commands, as her imprisonment to imagination's orders grants her freedom to utilize her mental faculties to escape the confines of slavery.

As a consequence of Wheatley's submission to imagination's power, she writes that "*Fancy* might now her silken pinions try / To rise from earth, and sweep th' expanse on high" (lines 41-42); the elation provided by imagination, which manifests itself as energy that "through the glowing veins the spirits dart" (line 40), sweeps Wheatley from her the earthly plane. On this alternative plane, Wheatley becomes enlightened with "a pure stream of light [that] o'erflows the skies" (line 45) and states that "From *Tithon's* bed now might *Aurora* rise, / Her cheeks all glowing with celestial dies" (lines 43-44). Shields offers some thought-provoking commentary on Wheatley's use of the mythological figure of Aurora. According to the scholar, Aurora is "evocative of her [Wheatley's] memory of her beloved mother" (*Romantics* 53). The poem highlights Tithon and Aurora's union, one which results in Memnon, "a prince of Ethiopia[;]…[since] Wheatley was fond of calling herself 'an Ethiop,' this heterocosm assumes personal significance…if Aurora represents her mother, then Wheatley figuratively becomes Memnon's sister, hence her proudly naming herself an Ethiop" (*Romantics* 53). As goddess of

dawn, Aurora also symbolizes the promise of a new day filled with possibilities. Wheatley writes how "The monarch of the day I might behold, / And all the mountains tipt with a radiant gold" (line 46-47), acknowledging the potential that lays in the power of imagination and the manner in which it allows her to remain for a certain time in an imagined world. However, Wheatley must reluctantly leave her realm of imagination and return to her reality, as she explains in lines 48 to 49: "But I reluctant leave the pleasing views, / Which *Fancy* dresses to delight the *Muse.*" The "pleasing views" (line 48) are replaced with views of winter, possibly representing Boston's change of climate. As Lamore observes, "the poet would have endured enough Boston winters to understand cold. It is plausible, then, to suspect that the Boston community received (or was receiving) snow at the time Wheatley wrote 'On Imagination'" (133). This vision of cold and sterility contrasts starkly with the alternative world Wheatley constructs in her poem, one filled with wild forests where "fields may flourish" (line 24), "waters murmur o'er the lands" (line 26), and "Fair *Flora* may resume her fragrant reign" (line 27). Yet, the poet must abandon this scene, for "*Winter* austere forbids me to aspire, / And northern tempests damp the rising fire" (lines 50-51). Like the "iron bands" (line 25) that restrict Wheatley, the "northern tempests" (line 51) seek to extinguish the flame that burns within Wheatley's mind. These icy storms "chill the tides of *Fancy's* flowing sea" (line 52), a sea whose flow suggests movement, much like the mental train (line 34), Fancy's flight (lines 8, 41-42), and imagination's soaring (lines 15, 20). Wheatley is left no choice but to order imagination to "Cease then, my song, cease the unequal lay" (line 53). The poem ends in an unsatisfactory note and leaves a trail of questions in its wake. For Wheatley, this dissatisfaction is commonplace; unsatisfied with her "unequal lay" (line 55), which likely represents the need to leave her imagined world, she must resign to cease her song and face Winter's austerity.

Yet, she does not face "Winter" alone, for Wheatley managed to construct in her extant letters an important community not made up of muses and parts of the mind but a community consisting of living, human females. For as the last stanza of "On Imagination" indicates, Wheatley and the speaker of the poem cannot forever remain on a poetic and imaginary plane, as "northern tempests" (line 51) "chill the tides of *Fancy's* flowing sea" (line 52). Wheatley is forced, then, to construct not only communities of the mind with recollection and imagination but also communities of females on the earthly plane to combat the effects of social death in another way. In the next chapter, I discuss how and why Wheatley constructed a supportive community of females with Susanna Wheatley, Obour Tanner, and Selina Hastings, the Countess of Huntingdon through an examination of her extant letters as autobiographical texts.

Notes

1. According to Shields, Wheatley writes about freedom in four ways ("Struggle for Freedom" 231). The first way she articulated the theme of freedom was through "utter[ing] passionate political statements supporting the American colonial quest for freedom from Great Britain" (Shields, "Struggle for Freedom" 231). The second way is through the display of "numerous examples of what Jung called the mandala archetype…[a] pattern closely associated with a psychological attempt to discover freedom from chaos" ("Struggle for Freedom" 231). The third "conscious poetic escape from slavery was the writing of contemplative elegies" ("Struggle for Freedom" 231). The fourth representation may be understood as "[h]er poetics of the imagination and the sublime…this young poet's intense longing for the spiritual world motivated her to use her poetry as a means of escaping an unsatisfactory, temporal world" ("Struggle for Freedom" 231).

2. Odell writes that John Wheatley "at the time of the purchase [of Phillis], was already the owner of several slaves; but the females in his possession were getting something beyond the active periods of life, and Mrs. Wheatley wished to obtain a young negress, with the view of training her up under her own eye, that she might, by gentle usage, secure to herself a faithful domestic in her old age" (9).

3. For a different account of Wheatley's authorship defense, see Joanna Brooks's "Our Phillis, Ourselves."

4. Carretta believes that "[f]or someone from such a humble and unpromising beginnings, Wheatley developed a remarkable transatlantic network of friendships and affiliations that transcended race, class, status, political, religious, and geographical boundaries" (xi). This network included prominent religious figures such as the Reverend Joseph Sewall and the Reverend George Whitefield—whose deaths were elegized by Wheatley in 1769 and 1770, respectively. Wheatley's elegy on Whitefield captured the attention of important transatlantic peoples, such as Selena Hastings, the Countess of Huntingdon. According to Carretta, Wheatley was not the only person of African descent to benefit from the Countess's benefaction—"Gronniosaw, Marrant, Equiano, and other[s]…gained access to the Countess of Huntingdon's literary patronage through Whitefield" (33). Crucial to Phillis's success was the Wheatley family's transatlantic network, a community of prominent religious figures who assisted in various ways with the publishing of her poems and eventually her book as well as serving as witnesses to Phillis's ability to write poetry. I examine this transatlantic community in chapter two.

5. Sidbury clarifies that "[t]he terms 'Africa' and 'African' and the perception that the continent of Africa…comprises a unified cultural and/or 'racial' unit are European in origin" (6). He adds

that "[p]eoples of various ethnic backgrounds became 'African' together by virtue of sharing the oppression of Atlantic slavery, [not by]... a notion of an essential difference between 'African' and other peoples, whether Europeans, Asians, or Native Americans" (7).

6. Sidbury uses quotation marks around the word "African" for several reasons. He writes: "*African* must be placed in quotation marks precisely because Wheatley [and]…Sancho very rarely referred to residents of Africa—the people who might first come to modern minds thinking of Africans…in their published works, neither displayed much interest in or knowledge of the residents of Africa. Instead, when Sancho or Wheatley claimed to be 'African' in a letter or poem, they were usually asserting outsider status" (29).

7. Genesis 4 narrates how "Adam made love to his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain…Later she gave birth to his brother Abel…The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry…the Lord said to Cain, 'Why are you angry? … If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door (Gen 4:1, 4-7).'" As a result of his jealousy, Cain attacked and killed his brother Abel. The Lord cursed Cain, making him a "restless wanderer on the earth" and "put a mark on Cain so that no one who found him would kill him" (Gen 4:12-15). Some eighteenth-century commentators interpreted Cain's "mark" to equate blackness, thereby offering a Biblical justification for slavery based on this reading of Genesis.

8. According to Julian D. Mason, Jr., "[t]his poem was not listen in her 1772 Proposals. A variant version was published in the last month of her life, in John Wesley's *Arminian Magazine* for December 1784, in London. During 1781 and 1784, this magazine…published variants of a total of eight previously published Wheatley poems…we do not know if she even knew that they

were going to be published, much less had some direct hand in bringing them about or making the changes" (78). Shields offers a contrasting record from that of Mason, stating that "the first version of this poem dates from late November to early December 1771; the superior version Wheatley chose to include in her 1773 *Poems*" (*Romantics* 45).

9. As documented by Mason, "[a]t some point between September 13 and October 18, Phillis Wheatley was freed by her master and legally was a slave no more," as a letter she wrote to David Wooster indicates. This letter is included in Shields's *Collected Works* (169).

10. James Weldon Johnson, Julian D. Mason, Jr., Benjamin Brawley, and Richard Wright have all voiced their critiques of Wheatley's work. As Arthur P. Davis comments in his essay, "Personal Elements in the Poetry of Phillis Wheatley," critics "…state or imply that Phillis Wheatley because of her identification with the literary viewpoint of her age simply did not write enough about slavery or herself. For [some]…critics, she was disappointingly objective; for…[Wright], she was…fortunately 'detached,' and as a consequence, she was free to write 'not as a Negro, but as a human being'" (192).

11. As Bennet states in her essay, "in insisting throughout her oeuvre on her paradoxical identity as an 'Afric muse'…and in stressing the particular spiritual and epistemic authority of this oxymoronic identity, Wheatley sought to legitimize herself as a poet in a culture that refused to grant her legitimacy on the basis of her talent and accomplishments alone. Without ceding her abjection in any way, she sought the right to participate freely in (Anglo-American) literary culture" (64).

12. Lamore writes that "[t]hese extended associations with Mneme and Maro (i.e., Virgil) are essential to understand how Wheatley envisions her own poetics. By signaling a relationship between these two words, Wheatley continues to emphasize a relationship between her interior,

mental processes with poetry of the Roman poet, Virgil. Because of the extended emphasis placed on the personal and the poet's interior mental space…the lines from 'To Maecenas,' 'soon the same beauties [in Virgil's poetry] should my mind adorn, / And the same ardors [in Virgil's poetry] in my soul should burn' (line 10), become closer to being realized in 'On Recollection'" (132).

13. Wormwood is mentioned in the Book of Revelation: "The third angel sounded his trumpet, and a great star, blazing like a torch, fell from the sky on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water—the name of the star is Wormwood. A third of the waters turned bitter, and many people died from the waters that had become bitter'" (Rev 8:10–11). Wheatley believes that, like wormwood, slavery also poisons the hearts of mankind.

14. Interestingly, the phrase, "Writ in brass," also appears in Ben Jonson's "To the Memory of My Beloved the Author, Mr. William Shakespeare: And What He Hath Left Us," a poem included in the 1623 Folio: "O could he but have drawn his wit / As well in brass, as he has hit / His face; the print would then surpass / All that was ever writ in brass" (lines 5-8). In the poem, Jonson laments the fact that the bard's "wit" was not as easily decipherable as his portrait, which was featured in his 1623 folio. Jonson utilizes the phrase "writ in brass" to signify the notion of preservation via the written word. It is worth speculating that Wheatley was exposed to this poem as part of her studies, as the use of this phrase seems hardly coincidental.

15. Scholars such as Kendrick, Shields (*Romantics*), and Lamore have also offered this interpretation of "Winter" in "On Imagination."

16. Shields suggests that "…the line in which Sylvanus appears…probably owes something to Vergil's 'Eclogue X.' For that matter, [line 29]... may well be a translation of Vergil's 'venit et agresti capitis Silvanus honore'…Wheatley's familiarity with Horace may well have inspired the

following passage from the second epode: ‘pater / Silvane, tutor finium’ (lines 21-22; ‘father Sylvanus, guardian of borders’)” (“Subversion of Stylistics” 262).

Construction of Female Communities Through Letter Writing

When Wheatley writes about memory in her poems "On Recollection" and "On Being Brought from Africa to America," I argue that she attempts to begin a healing process that was discouraged by the society in which she lived as an enslaved African. In this analysis, Wheatley uses several of her poems as a tool to rebuild her identity and reestablish communities through poetry. However, Wheatley did not only reconstruct communities through the writing of poems; she created and sustained transatlantic female-centered relationships through epistolary writing as well.

