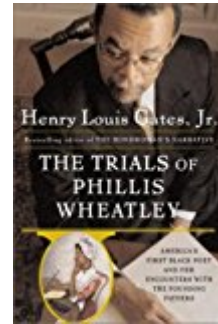


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Phillis Wheatley and Thomas Jefferson: The Birth of African-American Literary Criticism

In *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley: America's First Black Poet and Her Encounters with the Founding Fathers*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., examines the significance of the work of the eighteenth-century African-American poet Phillis Wheatley in three ways: (1) through analysis of Wheatley's intellectual battles with a White leadership that viewed the Black race as inferior; (2) through a study of the author's status as an African slave in America; and (3) through an exploration of the poet's impact in how Americans, Whites and Blacks, have, since before the publication of Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787), viewed race in narrow and dichotomous terms. By prioritizing Wheatley's status as an African slave who proved through her work that Blacks were human, Gates makes significant contributions not only to the growing scholarship in Black Atlantic Studies, but also to the inquiries on the history of race in America, especially the historical construction of Whiteness as an essential identity that subsumes Blackness. Tracing the beginnings of a long tradition of White imagination of Blackness, Gates reveals, through analysis of a vast literature spanning from the writings of Jefferson and of earlier intellectuals to the work of critics of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s, the large impact that Wheatley's

work has had on American culture.

First, *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley* contributes to the groundbreaking studies on Wheatley that have emerged since the 1990s and earlier from the scholars of the Black Atlantic world. According to Paul Gilroy, the term "Black Atlantic world" refers to the transformations that resulted from "this historical conjunction—the stereophonic, bilingual, or bifocal cultural forms originated by, but no longer the exclusive property of, blacks dispersed within the structures of feeling, producing, communicating, and remembering." [1] This scholarship is mainly concerned with the historical and cultural connections, disconnections, and struggles among Black communities from around the world. Migration and resistance are major dynamics of this Black Atlantic world. As Gilroy wrote: "The history of the black Atlantic since then, continually crisscrossed by the movement of black people—not only as commodities—but engaged in various struggles towards emancipation, autonomy, and citizenship, is a means to re-examine the problems of nationality, location, identity, and historical memory." [2]

The Trials of Phillis Wheatley contributes to the inquiry that Gilroy outlines above because it represents

Wheatley as a major participant in the struggle for freedom and equality in the Black Diaspora. First, as Gates suggests, Wheatley's resistance might have begun on the slave-ship called the *Phillis* which brought her to Boston on July 11, 1761, when she was about seven years old (pp. 16-17). According to Gates, among the cargo of the ship, which had recently returned from gathering slaves in Senegal, Sierra Leone, and the Isles de Los, off the coast of Guinea, was "a slender frail, female child" who was probably from the Senegambian coast of Africa (p. 16). Although he identifies Wheatley as a Senegambian, Gates does not examine the historical circumstances in West Africa which led to Wheatley's enslavement. In this sense, *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley* is narrow and particularist because it does not reflect the "Africancentric" approach to Black Atlantic history which, as Paul Lovejoy suggests in *Identity in the Shadow of Slavery* (2000), "introduces a perspective that is *not* centered in the history of Europe or colonial America but instead in trans-Atlantic origins."^[3]

Nevertheless, Gates's book is, to a limited degree, "trans-Atlantic" since it reflects the influence of Wheatley's work in the international formation of a Black Atlantic literary culture. Referring to Vincent Carretta, a major scholar of eighteenth-century Black Atlantic literature, Gates argues that a 1772 court ruling in England, which "made it illegal for slaves who had come to England to be forcibly returned to the colonies," helped create a positive atmosphere for Blacks (p. 31). Despite its involvement in slavery, England, unlike the United States, gave Black intellectuals the opportunity to publish their writings. As Gates shows, in 1772, when Wheatley finally received from her eighteen White examiners a document attesting to her ability to write literature, her benefactor and owner Susanna Wheatley turned to her friends in England for help (p. 30). Gates explains: "Through the captain of the commercial ship that John Wheatley used for trade with England, Susanna engaged a London publisher, Archibald Bell, to bring out the manuscript" (p. 31). Gates continues: "And so, against the greatest odds, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* became the first book of poetry published by a person of African descent in the English language, marking the beginning of an African-American literary tradition" (p. 31).