A letter is a communication between people; therefore, it can also be used as a text that builds communities. In her book, *In Love and Struggle: Letters in Contemporary Feminism*, Margaretta Jolly examines the role of letter writing, particularly ones written by second-wave feminists, by analyzing epistles between lesbian lovers, mothers and daughters, friends, and feminist activists. Her ideas on epistolary correspondence among certain types of women provide a helpful framework for exploring Wheatley's extant letters. Jolly maintains that letters are a "subtle exchange among fantasy, writing, and relationship…the ambiguity of the letter as a literary genre shows us there is something expressive…[,]irreducibly communicative and, at some level, referential" (7), and argues that "[i]ndeed, letters show more poignantly than autobiography or even novels…the struggle to realize ideals of sisterhood from within and the puzzle of how to create genuine coalition and community across political gulfs of race or class or sheer differences of temperament" (4). The essence of letter writing "survives as a powerful record of women's unprecedented willingness to prioritize the relationships among themselves…[while] they reveal women's new demands of one another and the disappointments that often followed" (Jolly 2). Through her letters, Wheatley expresses the hope that her trauma

and suffering will eventually lead her on a path of redemption and Christian salvation. The letters, then, serve as a testament of her desire to be humanized by sharing her faith with other women.

This chapter examines the ways in which Wheatley constructed a community of transatlantic women through epistolary writing. Her social status as an enslaved person of African descent as well as her being denied the right to experience freedom forced Wheatley to create a substitute community, one in which she would be free to communicate with and relate to other women. This community, constructed through epistolary correspondence, addressed her lack of connection to Africa and other peoples of African descent along with the fact that Revolutionaries in the North American colonies did not include these displaced persons in their ideas about who deserved to experience freedom. Wheatley was well aware of this juxtaposition and criticized the Revolutionaries' contradictory position on slavery in her letter writing. In Wheatley's February 11, 1774 letter to Reverend Samson Occom, she points out the contradictory nature between the colonists' claim for independence and their resolve to maintain the institution of slavery. Wheatley writes, "This I desire not for their Hurt, but to convince them of the strange Absurdity of their Conduct whose Words and Actions are so diametrically, opposite. How well the Cry for Liberty, and the reverse Disposition for the exercise of oppressive Power over others agree—I humbly think it does not require the Penetration of a Philosopher to determine" ("Rev'd and Honor'd Sir [February 11, 1774]" 177). Wheatley was deeply dissatisfied with Revolutionaries' fight for freedom; her community building, then, can be seen as an act of protest against this type of exclusive idea of who belonged (and who did not belong) in the United States.

Scholarship on Wheatley has privileged this letter to Occom while failing to examine her extant correspondence with female figures. Overlooking these feminist letters shuts down attempts to understand other aspects of Wheatley's life, specifically those that deal with her community building in relation to other women. I argue that Wheatley's extant letters function as autobiographical texts that depict the ways in which she developed, sustained, and eventually lost connections to three significant women in her life: Selina Hastings, Countess of Huntingdon, Obour Tanner, and Susanna Wheatley. This chapter outlines a cycle in Wheatley's correspondence with and about these three women, which starts through a process of rebirth through Christianity. It is important to note that this examination of Phillis's and Susanna Wheatley's relationship is based primarily on letters written by Phillis to third parties about Susanna Wheatley. Wheatley's conversion to Christianity allowed her to form new relationships, such as the ones with Hastings, Tanner, and Susanna Wheatley. In her letters, Wheatley negotiates a cycle of gaining, sustaining, and losing female relationships as well as her need to survive by relying on members of this female community to sell her 1773 book of poems.

Hastings, Tanner, and Susanna Wheatley played crucial roles in Wheatley's construction of a transatlantic female network that supported her endeavor to overcome the effects of social death. In *Women's Life Writing and Imagined Communities*, Cynthia Huff writes about the importance of imagined communities constructed through life writing by women. According to Huff, the female "…imagined community is far-reaching indeed and one that involves crossing borders of geography, time, and thought" (1); she further claims that "[n]ot only has feminism been important in helping establish the idea of communities of women but it has also underscored that such communities have functioned historically and spatially as sites for writing" (5). In studying women's life writing and the notion of imagined communities, it is important to

understand that women belonging to these groups do not necessarily share "a stable identity across continents, public and personal histories, and ethnic and racial positions" (Huff 6). Wheatley's ability to connect with women from different races, classes, and geographical locations becomes especially meaningful as the three aforementioned women played particular roles in helping the African writer despite the fact that Wheatley's female community was anything but cohesive. The Countess of Huntingdon—whom Wheatley never met personally—eventually became the patron of Wheatley's book of poetry, which was published in London. Susanna Wheatley, Phillis's owner, represented a type of "othermother" (to use Patricia Hill Collins's term) for the poet. Finally, because of their epistolary correspondence, Tanner became like a sister and spiritual advisor for Wheatley, a bond that was reinforced by their conversion to Christianity and social status as enslaved women of African descent. Huff sustains that women's life writing demonstrates

> not so much resisting a powerful nation as creating a collage of cultures by borrowing elements from the main culture yet using them to form new imagined communities, all the while constantly allowing their writing to move among them imaginatively, physically, and through time. This birthing allows these writers to negotiate the complexities of their positioning as poised between, yet a part of, conflicting belief systems and also foregrounds issues of memory, identity and positionality. (7-8)

Huff frames women's life writing as an attempt to form new imagined communities. As a marginalized woman, several of Wheatley's poems articulate a desire for mental and spiritual freedom, while her letters demonstrate her efforts to achieve Christian redemption and cement female bonds that provided support and guidance to her. Wheatley's epistles demonstrate Huff's "collage of cultures" in three different dynamics. First, Tanner and Wheatley's African ancestry

and the possibility of a similar experience across the Middle Passage ties these women together; second, Wheatley incorporates Christian culture through correspondence with Tanner and the Countess of Huntingdon; and third, Wheatley includes commentary on and the circulation of books and print culture in her letters with Tanner, who helped distribute Wheatley's book after she was emancipated in 1773.

As the title of her book indicates, Huff's theorizing on women's life writing connects to Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities.* Anderson proposes in his seminal book that a nation is "an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (48).[1] Anderson argues that there is a divide between the concept of a physical nation and one's idea of the nation. He maintains that physical movement—such as the crossing of borders—does not necessarily change a person's idea on her or his national identity; a nationality is not necessarily left behind at the borders of one's home nation. The same might be said of Wheatley, whose sense of retaining her African identity is present in select poems and letters.

In chapter one, I discuss the effects of the Middle Passage and how it impacted Wheatley's memory and her idealization of a future self. Through some of her poems, Wheatley asserts that memories of her past have not been erased. Her poems serve as a roadmap in which she employs the knowledge of her past to envision a physical freedom through mental flight. Yet, her letters reveal that Wheatley attempted to construct a community beyond a community of the mind and beyond the confines of the North American colonies to include other transatlantic lives. Through the act of writing letters, Wheatley created a supportive female community that

transcended the nation. The members of this community shared a set of ideals that held their imagined community together: gender, Christianity (specifically the eighteenth-century-branch of Methodism endorsed by the Countess), the process of loss and the subsequent process of grief, and the use of printed texts to help circulate these ideals and maintain friendships.

In order to assess the significance of the bond between Wheatley and the Countess, it is essential to understand the historical contexts that shaped this relationship: Methodism and the principal role the Countess had in its development. Wheatley's eventual subscription to Christian culture, which she shared with women like Tanner and the Countess, was situated in the Methodist faith and the transatlantic movement that popularized it. Eighteenth-century evangelical circles and particularly Huntingdonian circles shaped Wheatley as a writer and provided her with one way to attempt to overcome social death. Born in 1707, Selina Hastings was "one of the most interesting and enigmatic figures of eighteenth-century Methodism" (Tyson and Schlenther 1). John R. Tyson considers Hastings to be "the benefactor and guiding hand behind the Calvinistic wing of eighteenth-century Methodism, who exercised a wide religious influence in England through her 'Connexion' of sixty-eight chapels and preaching posts. Stretching her rights under peerage...she employed 'domestic chaplains,' like the transatlantic evangelist George Whitefield" (28).[2] According to Tyson and Schlenther, Hastings

> had tremendous impact upon the religious tenor of her times…And yet, despite leaving such a significant "paper trail" behind her, it must be said that Lady Huntingdon was (and is) a very difficult person to know. She was a complex person… a talented and astute woman whose piety, position, wealth, and ability catapulted her into a leadership role in the early Methodism movement. (1)

Lady Huntingdon has been named by some as "a Mother to the poor" (Tyson and Schlenther 2).[3] Hastings took on an active role in the diffusion of evangelical Christianity and Methodism in both England and the North American colonies. With her fortune, she founded Trevecca College to train itinerant preachers in Wales, and "appointed clerics as domestic chaplains in her service…Lady Huntingdon functioned as a sort of *de facto* bishop who appointed, deployed, and oversaw the development of the preachers" (Tyson and Schlenther 129).[4]

The Countess was not alone in her quest to propagate the Methodist faith across the Atlantic. Her personal chaplain, George Whitefield, was a pivotal figure in the Great Awakening as well as the transatlantic Methodist movement. His powerful oratory skills earned him a great amount of popularity and fame in the British colonies, as documented in the life writing of John Marrant and Olaudah Equiano. His work as a Methodist preacher was financed by Lady Huntingdon; letters between Whitefield and Hastings reflect the deep friendship that existed between them. His presence in the British colonies was a pivotal element in dissemination of Christianity in the North American colonies (he made seven trips there) and the role Methodism played in the conversion process in the second half of the eighteenth-century. Bethesda, an orphanage founded in Savannah, Georgia in 1740, was one of Whitefield's important contributions to the colonies. Tyson documents that "[i]n 1738, George Whitefield… found so many orphans and poor people's children that he became determined to establish an orphanage, called Bethesda… 'the orphanage plunged Whitefield deep into the Atlantic commercial world, requiring him to develop many of the entrepreneurial skills demanded of merchants'" (Lambert qtd. in Tyson 30-31).

While eighteenth-century Methodism provided a space for peoples of African descent to become members of the Christian family, some of its leaders did not condemn the institution of

slavery. Whitefield and Hastings both had contrasting, even ironic, stances regarding the enslavement of African peoples. In 1739, Whitefield penned an open letter in which he expressed his lament towards the "the evils of slavery" (Tyson 31); however, by 1751, "Whitefield had changed his mind about slavery and was operating a plantation in South Carolina and employing slave labor to support his philanthropic work at Bethesda" (Tyson 31). Hastings's position regarding slavery and evangelical Christianity appears clear based on her actions and correspondence. After Hastings inherited in 1770 Whitefield's Bethesda Orphanage and the enslaved peoples that came with the institution, "[she] continued to hold these slaves, and authorized the purchase of additional field hands for work on Whitefield's plantations" (Tyson and Schlenther 16). Philadelphian abolitionist Anthony Benezet corresponded with Hastings, criticizing her position on the subject of slavery. In his letter, Benezet urged the Countess to "[further] the good designs of putting an end to this mighty destroyer, The Slave Trade" (34). Hastings dismissed Benezet's plea by responding that the matter of slavery was best left to the will of God. As the letter to Benezet reads, "God alone…can and will in his own time bring outward, as well as spiritual [,] deliverance to his afflicted and oppressed creatures" (Hastings (qtd. in Tyson and Schlenther, "Editorial Note" 229). By appointing God as the only figure charged with altering the temporal and spiritual states of enslaved peoples, Hastings seemingly washed her hands of any guilt associated with the ownership of slaves. However, she supported a number of individuals of African descent like James Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, Wheatley, Margrett, and John Marrant (16).[5] Benezet also corresponded with Whitefield with the purpose of attempting to sway his mind in debates on the slave trade, but failed to convince him. Scholars are unsure of the precise reasons for the abrupt change of heart Whitefield underwent concerning his position on slavery.

Independent from Whitefield's position on slavery was his desire to preach to enslaved peoples, a choice that was condemned by other religious groups at the time. As Carretta explains, the Methodism movement was often "condemned for addressing the poor and enslaved" (29), yet this interest in spreading Christianity to a diverse set of peoples did not dishearten Whitefield, who "directly address[ed] slaves in his audiences" (29) during his sermons.[6] As Carretta claims, "[p]eople of African descent were…[likely] drawn to Whitefield in part because his energetic and emotive oratorical style was similar to that found in many native African religions" (29). His popularity with enslaved peoples likely grew from the fact that he was one of the few white preachers offering salvation and hope to enslaved peoples at that time. Susanna Wheatley supported Whitefield and "greatly admired…his patron, the Countess of Huntingdon" (Carretta 33). Susanna Wheatley's letter sent to the Countess on February 20, 1773 documents how the Wheatley family provided lodging to some of Hastings's itinerant preachers traveling in the colonies.[7] In the letter, Susanna reassures the Countess about the well-being of her preacher, the Reverend Page: "you may be assured I shall bid him [Reverend Page] a hearty welcome to my house as his home, and any other itinerant preachers which your Ladyship may please to send this way…[w]hen your Ladyship sends any of those gentlemen this way please direct them to John Wheatley, Merchant in King Street, Boston" (S. Wheatley 218). The language in Susanna Wheatley's letter clearly states that her Boston home served as an asylum for the itinerant Methodist preachers belonging to Hastings's Connexion. Therefore, the Wheatleys might have even provided shelter for Whitefield in their home during one of his visits to Boston on any three of his seven American tours. Regardless of whether Phillis Wheatley personally witnessed one of Whitefield's sermons or met him, it is safe to assume that any news of Whitefield's missionary work with slaves likely reached Phillis and the Wheatley family. Carretta writes that

> [a]lthough Phillis was probably already familiar with Whitefield through his publications, she could have first met him when he came to Boston in 1764…[although] no known record survives of Phillis Wheatley having heard Whitefield preach…in light of Susanna Wheatley's commitment to her religious education, however, it is very likely that Phillis was given the opportunity to share the experiences described by [Benjamin] Franklin, Equiano, and [Benjamin] Rush, [all of whom praised Whitefield's oratory]. (33) [8]

It is highly probable then, that Whitefield and Hastings were two influential figures in the shaping of both the Methodist movement in the colonies and the lives and texts of some of the most prominent individuals of African descent in the early black Atlantic, such as Gronniosaw, Wheatley, Marrant, and Equiano.

Wheatley's ties to the Methodist movement were arguably the strongest weapon in her quest to become an accomplished writer. On the one hand, Hastings made the publishing of the volume of poems possible largely through her financial support and her connections to London publishers. On the other hand, even before the Countess, Whitefield would go on to become a key figure in Wheatley's development as a published poet. His death in 1770 in Newburyport, Massachusetts inspired Wheatley to compose her famous elegy, "On the Death of the Rev. Mr. George Whitefield," which immediately propelled Wheatley's status to that of a writer of transatlantic fame and recognition.[9] Due to the overwhelming popularity of the elegy, Wheatley was abruptly thrust into the spotlight of the transatlantic Methodist community and was given an "almost instant intercolonial and transatlantic fame" (Carretta 78).[10] The elegy was "[p]ublished as a broadside… [and] appeared, unlike her previous elegies, not only in Boston but also in Newport, New York, Philadelphia, and in London" (Franke 230). Importantly, Wheatley wisely used this opportunity to reach out to the Countess of Huntingdon by "sending out a…direct

appeal to [her]…with a copy of her poem" (Carretta 76). This instance is likely not the first time that Hastings and Wheatley corresponded, for Carretta writes that "[a]mong the Countess of Huntingdon's papers is a manuscript copy of Wheatley's elegy on Rev. Joseph Sewall, who had died in June 1769" (76). Therefore, it is extremely probable that Wheatley was aware of the relationship between Whitefield and Hastings, and seized the occasion to begin a transatlantic correspondence with the Countess after the preacher's death. The fourth stanza of the elegy specifically addresses the Countess:

> Great Countess, we Americans revere
>
> Thy name, and mingle in thy grief sincere;
>
> New England deeply feels, the Orphans mourn,
>
> Their more than father will no more return. (Wheatley, *Collected* 24)

The beginnings of the transatlantic epistolary correspondence between Wheatley and the Countess provided one way in which Wheatley purposefully employed her status as an enslaved African to appeal to a target audience. On October 25, 1770—twenty-six days after the death of Whitefield—Wheatley sent the letter to the Countess.[11] The first part of the epistle expresses Wheatley's hope that the Countess would forgive her "boldness" (Wheatley, "To the Rt. Hon'ble" 162) in taking it upon herself to initiate an unsolicited correspondence with a member of the nobility who was a white woman. The poet justifies her writing of the letter by stating her only motivation in doing so was the desire to "enclose a few lines on the decease of your worthy Chaplain, the Rev'd Mr[.] Whitefield, in the loss of whom I Sincerely sympathize with your Ladyship" (Wheatley, "To the Rt. Hon'ble the Countess of Huntingdon" 162). Wheatley's calculated use of language in this letter depicts her as an "untutor'd African," who deems her efforts at praising Whitefield's life and work "insufficient" (Wheatley, "To the Rt. Hon'ble"

162). Wheatley closes the letter by referring to herself as the Countess's "most Obedient Humble Servant" (Wheatley, "To the Rt. Hon'ble" 162).

This bold epistolary act, however, provided Wheatley with a much-needed patron for her book. On February 29, 1772, "[Wheatley] and her owners confidently announced in the *Boston Censor*…her 'Proposals for Printing by Subscription'" (Carretta 80). Unable to secure a Boston publisher, Susanna and Phillis eventually relied on the Wheatley family's connections in London towards the end of 1772.[12] Although Wheatley "had not heard back from the Countess of Huntingdon directly since she had sent her the letter and copy of the poem…[she] knew through intermediaries…that the [C]ountess was so intrigued by what she had read that she turned to members of…her Huntingdonian 'Connexion' to try and learn more about the young poet's…piety and authenticity" (Carretta 91). There is no doubt that the Countess had power over an influential transatlantic network; however, scholars seem to underestimate the pull of Wheatley's own transatlantic network—one whose members were often interconnected to the Countess's. The events that led up to the publishing of *Poems* demonstrate the skillful ways in which Susanna and Phillis utilized their network to their advantage. It is likely that the Wheatleys knew that the Countess would use her Connexion to search for peoples willing to vouch for the African poet before she committed to supporting Wheatley's book.[13] Two of these people were Robert Calef, "[c]aptain…of the Wheatley-owned *London* [Packet]" and Archibald Bell, "a London bookseller [specializing] [in] religious works" (Mason 6). As Carretta documents, towards the end of 1772, "Captain Calef…brought Phillis's manuscript with him to London. Acting as her literary agent, Calef had enlisted Archibald Bell to publish her book if a patron could be found…[a]lthough Archibald Bell was a relatively minor London bookseller he

was an appropriate choice to approach the Countess...[h]e specialized in evangelical religious works that appealed to her" (Carretta 93).[14]

By the winter of 1772, the Countess had already been made aware of Wheatley's desire to dedicate her book of poems to her; she was likely informed by Bell, the eventual publisher of her book. A March 29, 1773 letter sent by Susanna Wheatley to the Reverend Samson Occom documents the close relationship between Bell and the Countess. In the letter, "which appears to be in Phillis's hand" (Mason 6), Susanna references a correspondence sent to her on January 7, 1773 by Calef:

> [t]he following is an Extract from Capt Calef's Letter dates Jan 7th. Mr. Bell (the printer) Acquaints me that about 5 weeks ago he waited upon the Countess of Huntingdon with the Poems, who was greatly pleas'd with them, and pray'd him to Read them; and often would break in upon him and Say, "is not this, or that, very fine? do read another," and then expressed herself, She found her heart to knit with her [Phillis]…I had like to forget to mention to you She is fond of having the Book Dedicated to her; but one thing She desir'd which She Said She hardly tho't would be denied her, that was to have Phillis' picture in the frontispiece… (S. Wheatley, "Rev'd Sir" 7)[15]

Phillis departed for London on May 8, 1773 with Nathaniel Wheatley, son of John and Susanna, aboard the *London Packet*. The Countess's growing interest in Wheatley, which led to her acceptance of the book's dedication and her financial support of its publishing, was the direct result of Susanna and Phillis's efforts. On June 27, 1773—ten days after her arrival—Phillis sent the Countess a letter, notifying her about her "safe arrival in London after a fine passage of 5 weeks in the Ship with my young master (advised by my physician for my Health)" ("Madam [the Countess of Huntingdon] [June 27, 1773]" 167). In the letter, Wheatley also expresses her

gratitude towards the Countess, specifically in regards to the frontispiece: "I should think my self very happy in seeing your Ladyship, and if you was so desirous of the Image of the Author as to propose it for a Frontispiece I flatter myself that you would accept the Reality" ("Madam [the Countess of Huntingdon] [June 27, 1773]" 167). Wheatley also acknowledges the power that the Countess's blessing granted to her volume, for she states she is "not insensible [sic], that under the patronage of your Ladyship…my feeble efforts will be shielded from the severe trials of [unpitying] Criticism" ("Madam [the Countess of Huntingdon] [June 27, 1773]" 167). The Countess's "shield[ing]" of Wheatley's poetic efforts was significant because it allowed her to publish her book and attain transnational fame. Hastings's patronage became the foundation of how their female community was constructed.

Wheatley's visit to London was short—approximately six weeks—and she was unable to personally meet with the Countess for reasons that cannot be ascertained on the basis of existing records. A letter dated July 17, 1773 sent to the Countess addresses her prompt return to Boston: "Am sorry to acquaint your Ladyship that the Ship is certainly to Sail next Thursday (on) which I must return to America… (I am) extremely reluctant to go without having first seen, your Ladyship" ("Madam [the Countess of Huntingdon] [July 17, 1773]" 168). The exact reason for the brevity of the visit is uncertain.[16] Even though the epistolary relationship between the Countess and Wheatley was complicated by their lack of face-to-face interaction, important points about Wheatley's epistolary correspondence can be observed. Huff conceptualizes "a collage of cultures…[that] form[s] new imagined communities… while constantly allowing their writing to move among them imaginatively, physically" (8). Wheatley and the Countess's epistolary relationship, however brief, cut through lines of race, class, and distance. For Wheatley, transatlantic Christian culture became a substitute nation for the North American

colonies which excluded her. Being forcefully removed from Africa and the North American colonists' rejection of enslaved persons as worthy recipients of freedom resulted in Wheatley envisioning a transatlantic Christian culture as a substitute nation. I argue that significant parts of Wheatley's and Hastings' identities were based on their mutual participation in transatlantic Christian culture. For Wheatley, sharing a transatlantic Christian culture—one which included individuals of African descent—with the Countess and others was a more worthwhile exercise of community building than aligning herself with the colonists' cause for independence, which excluded individuals of African descent. Even though scholars have limited access to the letters comprising Wheatley's and Hastings's epistolary relationship since only three letters sent by Wheatley to the Countess are extant and no letters sent by Hastings to Wheatley have survived, the poet's epistolary tracts formed the basis of their relationship following the death of Whitefield. This relationship resulted in the eventual publication of her book and her ability to benefit from the Wheatley family's transatlantic community. The Countess's patronage funded Wheatley's book of poems, which resulted in her manumission when she returned from Boston. Wheatley's epistolary correspondence with the Countess, then, helped initiate a significant sequencing of events: the publication of Wheatley's book and then her emancipation.

Unlike Wheatley's and Hasting's epistolary relationship, Wheatley's and Tanner's epistolary relationship is documented by several extant letters sent to Tanner by the poet. As a result, letter writing takes on another powerful role in Wheatley's epistolary relationship with Tanner. Jolly maintains that "the nature of letter writing itself…is a gift that always exacts a return, a reaching out that always interpellates a reply…letters make not just a virtual but an imagined community in that sense. They act as unconscious expressions of women's expectation of care" (13). In this case, intricate sisterly ties among both women of African descent create a

substitute nation. Their communal identity, then, is based on these expectations of interpersonal care. Wheatley and Tanner's correspondence underscores the intricate sisterly ties solidified through letter writing. According to Jolly, letters reveal "the construction of feminist relationships" and "a powerful assumption of both identity and mutual care among women. They are part of a culture of relationship…theorized as special to women's values and communities," which Jolly calls "the feminist philosophy-of-care ethics" (3). Care ethics "crystalize the idea of the relational self as a feminist ideal, defining 'the moral subject as a self-in-relation—an individual who values and enjoys intimacy, whose identity is in significant measure defined through her interpersonal ties, and whose concerns are interdependent with those of other people'" (Meyers qtd. in Jolly 3).[17]

The epistolary letters that make up Wheatley and Tanner's body of correspondence demonstrate this ethics of care—particularly through their budding sisterhood, which was largely solidified by conversion to Christianity and then by Tanner emotionally supporting Phillis after the death of Susanna Wheatley. As Patricia Hill Collins explains in her book *Black Feminist Thought,*

> [t]raditionally…Black women's efforts to construct individual and collective voices have occurred in at least three safe spaces. One location involves Black women's relationships with one another. In some cases, such as friendships and family interactions, these relationships are informal, private dealings [such as letters] among individuals… [a]s mothers, daughters, sisters, and friends to one another, many African-American women affirm one another. (112)

The colonist's rejection of Wheatley in a protonational framework created the need to build substitute nations, as in the case with Tanner. Their body of letters testifies to the specific ways

in which these women of African descent in the North American colonies (and later the United States) constructed an imagined female community, particularly through the shared experiences of literacy, conversion through Christianity, the desire to reestablish relationships with women who they had lost, and a shared social status. Tanner was "Wheatley's only known correspondent of African descent. She may have been about three years older than Phillis" (Carretta 43). Even though there is no textual evidence indicating that Wheatley and Tanner ever met in person, "Wheatley's surviving correspondence reveals that they developed an increasingly affectionate epistolary relationship" (Carretta 43).