The scant data on Wheatley's biography shows that there are key experiences such as the events that led to Wheatley's capture and the predicaments that the child faced during the Middle Passage that remain to be known. Another difficulty in the scholarship about Wheatley is the lack of information on the interactions

that Wheatley had in her early career with her White critics. Gates writes: "We had no transcript of the exchanges that occurred between Miss Wheatley and her eighteen examiners" (p. 29). Gates gives a detailed list of these critics, who included Thomas Hutchinson, who was the governor of Massachusetts between 1769 and 1774; Andrew Oliver, a Harvard graduate and "the colony's lieutenant governor (and Hutchinson's brother-in-law through his wife's sister)" (p. 8); the Reverend Mather Byles, who was another Harvard graduate and a Tory Loyalist; the poet and satirist Joseph Green; the Reverend Samuel Cooper, who was a poet, Harvard graduate, and minister nicknamed "the silver-tongued preacher" (pp. 10-11); James Bowdoin, who was "one of the principal American exemplars of the Enlightenment" (p. 11); the Reverend Samuel Mather, known as "one of the greatest in New England" (p. 14); and many other White dignitaries of Boston.

In order to understand the purpose of the examiners' meeting with Wheatley, one must read the essay "The Day When America Decided That Blacks Were of a Species That Could Create Literature" that Gates wrote in *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* in Autumn 1994.^[4] In that article, Gates asked a series of questions on the relations between the White leadership and Wheatley in eighteenth-century America. Referring to a meeting that 18 notable White men of Boston held in the city's courthouse in the spring of 1772 to give Wheatley an "oral examination" about her work, Gates asked: "Why had this august group been assembled? Why had it seen fit to summon this young African girl, scarcely 18 years old, before it?" Gates later wondered: "Why was the creative writing of the African of such importance to the eighteenth century's debate over slavery?" (p. 51) Seeking to answer these questions, Gates suggested that the White men's attitude was a product of the belief of both Americans and Europeans in the incapacity of Africans to produce literature, an assumption which, as Gates argued, was antithetical to the Cartesian tenets of the Enlightenment movement which equated reason to humanity (p. 51).

In *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley*, Gates takes his inquiry further by raising serious issues about the relationships between the White leadership in eighteenth-century America and African-American literature. In an attempt to understand the obstacles that Wheatley had to overcome in America for being a Black woman intellectual, Gates traces them to the racialist discourse which surrounded her poetry on that meeting which was held in Boston one afternoon in October 1772. Gates writes:

“The panel had been assembled to verify the authorship of her poems and to answer a much larger question: was a Negro capable of producing literature?” (p. 5). In this gathering, Gates identifies an important moment in African-American literature: “Their interrogation of this witness, and her answers, would determine not only this woman’s fate but the subsequent direction of the anti-slavery movement, as well as the birth of what a later commentator would call ‘a new species of literature,’ the literature written by slaves” (p. 7).

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

First, Gates describes the relations between Jefferson and Wheatley as similar to those between a biased critic of African-American literature and a genuine African-American writer. The interaction between the two individuals was tainted by the subtle racism that prevented Jefferson from acknowledging the merit of Wheatley’s poems. Taking part in the racist tradition in which philosophers of the Renaissance and of the Enlightenment such as Francis Bacon, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel misrepresented Blacks as people who possessed no arts, sciences, or feeling, Jefferson was prone to demean not only Wheatley’s *Poems* but also the entire Black race. Gates writes: “Thomas Jefferson had associated Africans with apes: black males find white women more beautiful than black women, Jefferson had argued, as ‘uniformly as is the preference of the Orangutan for the black woman over his own species’” (p. 26). Jefferson’s racism, Gates suggests, resonated with the Elizabethan conception of the Great Chain of Being, which excluded Black people from the human family.[5]

Paradoxically, as Gates shows, unlike the European Enlightenment thinkers, Jefferson “has qualified praise for the African’s musical propensities” (p. 43). Gates refers to the passage in *Notes on the State of Virginia* where Jefferson described Blacks as being “more generally gifted than whites with accurate ears for tune and time” (p. 43). Another paradox Gates reveals is that Jefferson, who was clearly a racist philosopher, coincidentally became the first critic of African-American litera-

ture. Gates describes a letter that Jefferson received from his French colleague François, “the Marquis de Barb-Marbois,” in which the author commended Wheatley for having published “a number of poems in which there is imagination, poetry, and zeal” (p. 42). As Gates points out, Jefferson was not pleased by such high appraisal and was quick to prove the contrary to the French critic. Gates explains: “As outlined in *Queries VI and XIV of the Notes*, Jefferson lays out clearly his views. ‘The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism.’ The criticism comes in a passage setting out his views on the mental capacity of the various races of man. ‘In general, their existence appears to participate more of sensation than reflection,’ Jefferson writes about blacks” (p. 42).