In order to avoid the effects of social death, it was crucial for Wheatley to foster relationships with females that could substitute familial ones that she was permanently separated from in Africa. Hill Collins reports that "[e]nslaved Africans were property, and one way that many resisted the dehumanizing effects of slavery was by re-creating African notions of family as extended kin units.…enslaved Africans drew upon notions of family to redefine themselves as part of a Black community consisting of their enslaved 'brothers' and 'sisters'" (55). In this sense, Wheatley's letters to Tanner served to rebuild communities from which they were physically removed. Commonly referred to as "Sister" by Wheatley in her epistles, Tanner would eventually take on the role of friend, mentor, and spiritual advisor in a mutual sisterhood that sought to alleviate the effects of social death in these women. It is likely that Tanner was a slave, as Grimstead and Carretta have suggested. She is identified in her baptismal records as the "servant of James Tanner" (Carretta 43). Their shared social status as enslaved women of African descent served as an essential component of their identities and in their construction of a substitute community via letters.

Tanner lived in Newport, Rhode Island and "was baptized and admitted in the First Congregational Church in Newport on 10 July 1768" (Carretta 43).[18] In his essay, "Anglo-American Racism and Phillis Wheatley's 'Sable Veil,' 'Length'ned Chain,' and 'Knitted Heart,'" David Grimstead explores the connection between these two women. On one hand, Grimstead believes that Sarah Osborn, a Newport school teacher "who influenced Wheatley's closest black friend, Obour Tanner" (372), was likely responsible for their relationship. According to Grimstead, "Osborn was at least an acquaintance of Susanna Wheatley and her protégé, the Mohegan minister, the Rev. Samson Occom" (372), a point which might validate scholars' beliefs that the two African women met at some point during their lives. Grimstead argues that Osborn was a significant figure in the formation of Tanner's religious and spiritual views.[19] As Grimstead notes, "Tanner shared Wheatley's literacy, piety, and ability to adapt to her slave circumstances with little diminution of dignity" (372). On the other hand, Grimstead also adds that Wheatley and Tanner might have "perhaps made the long voyage from Africa" (372) together on the slaver *Phillis*, a theory that has been acknowledged by scholars such as Carretta, although he maintains that "there is no evidence to support that possibility" (Carretta 43). Both Tanner and Wheatley were considered outsiders in the North American colonies due to their genetic make-up; their gender and enslaved status also served as additional sources of marginalization. These women figured out ways to survive as outsiders by creating imagined communities through letter writing. As enslaved women who were stolen from their home nation, Tanner and Wheatley were placed outside the reach of their own national identity and were considered unworthy of belonging to the dominant culture in the North American colonies. Their imagined community became an alternate nationhood that provided them with a type of mutual care and support not extended to them by white individuals in the colonies.

Regardless of whether Wheatley and Tanner met personally, it is evident that these two women "were united in their Christian faith" (Carretta 43). Wheatley's first letter to Tanner, dated May 19, 1772 and sent to "Abour Tanner, in Newport" (Shields, *Collected Works*, 164), responds to a "rec'd…favour of February 6th" ("To Abour Tanner, in Newport [May 19, 1772]," *Collected Works* 164).[20] Wheatley opens her letter with the following language:

> Dear Sister…I greatly rejoice with you in that realizing view, and I hope you experience, of the saving change which you so emphatically describe. Happy were it for us if we could arrive to that evangelical Repentance, and the true holiness of heart which you mention…let us rejoice in and adore the wonders of God's infinite Love in bringing us from a land semblant of darkness itself…May this goodness & long suffering of God lead us to unfeign'd repentance…I hope I may have the happy effect of improving our mutual friendship…Friend & humble servant, Phillis Wheatley. ("To Abour Tanner, in Newport [May 19, 1772]" 164)

The act of addressing Tanner as a "Sister" likely refers to their shared baptismal status as well as their mutual African racial background. This initial epistle illustrates the Christian culture that the two women came to embrace fully, even though Christianity was largely imposed on them. Wheatley expresses her gratitude towards "the wonders of God's infinite Love," whose mercy has brought them from Africa—an alleged "land" of "darkness"—to America, where they may "arrive to that evangelical Repentance, and the true holiness of heart," a point made in "On Being Brought from Africa to America" as well. Moreover, Wheatley states her desire to "improve" her friendship with Tanner. Wheatley likely recognized that Tanner could supply the poet with something neither the Countess nor Susanna Wheatley could: a shared experience with enslavement and possibly the Middle Passage. Wheatley's construction of this particular

imagined female community grew from this mutual understanding and shared experiences, which resulted in a sense of empathy often articulated through their hopes that Christianity would offer them salvation after death. There is attention being paid to both the temporal and spiritual planes of existence in Wheatley's letters to Tanner; Wheatley hopes to experience life after death in Christian heaven.

Wheatley's loss of physical health was also discussed often in their correspondence.[21] On July 19, 1772, Wheatley wrote to Tanner stating that she had been "in a very poor state of health all the past winter and spring," adding: "[l]et me be interested in your prayers that God would please to bless to me the means us'd for my recovery, if agreeable to his holy will…May the Lord bless us…and teach us by his Spirit to live to him alone, and when we leave this world may we be his. That this may be our happy case, is the sincere desire of, your affectionate friend...Phillis" ("To Arbour Tanner, in Newport [July 19, 1772]" 165). In this letter, Wheatley makes a distinction between the earthly and heavenly planes and her temporal and spiritual existence. The poet's delicate health, a circumstance which she battled against for most of her life, likely brought Wheatley to further contemplate her impermanence in the physical world. Tanner, her epistolary sister, provided an opportunity to explore the state of her soul and whether she, as an African from what she referred to as a "land semblant of darkness" ("To Abour Tanner, in Newport [May 19, 1772)]" 164), would be allowed entrance to heaven.

Piety and humbleness are ubiquitous in Wheatley's language, particularly shown through the poet's great esteem towards Tanner. In a letter dated October 30, 1773—approximately three months after her arrival from London—Wheatley wrote to Tanner in response to her "most kind epistles of Augst. 27th & Oct. 13th:"

> Your observations on our dependence of the Deity, & your hopes that my wants will be supply'd from his fulness which is in Christ Jesus, is truly worthy of your self…[y]our reflections on the suffering of the Son of God, & the inestimable prices of our immortal souls, plainly demonstrate the sensations of a soul united to Jesus…Join with me in thanks to him for so great a mercy, & that it may excite me to praise him with cheerfulness, to persevere in Grace & Faith, & in the knowledge of our Creator…I am Dear Friend, Most affectionately yours, Phillis Wheatley. ("To Obour Tanner, in New Port [Oct. 30, 1773]" 171)

Wheatley acknowledges that she has not only received "the most kind of epistles," but that she has learned from Tanner's "reflections" on Christianity. One could claim that in addition to functioning as a type of substitute sister figure, Tanner also served as a spiritual teacher to Wheatley. Hill-Collins states that "[s]isterhood is not new to Black women...this relationship of sisterhood among Black women can be seen as a model for a series of relationships African-American women have with one another" (278). This allusion to sisterhood and affectionate friendship prevails in Wheatley's letters to Tanner, further testifying to Jolly's ethics of care. Jolly argues that women's epistolary writing addressed the "expect[ed] care" in the textual exchanges. Through their correspondence, Wheatley and Tanner shared a mutual care—a type of substitute citizenship—by reassuring one another that there would indeed be salvation after death, and that their "immortal souls…demonstrate[d] the sensations of a soul united to Jesus" ("To Obour Tanner, in New Port [Oct 30, 1773]" 171). The possibility of attaining life after death, in this Christian sense, was a way to combat social death for Wheatley; it symbolized an opportunity to live eternally as a free woman.

Moreover, Hill Collins maintains that "African-American women as sisters and friends affirm one another's humanity, specialness, and right to exist… [a] shared recognition often operates among African-American women who do not know one another but who see the need to value Black womanhood" (113). Tanner and Wheatley's epistolary exchanges clearly demonstrate that they were aware of the importance of reaffirming their humanity as women of African descent living in the North American colonies. Moreover, the epistolary correspondence between Tanner and Wheatley reinforce Hill Collins's points on the relationships between African American women. This need of care and affirmation as an act of humanization becomes especially meaningful in the correspondence between Wheatley and Tanner after Susanna Wheatley's death. After this event, Tanner's presence in the Wheatley's life becomes even more meaningful both as role model and as book agent for the selling of Wheatley's *Poems.*

After Wheatley was granted her freedom "shortly after her arrival from London" (Grimstead 342), she was in great part responsible for her survival since she "recognized that emancipation gave her not only freedom and agency, the ability to act on her own behalf, but also new responsibilities…a freed woman of African descent in a world with very limited economic opportunities for her" (Carretta 141). In an epistle addressed to David Wooster, Wheatley recognized the critical importance of selling her books:

> I beg your favour that you would honour the enclos'd Proposals, & use your interest with Gentlemen & Ladies of your acquaintance to subscribe also, for the more subscribers there are, the more it will be for my advantage as I am to have half the Sale of the Books. This I am the more Solicitous for, as I am now upon my footing and whatever I get by this is entirely mine, & it is the Chief I have to depend upon. ("Sir [David Wooster] [October 18, 1773]" 169)

It was at this point in her life in which the sales of her *Poems* became the way for Wheatley to sustain herself. Tanner aided Wheatley's bookselling efforts by promoting the sale of her Christian friend's book of poems, possibly among the particularly literate peoples of African descent that she knew through Osmond. Wheatley surely recognized the significance of distributing and selling her books. In a letter addressed to the Reverend Samuel Hopkins, a pastor with ties to both Osborn and the Wheatleys family, Wheatley references Tanner's actions:

> Rev'd Sir, –I take with pleasure the opportunity by the Post, to acquaint you with the arrival of my books from London. I have sealed up a package containing 17 for you, and 2 for Mr. Tanner…and only wait for you to appoint some proper person, by whom I may convey them to you. I received some time ago 20s sterling upon them, by the hands of your son, in a letter from Abour Tanner…Please give my love to her, and I intend to writer her soon. My best respects attend every inquiry after your obliged humble servant, Phillis Wheatley. ("To the Rev'd Samuel Hopkins [Feb 9, 1774]" 175-76)[22]

Wheatley was very much concerned with achieving stability, both economic and spiritual. The poet confided her fears to Tanner, to whom she wrote on May 6, 1774:

> Your tenderness for my welfare demands my gratitude. Assist me, dear Obour! to praise our great benefactor, for the innumerable benefits continually pour'd upon me, that while he strikes one comfort dead he raises up another. But O that I could dwell on & delight in him alone above every other object! While the world hangs loose about us we shall not be in painful anxiety in giving up to God that which he gave to us. ("To Miss Obour Tanner, New Port [May 6, 1774]" 181)

Her emancipation necessitated the generating money from the sales of her book as she was now "upon [her] footing," but the death of Susanna Wheatley brought new preoccupations to

Wheatley. With her mistress gone, the poet's world hung loose and the uncertainty of the future brought the poet "painful anxiety" of what exactly was to come next in her life.

There are no extant records of communication between Wheatley and Susanna. Examining the nature of Phillis's and Susanna Wheatley's relationship is possible, however, by attending to the poet's extant letters to third parties about Susanna's health that were written to members of their transatlantic network. This point is especially important after Susanna Wheatley's death in 1774. According to Grimstead, during her stay in London "Wheatley was called home by the deepening illness of Mrs. Wheatley, who died the next year" (Grimstead 342). In a letter to Tanner, Wheatley informs that her "mistress has been very sick above 14 weeks, & confined to her bed the whole time, but I hope somewhat better now" ("To Obour Tanner, in New Port [Oct 30, 1773]" 172). Susanna Wheatley's death in 1774 left a deep wound in Wheatley's heart, for extant letters indicate that the two women shared a bond well beyond than that of a master and a slave. Susanna and Phillis's relationship was anything but ordinary. In fact, one part of Wheatley's construction of a substitute female community includes Susanna Wheatley's role as what Hill Collins calls an othermother. Hill Collins explains the distinction between othermothers and bloodmothers:

> [i]n many African-American communities, fluid and changing boundaries often distinguish biological mothers from other women who care for children. Biological mothers, or bloodmothers, are expected to care for their children. But African and African-American communities have also recognized that vesting one person with full responsibility for mothering a child may not be wise or possible. As a result, othermothers—women who assist bloodmothers by sharing mothering responsibilities—traditionally have been central to the institution of Black motherhood. (192)

Simply put, othermothers are female caretakers who help with the responsibility of caring and raising of children even if they are not genetically related to the child. Sold into slavery as a child around seven to eight years of age, Wheatley lost her mother at a very young age. In one of her poems, "To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth," Wheatley articulates this separation from her family and Africa:

> I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate
>
> Was snatch'd from *Afric's* fancy'd happy feat:
>
> What pangs excruciating must molest,
>
> What sorrows labour in my parent's breast?
>
> Steel'd was that soul and by no misery mov'd
>
> That from a father seiz'd his babe belov'd:
>
> Such, such my case. And can I then but prey
>
> Others may never feel tyranic sway? (lines 25-31)

In these lines, Wheatley vividly describes the "cruel" experience of being "snatch'd" (line 26) from Africa and writes about how the "sorrow" (line 28) caused to her parents by the act of being "seiz'd" (line 29) from them. This violent uprooting left the young African child vulnerable; this vulnerability, in addition to her young age, were two defining factors in her forming of familial-like bonds with Susanna. In this case, this substitute motherlike relationship was also a response to the dominant colonial nation that excluded her. It is important to note that Hill Collins uses the term "othermother" to refer to African American women who raise the children of other women from similar class positions. Even though the relationship between Phillis and Susanna Wheatley was based on unequal terms in relation to the power and the social standing of both women, I

maintain that Hill Collins's framework is still valid in the examination of their familial-like relationship.

Tragic events in the Wheatley family also likely shaped the relationship between Susanna and the young child who would be renamed Phillis. Carretta notes that "[j]ust a few weeks before the Wheatleys purchased Phillis they had observed the ninth anniversary of the death of their daughter Sarah. The unusually precise recording of her age in her gravestone…suggests that she had been a favorite child... 'Who Died May 11th / 1752, Aged 7 Years / 9 months & 18 Days'" (14). Carretta speculates that John Wheatley's buying of a "young and sickly" (14) child was not a coincidence, but that he "bought [the future Phillis Wheatley] at almost exactly the same age as Sarah had been when she died…such a psychological link between Susanna and Phillis…would help account for the extraordinary relationship that all surviving evidence indicates existed between [them]…" (Carretta 14). Grimstead writes that Susanna, "in 1761, could have had no idea how this shivering stranger was to gain her affection and become 'as a daughter' to her. And as daughters and slaves sometimes do, the child she came to call with love 'my Phillis' was to form her remaining life as much as Mrs. Wheatley was to shape hers" (341).[23]

Susanna Wheatley was greatly invested with "Phillis's religious education as conscientiously as she did that of her own children" (Carretta 24) and "offered her an extraordinary opportunity to develop her talents and interests" (Carretta 37). What is more, Susanna became deeply involved in the process of overseeing the publication of Wheatley's poems before her death on March 3, 1774. Mason reports that "[o]nce Phillis began writing poetry, apparently it was Susanna Wheatley who, in addition to providing Phillis social awareness and decorum, encouraged her publication in every way she could, including useful

contacts, financial backing, and helping to publicize and distribute her works through letters and in information given to newspapers and magazines" ("Introduction" 5).

According to Hill Collins, one's genetic makeup does not hinder the significance of bonds formed among women as "[s]tudies of White mothers of mixed-race children confirm this phenomenon of White mothers becoming politicized in fighting the battles confronting their Black children. Raising their Black children in racist environments fosters new views of motherhood for many of these women" (210). Susanna's exemplary treatment towards Phillis testifies to the change of heart she must surely have underwent in regards to the intellectual capacities of individuals of African descent and the overall general sentiment of white colonial peoples. In a likely manner, Susanna possibly came to understand Phillis's status as an outsider as well as the slave's perceptions of white peoples. Hill Collins highlights the importance of "women-centered networks of community-based care have extended beyond the boundaries of biologically related individuals to include 'fictive kin'" (Stack qtd. in Hill Collins 192-93).

Perhaps one of the strongest arguments in support of the strong emotional bond between Susanna and Phillis may be found in the extant documents on Wheatley's return from London in 1773, which was likely prompted by Susanna's decaying health. According to Carretta, Susanna's illness "may have been the final stage of a recurring illness that had affected her for years" (142). Following her return from London, Phillis earned her legal freedom as well as lost her closest friend. She found Susanna Wheatley in a weakened state, and would "act as her former mistress's secretary" (Carretta 142) for several months until her passing in early 1774. Wheatley's sense of duty to Susanna separated her from her celebrated success in London, which might have resulted in an illustrious career as an emancipated writer, one far removed from impending Revolutionary War in colonial Boston. Addressed to the philanthropist John Thorton,

a close friend of the Wheatley family, the last transatlantic letter Phillis sent in 1773 reported on Susanna's condition:

> When I first arrived at home my mistress was so bad as not to be expected to live above two or three days, but through the goodness of God she is still alive but remains in a very weak & languishing Condition. She begs a continued interest in your most earnest prayers, that she may be duly prepar'd for that great Change which she is likely soon to undergo; she intreats you, as her son [Nathaniel Wheatley] is still in England, that you would take all opportunities to advise & counsel him; / she says she is going to leave him & desires you [to be] a spiritual Father to him…She thanks you heartily for the kind notice you took me while in England… ("Hon'd Sir [John Thornton] [Dec 1, 1773]" 173-74)

The next several months would bring great trials to both Phillis and Susanna. Wheatley's loss of physical health was likely worsened by the sadness brought on by Susanna's declining health and eventual death. Wheatley would remain silent until March 21, 1774, when she wrote the following to Tanner:

> Dear Obour…I have lately met with a great trial in the death of my mistress; let us imagine the loss of a parent, sister, or brother, the tenderness of all of these were united in her. I was a poor little outcast & a stranger when she took me in: not only in her house, but I presently became a sharer in her most tender affections. I was treated by her more like her child than her servant; no opportunity was left unimproved of giving me the best of advice; but in terms how tender! how engaging! This I hope ever to keep in remembrance. Her exemplary life was a greater monitor than all her precepts and instruction; thus we may observe of how much greater force example is than instruction.

> To alleviate our sorrows we had the satisfaction to see her depart in inexpressible raptures, earnest longings, & impatient thirstings for the upper courts of the Lord. Do, my friend, remember me & this family in your closet, that this afflicting dispensation may be sanctify'd to us…I am very affectionately your friend, Phillis Wheatley. ("To Miss Obour Tanner, Newport [March 21, 1774]" 177-78)

Wheatley's letter expresses the deep grief she succumbed to after Susanna's death. In it Wheatley notes that she was treated "more like her child than her servant," a significant point if one considers the dominant attitudes in the North American colonies towards peoples of African descent at the time. Here Wheatley frames her relationship with Susanna as a familial-like relationship. This substitute familial relationship was important to Wheatley, as it partially replaced her relationship with her bloodmother. Wheatley also praises Susanna's capacity of employing her Christian values more through "example" than "instruction," signifying that Susanna was indeed a pious woman who demonstrated her faith through actions, including those that benefited the African poet. Wheatley gives a detailed description of the scene at Susanna Wheatley's deathbed to John Thornton in a letter dated March 29, 1774, eight days after penning Tanner's letter:

> About half an hour before her Death, she spoke with a more audible voice, than she had for 3 months before. She call'd her friends & relations around her, and charg'd them not to have their great work undone till that hour, but to fear God, and keep his Commandments, being ask'd if her faith failed her she answer'd, No… She eagerly longed to depart to be with Christ. She retain'd her senses till the very last moment when "fare well, fare well" with a very low voice, were the last words she utter'd. I saw the

> whole time by the bed side… ("Much Honoured Sir [John Thornton] (March 29, 1774)," *Collected Works* 178-80)

Wheatley's first-hand account of Susanna's last hours attests to the intimate bond that existed between both women. On her deathbed, Susanna called her "friends & relations" to her side. It is likely that Wheatley spent those final moments close to Susanna and sought to ease the pain of her physical departure. According to these letters, Susanna Wheatley was, for Phillis, a source of inspiration as well as a "monitor" whom she utilized to model her life and her actions following her death.

Susanna's death likely energized Wheatley's ideas on the importance of securing a place in heaven. Following Susanna's death, Wheatley's letters become increasingly preoccupied with the uncertainty of the "temporal" space and the necessity of spirituality. Like Susanna Wheatley, who promoted Christian culture by providing shelter to Methodist preachers and giving monetary donations to this evangelical group, Wheatley became invested in encouraging others, like Tanner, to follow a path of Christian virtue. In another letter addressed to John Thornton, Wheatley describes the fear and uncertainty caused by Susanna's passing: "By the great loss I have sustain'd of my best friend, I feel like One forsaken in a desolate wilderness, for such the world appears to me, wandering thus without my friendly guide. I fear lest every step should lead me into error and confusion. She gave me many precepts and instructions; which I hope I shall never forget" ("Much Hon'd Sir [October 30, 1774]" 182-83). Like Tanner, Susanna Wheatley was also a spiritual advisor and mentor for Wheatley. Susanna was an integral part of Wheatley's Christian culture, for her "unwearied diligence to instruct [her] in the principles of the true Religion" lessened her "misery" ("Much Hon'd Sir [October 30, 1774]" 183). Susanna's life and subscription to Christianity guided, one may argue, Wheatley in the years following her death.

In what appears above, I have analyzed the ways in which Wheatley created imagined female communities. This chapter outlines Wheatley's construction of different types of relationships with women in the eighteenth-century-transatlantic world through letter writing, which I argue served her in numerous ways in her attempts at combating social death. These different types of relationships with women facilitated her efforts to publish her book of poems; they allowed her to embrace more fully Christianity; they aided her in comprehending the differences between temporal and spiritual planes of existence, according to the Judeo-Christian religious tradition; and, they provided her with the substitute, familial networks she needed to attempt to reassemble the family that she was permanently separated from in Africa. In a similar manner, the construction of an imagined female community of goddesses—which poems such as "On Recollection" and "On Imagination" demonstrate—allowed her to navigate living as an African in the North American colonies and address how the institution of slavery impacted her life. Wheatley did not allow her status as an enslaved African woman to solely define her; her epistolary efforts reflect that she wished to be known as a Christian, a daughter-like figure, an individual who could organize book sales, and an author. These elements were the foundation upon which Wheatley's female-centered imagined communities were built; these substitute relationships assisted her in her efforts to combat the effects of social death.

Wheatley fought, in other words, to organize a female-centered extended family. As Radford-Hill states, "'[t]he power of black women was the power to make culture…as well as to build shared ways of seeing the world that ensured [their]…survival'" (qtd. in Hill Collins 225). Wheatley's correspondence with Hastings helped her to secure her book's publication and provided meaningful connections to other affluent transatlantic peoples. Tanner was an essential figure in Wheatley's network as well serving as a friend, a spiritual advisor, and a caregiver.

Through their correspondence, Wheatley remained connected to her African heritage and with the belief that as displaced Africans they too would be welcomed into heaven after their deaths and that ultimately the arduous and often painful experiences they encountered would culminate in redemption and salvation. Susanna Wheatley served an equally important role as an othermother, a care giver, and a role model for Wheatley. Susanna aided in helping Wheatley become literate, encouraged her to subscribe to relevant Christian values, and assisted in the publication of her book of poems while also serving as a mentor. It was literacy alongside Susanna's piety and support that allowed Wheatley to construct an imagined female community through the act of epistolary writing. Wheatley's correspondence clearly demonstrates a need for establishing female-centered relationships that would provide care, guidance, emotional support, and spiritual advice.

Notes

1. While Anderson's theories on imagined communities serve as one of the pillars of *Women's Life Writing and Imagined Communities*, Huff also points out the juxtaposition of "the existence of a powerful nation located in space and time to a community imagined by less powerful women whose voices resonate in their texts and actions" (7). In his articulation of an imagined community and the idea of nation-crossing and identity, Anderson overlooks the "diasporic voices, which otherwise may be lost or ignored" and encourages readers to "consider the strategies as well as the cost of resistance," as Huff argues (7). Women and other marginalized peoples do not have the privileges that Anderson articulates in his book—the idea of being able to retain one's identity and language when crossing borders, for example, is normalized by Anderson. However, he fails to consider that this point is only true if one belongs to the dominant sector of a society; a heterosexual, white male from a certain social class who speaks

English will certainly find it easier, for instance, to retain his ideas of national identity and be welcomed into a new community as opposed to a homosexual, Hispanic woman who does not speak English. As Huff states, "by focusing on mainstream national symbols and cultural practices[,] Anderson slights the voices and texts of women and the intricacies of their subjectivities as these influence nation-building" (7).

2. Carretta notes that "Phillis Wheatley arrived in Boston during the transatlantic Great Awakening, which stressed conversion through spiritual rebirth and acceptance of Jesus Christ as one's personal savior. The Methodist Anglicans John Wesley (1703-91), his brother Charles Wesley (1707-88), and George Whitefield (1714-70) started the evangelic reform movement within the Church of England" (25). These three men were at some point in their lives under the wing of the Countess's benefaction.

3. According to Tyson and Schlenther, "[i]t has been estimated by Francis Bretherton that Selina gave over £100,000 to Christian causes…the motives behind [this]…generosity were many and complex; some aristocratic women were genuinely altruistic, some were moved by deep religious convictions, others sought to influence or receive deference or because of their desire to fulfill their mission as 'perfect' wives and aristocratic women" (2).

4. An exemplary case of one of these trained chaplains is the Afro-British minister, David Margrett. Margrett was trained at Trevecca, yet the complete narrative about how he eventually connected with the Countess is unknown. According to Tim Lockley, "it is feasible that, like [John] Marrant and Equiano, he was converted after hearing George Whitefield preach in Britain around that time" (2).

5. Lockey acknowledges the importance of analyzing the presence of Hastings's influence "in any study of the black Atlantic...it was due to her patronage and influence that a volume of

Wheatley's poems and…Gronniosaw's *Narrative* were published in Britain in the early 1770's. John Marrant, whose own narrative went through several editions in 1785, became a preacher in the countess's Methodist 'Connexion' and spent five years ministering to black congregations in Nova Scotia and Massachusetts" (1). Marrant's relationship with the Countess became permanently strained after he was accused of misusing Hastings's money. His 1790 *Journal* defends his actions and positions him as a diligent minster in Nova Scotia.

6. As Carretta writes, "Whitefield made seven missionary tours of North America before his death in Newburyport, Massachusetts, in 1770" (26). Many prominent figures of this time, such as Benjamin Franklin, Benjamin Rush, John Marrant, and Olaudah Equiano were impressed with or directly impacted by the Reverend's presence and the passionate rhetoric he implemented in his sermons. Carretta provides excerpts of these men's commentaries on Whitefield in his biography on Wheatley (26-28).

7. According to Julian Mason, Susanna "became a great admirer of George Whitefield and engaged in missions work by correspondence, encouragement, accommodating visiting members in her home, and (at least occasionally) donations of money" (3).

8. Patrick Moseley offers a contrasting statement to that of Carretta, claiming that "Phillis had a personal relationship with the great awakener, who probably stayed in the Wheatley household during his last tour through the colonies" (103).

9. Numerous colonial newspapers, such as the *Boston-News Letter* and the *New-Hampshire Gazette and Historical Chronicle*, "advertised the poem and recommended that 'this excellent Piece ought to be preserved…on Account of its being [written] by a Native of Africa, and yet would have done Honor to Pope or Shakespere [sic]'" (Carretta 76).

10. Carretta believes that "the publication, distribution, and reception of…Whitefield['s] elegy inaugurated the most productive period of her life" (78).

11. Two extant versions of this epistle exist; the capitalization in these epistles differs. Wheatley likely sent the letter on two different ships to ensure its safe arrival. These letters can be found in Carretta's *Collected Works*.

12. Not all of Wheatley's contemporaries responded favorably to her writing. In his 1774 book, *Slavery not Forbidden by Scripture*, Richard Nisbet wrote, "[a] few instances may be found, of African negroes possessing virtues and becoming ingenious…the Author of the Address gives a single example of a negro girl writing a few silly poems, to prove that blacks are not deficient to us in understanding" (qtd. in Carretta 90). These words echo the general sentiment many white colonists subscribed to in Boston regarding literacy, writing, and individuals of African descent, so the potential for a Boston edition of Wheatley's book never became a reality.

13. One example of these efforts was John Thornton, "a wealthy English merchant and philanthropist, an evangelical Anglican supporter of the Countess of Huntingdon's missionary activities, and a member of her circle…Phillis Wheatley had apparently initiated a correspondence with him to request his guidance in religious matters" (Carretta 86). Readers may conclude that Wheatley's correspondence with Thornton went far beyond the subject of religion; what is more, this relationship serves as a testament to Wheatley's attempts to reach out to the Countess and gain her patronage.

14. Another member of both the Wheatley's and Hastings's transatlantic network was Richard Cary. On May 25, 1772, Cary "reported to the countess…that 'The Negro Girl of Mrs. Wheatley, by Virtious [sic] Behaviour and Conversation in Life, gives Reasons to believe, she's a Subject of Divine Grace—remarkable for her Piety [and] of an extraordinary Genius'" (qtd. in Carretta

92). On March 9, 1773, Bernard Page—another member of both networks—also corresponded with the Countess, expressing his approval of Phillis: "'I have dined at Mr. Wheatley's and seen Phillis; whose Presence and Conversation demonstrate the written Performances, with her Signature, to be hers…[h]er aspect, humble[,] serene[,] & graceful; her Thoughts, luminous and sepulchral, ethereal & evangelical and her Performances most excellent, yea almost inimitable. A wonder of the Age indeed!'" (qtd. in Carretta 92).

15. This visual representation of Wheatley, very likely created by the Boston slave Scipio Moorhead, depicts the enslaved poet in a pose of submissive contemplation. In the essay, "Phillis Wheatley, Melancholy Muse," Astrid Franke states that "present-day critics have argued that the engraving that prefaces Wheatley's poems represented a significant public, even political, act" (225).

16. Mason believes "a message that Mrs. Wheatley was seriously ill led to [Phillis's] returning to Boston earlier than she had intended" ("Introduction" 8). Carretta, on the other hand, argues that "[t]he timing of Phillis's return voyage had probably been planned before she left Boston…[t]he brevity of her stay in London made it unlikely that she could have received a letter from Boston while she was there" (97). In addition, Carretta claims that "Calef's primary purpose in sailing to London was not to see the publication of…*Poems*, but rather to acquire goods as soon as possible for the Boston market and to set sail for home…before the onset of the hurricane season" (Carretta 97).

17. While Jolly addresses the study of correspondence between twentieth-century-feminist activists in her book, *In Love and Struggle*, I argue that the framework she provides can be applied to the study of Wheatley's epistles. Through their correspondence, Wheatley and Tanner offered words of empowerment and encouragement to one another decades before the first

feminist movement in the United States. In this manner, their relationship anticipates the ones explored by Jolly in her book.

18. In her book, *Jupiter Hammon and the Biblical Beginnings of African-American Literature,* Sondra O'Neale notes that Phillis Wheatley frequently visited Newport, Rhode Island since "she accompanied her masters to their vacation home" (66). This observation is important as it provides evidence of the possibility that Tanner and Wheatley did indeed meet in Newport sometime before their correspondence began.

19. Born in England, Sarah Osborn relocated with her parents to the North American colonies as a child and eventually founded a school of her own in 1744 in Newport. In 1765, Osborn began "giving religious instruction in her home. It was a remarkable revival, the only one until the twentieth century initiated, organized, and led by a woman to span the American chasms of sex, race, and age…The largest and steadiest of [her] groups—and the most controversial—was…[blacks]…which averaged about seventy attendees, most of them slaves, and reached about ninety regular participants at one point" (Grimstead 374-75).

20. The spelling of Obour's name is inconsistent throughout Wheatley's body of correspondence. The poet spells the name as Abour (May 19, 1772), Arbour (July 19, 1772), and Obour, using the latter in her letters dating from October 30, 1773 to July 15, 1778, the date of the last known letter from Wheatley to Tanner.

21. Wheatley suffered several maladies that affected her health, among them "early signs of a pulmonary problem" (Carretta 85). In a letter address to John Thorton on 21 April 1772, Phillis writes: "[i]t has pleas'd God to lay me on a bed of sickness, and I knew not but my death bed, but he has been graciously pleas'd to restore me in a great measure" ("Hon'd Sir [John Thorton] [April 21, 1772]," 163). In a letter sent to Tanner later that same year, Wheatley informs that she

has "been in a very poor state of health all the past winter and spring, and now reside[s] in the country for the benefit of its more wholesome air" ("To Abour Tanner, in Newport [July 19, 1772]" 165).

22. As noted by Grimstead, Samuel Hopkins was pastor who "admired Osborn immensely [and] sanctioned and aided her work…Hopkins in all probability knew the Wheatleys too. In the spring of 1769 he preached in the Old South Church, where the Wheatleys worshipped and Phillis was baptized…Possibly contact with Phillis Wheatley and certainly commencement of his ties to Sarah Osborn converted Hopkins to a new view about blacks" (379).

23. Although Carretta acknowledges the powerful bond between Susanna and Phillis Wheatley, he largely frames it in ways that portrays Wheatley more as a trophy than a substitute daughter figure. Carretta notes that "[t]he Wheatley's treatment of Phillis enabled them to publicize their status, piety, and charity. They also used her to display their commitment to evangelical Christianity…[t]he religious training and extraordinary education they gave Phillis began to pay dividends quickly. Religions would give Phillis the motive, means, and opportunity to begin writing in 1765, and she would soon publicly demonstrate her value as an item of conspicuous consumption" (23). Carretta's statements, to a certain degree, dehumanize Wheatley and portray her as merely a spectacle for the amusement of her owners and colonial Bostonians.

24. At the time of this voyage, Wheatley was likely aware of the Court of King's Bench's Mansfield ruling, which changed the "legal status of slavery in Britain" and extended "British liberty to enslaved people of African descent" in 1772 (Carretta 127-28).[24] As Carretta writes, "[p]aradoxically, although Britain was well on its way to becoming the most significant participant in the transatlantic slave trade, for years it had also been the promised land of freedom to slaves in British colonies, particularly those in North America" (127). Carretta

believes there is “compelling” evidence that Wheatley was aware of the Mansfield ruling before her 1773 trip to London. According to Carretta, “[c]olonial newspapers, including ones that had advertised and published Wheatley’s poems since 1767, were reporting and discussing the possible significance of the Mansfield decision by the end of the summer of 1772” (128).

Conclusion

This conclusion expands the analysis of Wheatley's construction of a community of the mind comprised of her mental faculties of imagination and recollection as well as a community of supportive females in the Atlantic world to whom Wheatley wrote letters. I propose that an understanding of Wheatley's community building exercises must go beyond the poems "On Recollection" and "On Imagination" analyzed in chapter one and beyond the letters analyzed in chapter two. In a similar fashion, Wheatley's community of females with whom she corresponded included additional persons beyond Tanner and Hastings. A careful analysis of one of Wheatley's elegies illustrates an additional way in which Wheatley built supportive networks with one other woman in the Atlantic world. This point suggests that further research needs to be completed on Wheatley's elegies and how they enabled the poet to construct other complimentary imagined communities to combat the effects of social death.

In chapter one, "Communities of the Mind: Accessing the Past, Visualizing the Future, and Creating Imagined Worlds," I argue that Wheatley challenges the effects of social death by writing about two specific mental faculties in her poems "On Recollection" and "On Imagination." First, Wheatley uses the poem, "On Recollection," to understand her diasporic status as an enslaved African in the North American colonies. Additionally, in this poem Wheatley explores selected parts from her past which she uses to visualize her future as a possibly emancipated woman. Second, Wheatley, in "On Imagination," constructs an ideal world where she can experience temporary mental freedom. Both poems, I maintain, conceptualize a type of freedom timeline for Wheatley, as she likely wrote "On Recollection" and "On Imagination" in 1771 and 1772 as attempts to visualize mental freedom before being able to experience physical freedom in 1773. I also state that female deities—the goddess of recollection

and the muses—rule over this community of the mind and help Wheatley both process her past and chart a virtuous path for her future.

In chapter two, "Female Communities Constructed Through Letter Writing," I argue that Wheatley, through epistolary writing, created an important, transatlantic relationship with Selina Hastings as well as an important relationship with Obour Tanner, who lived in the North American colonies. In her correspondence with these women, Wheatley articulates her desire to share a Methodist faith with these women as well as her hope that she would eventually experience redemption and Christian salvation. Her epistles to Tanner also record how this Christian acquaintance and individual of African descent aided Wheatley in selling her 1773 book of poems, which provided a valuable source of income for the poet following her manumission. In this chapter, I also examine Wheatley's commentary in her epistles to Tanner and other individuals that addresses the death of one supportive female in her life—Susanna Whatley—and the how this event affected the poet and her outlook on the world. Wheatley's construction of a community of females in Great Britain and the North American colonies via letter writing, I argue, provided her with substitute, familial figures who both served different, yet equally important purposes in the poet's life and aided her in combating the effects of social death.

Despite her efforts to contest the effects of social death through the construction of a transatlantic community of women, Wheatley eventually lost connections to both communities due to the Revolutionary war. The escalating tensions between the Revolutionaries and Loyalists in the North American colonies forced many members of Wheatley's network to go into hiding. Mary Wheatley, the daughter of John and Susanna Wheatley, and her husband, Reverend John Lathrop, for instance, relocated to Providence, Rhode Island "during the 1775-1776 British

occupation of Boston. Phillis Wheatley probably accompanied them" (Carretta 153).[1] The death of Susanna Wheatley and the loss of most of her network of supportive women in Great Britain and the colonies proved detrimental to Wheatley's mental and physical health, which resulted in the end of her imaginative flight via her community of the mind—signaled in the poem, "An Elegy on Leaving." In "An Elegy on Leaving," Wheatley writes about how she can no longer engage in "scenes of transport" (line 2). This information likely indicates that Wheatley could not utilize her faculties of recollection and imagination to escape her temporal physical reality, which was encompassed by death, war, and loss. Although she continued writing until the late-1770's, earning "recognition as an author in the growing tradition of women writers…[which] continued in her absence [in London] during the 1770's and 1780's" (Carretta 166), Wheatley "did not foresee how greatly the economic and social disruptions caused by the American Revolution would alter her [life]" (Carretta 171).

It is likely that these social and economic complications impacted Wheatley's life and her ability to continue to write poetry as she had once done under the Wheatley family's protection. It is also probable that both the uncertainty of the political and economic climate in Boston as well as her own perilous economic situation resulted in Wheatley marrying John Peters, a free person of African descent whom she likely met before John Wheatley's death in 1778 (Carretta 172). In marrying Peters, Wheatley gave up the freedom and independence she had coveted for so long. As Phillis Peters, she had to sacrifice her "legal existence, [which was] consolidated into that of the husband" (Blackstone qtd. in Carretta 174). The lack of available information on Wheatley during the last years of her life—ranging from 1778 through 1784—likely was caused by her married status as well as the complications caused by the Revolutionary war. However, Wheatley did not completely stop writing poetry. In 1779, she submitted a proposal for a second

volume of poems, many of which offered commentary on the deteriorating political relationship between the colonies and Great Britain. Though this book was never published and many of the poems are nonextant, the proposal also included a number of elegies on the deaths of prominent Revolutionary figures who perished in the war for independence.

I argue that one of the ways in which Wheatley built additional supportive networks with other women in the Atlantic world is through the writing of elegies. One additional member of Wheatley's community of supportive women was Mary Wooster, widow of David Wooster, a General in the Revolutionary army and a member of the poet's epistolary network. In order to fully understand Wheatley's relationship with Mary Wooster it is necessary to examine the poet's letter to and elegy on David Wooster. These texts facilitated the women's relationship. The exact beginning of Wooster and Wheatley's relationship is unknown; however, one extant letter written by Wheatley to Wooster underscores at least one part of the foundation of this relationship. In this letter, dated October 30, 1773, Wheatley offers a detailed description of her trip to London to oversee the publication of her 1773 *Poems*. Importantly, this epistle also contains the first known reference to Wheatley's manumission. In this letter to Wooster, Wheatley references her 1773 book and asks for "the favour that you would…use your interest with Gentlemen & Ladies of your acquaintance to subscribe also…as I am to have half the Sale of the Books. This I am the more solicitous for, as I am now upon my own footing" ("Sir [David Wooster] [Oct 30, 1773]" 170). The fact that Wheatley was now "upon [her] own footing" when she wrote this letter suggests that the Wheatley family emancipated her sometime before October 1773 and that the topic of freedom for individuals of African descent in the North American colonies was an important one for both the poet and Wooster. This letter indicates that Wheatley

also included some white men in her epistolary network and in her network of peoples who helped with the sales of her book of poems.

No other mention of David Wooster is found in Wheatley's extant body of correspondence, but she did write a July 15, 1778 letter to Mary Wooster, the widow of David Wooster. In her letter to Mary Wooster, Wheatley included the elegy, "On the Death of General Wooster," which was written after he was mortally wounded in battle on May 2, 1777. Significantly, the letter records the relationship between both women and indicates that Mary Wooster, like Tanner and David Wooster, aided Wheatley in the sales of her book. In the letter, Wheatley asks Wooster to "do [her] a great favour by returning to [her] by the first [opportunity] those books that remain unsold and remitting the money for those that are sold" ("Madam [Mary Wooster] [July 15, 1778]" 186). In this letter, Wheatley also expresses her thanks to Mary Wooster for "the care you show me," and laments "not to have been honour'd with a personal acquaintance" ("Madam [Mary Wooster] [July 15, 1778]" 186) with her. The fact that Wheatley was disappointed "not to have been honour'd with a personal acquaintance" with Mary Wooster informs readers that these women never met face to face. The epistle serves, then, to bridge the physical distance between both women and indicates another way in which Wheatley used letter writing to add another white woman in the North American colonies to her epistolary network. This letter also demonstrates that the poet was aware of the importance of establishing meaningful relationships with women both in Great Britain as well as in the North American colonies.

Like her first letter to Hastings, which contained an elegy on George Whitefield, Wheatley's letter to Mary Wooster contained the elegy on her late husband. Wheatley's elegies, which honored the lives of deceased persons, constructed communities by bringing readers

together through a shared sense of loss and grief. With these elegies, including ones written for parents who had lost children and women who had lost husbands, Wheatley created additional supportive communities that I did not address in chapters one and two of this thesis. In other words, Wheatley aspired in her elegies to create extended, more encompassing communities that went beyond a transatlantic or colonial Christian culture, as was the case with both Hastings and Tanner.

In her epistle to Mary Wooster, Wheatley uses both the letter and the enclosed elegy to create a community among these two colonial women who shared a sense of grief and loss. Through the institution of slavery, Wheatley had been forcefully removed from Africa, resulting in her being severed from her family and culture. Like the many recipients of her elegies, Wheatley had also experienced tremendous loss. She addresses the effects of her enslavement in her poem, "To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth," in which the speaker of the poem explains how she "young in life, by seemingly cruel fate / Was snatchd from *Afric's* fancy'd happy seat" (lines 24-25). The speaker acknowledges she was "snatched" from Africa, a place which she describes positively as being a "happy seat." Wheatley then acknowledges the "sorrows" and grief in her "parent's breast" (line 27) following her forced removal from her home. In lines 28 and 29, the speaker of Wheatley's poem acknowledges how a "babe belov'd" was stolen "from a father." In this poem, the speaker acknowledges the significance of addressing this captivity and "pray[ing that] / Others may never feel tyrannic sway" (line 30-31); here the speaker desires that slavery will never tear families apart again.

It is possible that this sense of her own loss motivated Wheatley to console women and men in the colonies who experienced loss, specifically the death of loved ones. This connection to loss and death may have inspired her to write "On the Death of General Wooster," which

opens with the following language: “From this [David Wooster’s death] the Muse rich consolation draws” (line 1); in other words, Wooster’s death inspires Wheatley’s “pen” (line 5) to compose an elegy on his life. In lines 5 and 6, Wheatley wonders “How shall my pen his warlike deeds proclaim / Or paint them fairer on the list of Fame.” The poet expresses her desire to praise Wooster’s patriotic deeds and wonders how she can adequately describe them with words or imagery. I argue that “On the Death of General Wooster” Wheatley used war and death in strategic ways to connect to Mary Wooster and even attempt to alter her worldview. Interestingly, Wheatley chooses to reconstruct what she believed were David Wooster’s last words in this elegy. Wheatley places anti-slavery rhetoric in Wooster’s mouth: “‘But how, presumptuous shall we hope to find / Divine acceptance with th’ Almighty mind— / While yet (O deed Ungenerous!) they disgrace / And hold in bondage Afric’s blameless race?’” (lines 26-30). In these lines, Wheatley employs David Wooster’s voice to ask the reader, how can Revolutionaries expect to receive “Divine acceptance” from the “Almighty” when these same individuals choose to keep individuals of African descent as slaves in the North American colonies?

This question connects to Wheatley’s 1774 letter to Reverend Samson Occom, in which she writes: “This I desire not for their [Revolutionaries’] Hurt, but to convince them of the strange Absurdity of their Conduct… [h]ow well the cry for Liberty, and the reverse Disposition for the Exercise of oppressive Power over others agree” (“Revered and Honoured Sir [February 11, 1774]” 177). In this letter to Occom, Wheatley criticizes the contradictory nature between the Revolutionaries’ demands for independence and freedom along with their decision to continue enslaving individuals of African descent in the colonies. Wheatley likely used her elegy on Wooster as an opportunity to address this very contradiction and make sure that Mary was aware

of it. As a general and a Revolutionary hero, David Wooster was well-known and respected by the colonists who supported the war for independence. It is possible that Wheatley believed that by placing anti-slavery rhetoric in Wooster's mouth as his finals words, she could both persuade Mary to acknowledge the colonists' contradictory practices as well as make claims that she was not necessarily allowed to make because of her status as a marginalized person. In other words, in the elegy Wooster articulates Wheatley's ideas on the Revolutionary war and the colonists' contradictory actions.

Wheatley uses David Wooster's death to stress an additional point about the significance of his passing to his widow. In her letter to Mary Wooster, Wheatley first hopes that the "foregoing lines meet with your acceptance and approbation" ("Madam [Mary Wooster] [July 15, 1778]" 186). And yet, Wheatley did not only wish for acceptance from Mary in this letter; as additional lines of the elegy indicate, she also aimed to persuade Mary Wooster to reflect upon her late husband's stance on the institution of slavery. In the elegy, Wheatley addresses Mary Wooster with the following language: "Tis thine, fair partner of his life, to find / His virtuous path and follow close behind" (lines 35-36). According to these lines, Wheatley uses David Wooster's last words to encourage Mary Wooster "to find" her husband's path of virtue, indicating that the recipient of the letter needed to change her life if she wished to meet him in "the ethereal Skies / Where in succession endless pleasures rise!" (lines 37-40). Wheatley proposes to Mary Wooster that if she finds and then follows the same virtuous path as her husband and adopts the same anti-slavery position stated by her husband, she will be reunited with him in the afterlife. This language illustrates a continuation of Wheatley's transnational religious community—particularly with the Countess—one in which a Christian's life concludes with an afterlife in which they will all be united if they continue to work towards equality.

Wheatley's correspondence with Mary Wooster is, then, unique. In this exchange, Wheatley uses both an epistle and elegy to push Mary Wooster to take a specific political position regarding which parties deserved freedom in the colonies: namely that the poet's and other individuals of African descent's battles for freedom were just as important as the white Revolutionary cause for freedom for which her husband died. This combination of letter and poem indicates that Wheatley viewed both types of texts as important ways not only to address the plight of enslaved peoples in the colonies but to alter other people's commitment—in this case, Mary Wooster—to battling the institution of slavery in the colonies. Wheatley used these two texts to attempt to form a community with Wooster through shared loss but also to shape her into an individual sharing political positions that would assist the poet and other enslaved persons in the colonies to achieve freedom.

This conclusion also extends an understanding on Wheatley's community of the mind beyond the observations on "On Recollection" and "On Imagination" found in chapter one. Specifically, I argue that in Wheatley's poem, "An Elegy on Leaving," the last poem she wrote before her death on December 5, 1784, the poet acknowledges the loss of her community of the mind. "An Elegy on Leaving," I maintain, articulates the grief that Wheatley feels after realizing that she will lose her connection to her community of the mind. I propose that "An Elegy on Leaving" is a poem that mourns the death of Wheatley's community of the mind. The poet had been emancipated for roughly eleven years when she wrote "An Elegy on Leaving," so she did not need to escape physical bondage any longer via her mind. However, the elegy indicates that Wheatley still used poetry as a means of escape and retreat even after she was a freed person and that she made different comments on her community of the mind in this elegy compared with "On Imagination."

Wheatley extends in “An Elegy on Leaving” her commentary on her community of the mind. Rather than celebrating the powers of recollection and imagination, two vital members of her community of the mind, Wheatley mourns in the elegy that the rural retreats provided by imagination will no longer be available to her—likely because she anticipates her physical death or a type of creative death. The first lines of the poem, “FAREWEL! ye friendly bow’rs, ye streams adieu, / I leave with sorrow each sequester’d seat” (lines 1-2), set the tone of the elegy. The speaker of the poem bids goodbye to the comfortable, friendly shelter that the natural world provided her. Filled with “sorrow,” the speaker realizes in bidding “FAREWEL” to the “bow’rs” and “streams” that she will leave behind her contemplative solitude in this natural setting. Lines 3 and 4 begin to describe the pleasing rural views she realizes she must leave: “The lawns, where oft I swept the morning dew, / The groves, from noon-tide rays a kind retreat.” Here Wheatley describes the “groves” and how they provide shelter from “noon-tide rays,” symbolizing the protection that she associated with her community of the mind.

As the above lines indicate, the speaker of the poem initially praises the rural retreat. However, Wheatley laments that she must permanently leave this rural retreat, for she notes that “reluctant, I forsake” this natural setting (lines 7-8). Even though the speaker offers hesitation concerning her decision, she admits that she must renounce the rural retreats that allowed her to escape from the “crowds and noise” (line 8). The “crowds” and “noise” that the speaker references in “An Elegy on Leaving” likely represent post-war Boston and her daily life in this city. However, it is important to note that Wheatley’s commentary in “An Elegy on Leaving” on her community of the mind differs from what she writes about in “On Imagination.” In the last stanza of “On Imagination,” the speaker states that she must “reluctant leave the pleasing views” (line 48) of “mountains tipt with radiant gold” (line 47). Here, the speaker acknowledges that she

cannot permanently remain in the realm of imagination, but Wheatley does not write that she must "forsake" this space or abandon it for good in "On Imagination." In "An Elegy on Leaving," however, Wheatley praises the rural retreats found in "On Imagination" but she admits that she needs to renounce them.

Wheatley's need to "forsake" the rural, contemplative retreats in "An Elegy on Leaving" may be explained by the detrimental effects the Revolutionary War had on Wheatley's supportive network, which helped her to publish her book of poems. Many of these individuals were Loyalists who fled the colonies when the Revolutionary war started in 1776 or who were dead by 1784, the year in which "An Elegy on Leaving" was written. The Revolutionary victory did not necessarily improve Wheatley's life or the lives of other individuals of African descent in what became the United States. Therefore, "An Elegy on Leaving" may be an acknowledgment of the inability of her poetry to alter the colonial society and the newly formed United States in which Wheatley lived. Wheatley possibly felt that this newly formed society still did not provide her with a satisfactory place of belonging; this exclusion may have resulted in an additional need to escape her temporal reality through mental flight, as seen in "On Imagination." However, "An Elegy on Leaving" signals the death of those "scenes of transport" that she writes about in her poem. Additionally, Wheatley may have been admitting that she could not support herself or her family by the writing of poetry and that she needed to dedicate an elegy on her departure from this creative act.

Despite this renouncing of the rural, contemplative world, the speaker in "An Elegy on Leaving" chooses to continue to praise the natural world and outline how this space protects her in additional parts of the poem. The speaker describes "The solemn pines, that, winding through the vale / In graceful rows attract the wand'ring eye" (lines 9-10), which also "veil [her] from the

fervid sky" (line 12). Here the "pines" that catch the speaker's attention shield or protect her from the sky; Wheatley expresses her gratitude towards nature for providing her with protection. The fifth stanza, however, marks an important moment in the poem, one in which the speaker takes a significant step in thinking about the natural world. Lines 17 and 18, "Rapt with the melody of Cynthio's strain, / There first my bosom felt poetic flame," explain how the natural world provided the space for the speaker to feel "poetic flame" for the first time.[2] In this line, Cynthio is a representation of the moon, which impacts the entire natural world in this stanza. The speaker links the moon and a rural setting with inspiration and the writing of poetry. Therefore, like "On Recollection" and "On Imagination," "An Elegy on Leaving" addresses the process of writing poetry and what exactly inspires Wheatley to write poems about her mind. The speaker then notes how "Mute was the bleating language of the plain, / And with his lays the wanton fawns grew tame" (lines 19-20). The speaker uses the adjective "bleating" (line 19) to describe the language of this rural space; the "plain" on which the speaker finds herself does not only inspire her to write poetry; the "plain" on which the force of Cynthio's or the moon's rays shine also domesticate the "wanton fawns" (line 20). In other words, the speaker states that the strength of Cynthio's rays provided her with an introduction to "poetic flame" and tamed or domesticated nature for the speaker to understand it and write poems about this space.

In the next stanza, the speaker characterizes the time spent in this rural retreat as "pleasing hours [which] are ever flown; / Ye scenes of transport from my thoughts retire" (lines 21-22). These "scenes of transport" likely allude to the imaginative flight that transports Wheatley from the physical realm into another universe in "On Imagination." Lines 17 and 18 from "On Imagination" read as follows: "We on thy pinions [Imagination's] can surpass the wind, / And leave the rolling universe behind." In "On Imagination," Wheatley celebrates the

ability to leave "the rolling universe behind" through imagination's power. However, the speaker in "An Elegy on Leaving" once again laments that her relationship to her community of mind has changed; she can no longer experience the benefits of this community, as she has to permanently depart from it. As Wheatley writes, "Those rural joys no more the day shall crown, / No more my hand shall wake the warbling lyre" (lines 23-24). Here the speaker acknowledges that she will never again compose poetry; her hand shall never again "wake the warbling lyre" (line 24), an allusion to the stringed instruments used by bards in classical Greece ("Lyre"). Wheatley's "An Elegy on Leaving," is, then, a somber poem, one which she likely wrote because she knew she was going to die and would no longer write poetry. The elegy is a farewell to her community of the mind.

The elegy ends with the speaker expressing her desire for "sweet Hope, from thy divine retreat" to visit her "breast, and chase [her] cares away" (lines 25-26). She also states that this "sweet Hope" may "Bring calm Content" and "gild [her] gloomy seat" (line 27). This last stanza likely connects to Wheatley's letters to Tanner that address her acceptance of the brevity of a physical existence on the earthly plane. As I argue in chapter two, Tanner and Wheatley's relationship was founded largely on their hopes that Christianity would offer them salvation and stability after death, a stability that the two could never find in the North American colonies. Wheatley's letters to Tanner articulate her belief of both a temporal and a spiritual plane of existence and express the hope that she would experience life after death in heaven. For instance, in her May 29, 1778 letter to Tanner—one of the last extant letters composed by the poet—Wheatley believes that "[t]he vast variety of scenes that have pass'd before us these 3 years past, will to a reasonable mind serve to convince us of the uncertain duration of all things Temporal" ("Miss Obour Tanner, Worcester [May 28, 1778]" 185). As this epistle indicates, Wheatley

acknowledges that she was well-aware of life's uncertainty and the temporal nature of existence. In the face of this uncertainty and her lack of control over this temporal plane, Wheatley holds on to the assurance in "An Elegy on Leaving" that she can count on her spiritual state once she has passed away—that "calm Content" will "cheer [her] bosom with her heav'nly ray" (line 28). The fact that Wheatley wishes to be impacted by this "heav'nly ray" suggests that she was anticipating her physical death and ascent to heaven. Wheatley very likely associates, then, the "divine retreat" (line 25) with the Judeo-Christian conception of heaven.

Considering that "An Elegy on Leaving" was the last poem Wheatley wrote, this poem incorporates important Christian elements and contains commentary on the poet's farewell to the act of writing poetry. The "vast variety of scenes" that she describes in her 1778 letter to Tanner likely reference the chaos of the Revolutionary war and the loss of the network of peoples in colonial Boston (and elsewhere) who helped Wheatley in various ways ranging from providing her with spiritual guidance to assisting her with her book sales. The speaker of "An Elegy on Leaving" realizes, then, that her community of the mind has collapsed, like her community of supportive individuals in the colonies. "An Elegy on Leaving" may even symbolize the realization—the "sweet Hope" she describes in line 25—that Wheatley knew in some ways that she was going to die. With this knowledge, Wheatley pays tribute to the significance of her community of the mind one last time, even though she knew she had to say "Farewel!" (line 1) to it.

As I argue in this last part of the thesis, Wheatley's elegy on David Wooster, her letter to Mary Wooster, and her poem "An Elegy on Leaving" help to understand the poet's legacy in new ways. According to Gates, Jr., Wheatley's *Poems* created both "the black American literary tradition *and* the black woman's literary tradition," an extraordinary feat when one considers that

"both of these traditions were founded simultaneously by a black woman" ("In Her Own Write" 123). Wheatley used selective poems and letters to construct different types of female communities of care to combat social death and to provide her with ways to understand and survive in the North American colonies (which would later be known as the United States). Wheatley's elegies and the imagined communities they constructed via loss and mourning were an integral part of her efforts to combat the effects of social death. In the eighteenth century, an enslaved woman of African descent dared to construct alternative, imagined communities through poetry and letters. The loss and pain she experienced as a victim of the Middle Passage and the institution of slavery became a source of authority for Wheatley. Her grief allowed her to empathize with other individuals in the North American colonies who also experienced loss in different ways and console them via her elegies. While Wheatley's letters demonstrate her need for a substitute, familial community mostly comprised of women in the Atlantic world, ones who would care and support her through a shared Judeo-Christian faith, her elegies reveal her desire to care for and support others who were experiencing death and loss. Therefore, Wheatley may now be understood as the creator of a tradition within the African American community of building alternative, imagined communities that created safe spaces to explore death, loss, and grief.

Notes

1. Wheatley's possible relocation to Rhode Island during the British military occupation of Boston placed her in close proximity to Tanner between 1775 and 1776. This move may have provided the circumstances for them to have personally met.

2. As Shields notes, "[b]oth Apollo and his twin, Artemis (or the moon), were born in Mount Cynthus…[o]rdinarily one would expect to find the feminine form of Cynthus, 'Cynthia,' which

is used as a synonym for Artemis" (*Collected Works* 309). The male gendering of this Greek mythological figure was likely a printer's or editor's error. Given my arguments on Wheatley's knowledge of the nine muses, who were all females, readers cannot attribute this error to the poet. Wheatley's poem, "Recollection," a variant of "On Recollection" printed by the editors of the *London Magazine* in March 1772, incorrectly refers to the goddess Mneme as a male. See Shield's *Collected Works* (212). Wheatley corrected this error in "On Recollection."

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