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

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

Gates’s argument that Jefferson’s racism belied his guilt-ridden conscience about Black humanity is pertinent, because it sheds light on a major figure of American history whose views on race are fraught with contradictions. Reading the 1964 edition of *Notes on the State of Virginia*, one can see that Jefferson’s dualism towards Blacks also stemmed from fear, since he was deeply convinced that the human beings he had enslaved would by virtue of their natural rights seek vengeance when op-

portunity arose. Because he was afraid of alliance between runaway slaves and the British army, Jefferson devised a code for the repatriation of slaves to Africa. He wrote: “[The] revised code further proposes to proportion crimes and punishments ... pardon and privilege of clergy are proposed to be abolished; but if the verdict be against the defendant, the court in their discretion may allow a new trial. No attainder to cause a corruption of blood, or forfeiture of dower. Slaves guilty of offences punishable in others by labor, to be transported to Africa, or elsewhere, as the circumstances of the time admit, there to be continued in slavery. A rigorous regimen proposed for those condemned to labor.”[6]

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

’Twas mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land, Taught my benighted soul to understand That there’s a God, that there is a *Saviour* too: Once I redemption neither sought nor knew. Some view our sable race with scornful eye, “Their colour is a diabolic die,” Remember, *Christians*, *Negro*s, black as *Cain*, May be refin’d, and join th’ angelic train. (pp. 70-71)

In this poem Wheatley ambiguously calls Africa “my Pagan land” while she celebrates her Blackness and her Christian faith. As Gates shows, “On Being Brought” has unfortunately become “the most reviled poem in African-American literature” for the following reasons: “To speak in such glowing terms about the ‘mercy’ manifested by the slave trade was not exactly going to endear Miss Wheatley to black power advocates in the 1960s” (p. 71). Gates’s rationale weakens the importance of “On Being Brought” because the poem, which is fraught with contradictions in Wheatley’s relationship to Africa, can help us understand the poet’s views on the relations between the Black Atlantic world and Africa. In this sense, the criticisms of Wheatley’s attitudes about race, which Gates summarizes and debunks in the second half of his

book, are not meaningless, because they help us position a major Black intellectual in the current conversation about the global significance of racial identity and social struggle. Frankly, one wonders why Gates seems to be irritated by twentieth-century Black critics such as Stephen Henderson, Addison Gayle, Jr., and Amiri Baraka, who he attacks for either re-enacting Jefferson’s indictment of Wheatley (p. 82) or for seeking “forms of black expression” or “cultural affirmation” in Wheatley’s work (pp. 74-84). Gates writes: “Too black to be taken seriously by white critics of the eighteenth century, Wheatley was now considered too white to interest black critics of the twentieth. Precisely the sort of mastery of the literary craft and themes that led to her vindication before the Boston town-hall tribunal was now summoned as proof that she was, culturally, an impostor.... As new cultural vanguards sought to police and patrol the boundaries of black art, Wheatley’s glorious carriage would become her tumbrel” (p. 82).

Gates’s comment reflects conflictive views about race and national or cultural identity. It is unsettling to know that Gates, who uses African iconography in his theorizing of African-American literature, is nonetheless disturbed when critics try to do the same thing with Wheatley’s work. Referring to the critics of the Black Arts Movement, Gates writes: “We can almost imagine Wheatley being frog-marched through hall in the nineteen-sixties or seventies, surrounded by dashiki-clad, flowering figures of ‘the Revolution’: ‘What is Ogun’s Relation to Esu?’: ‘Who are the sixteen principal deities in the Yoruba pantheon of Gods?’ ‘Santeria derived from which African culture?’ And finally ‘Where you gonna be when the revolution comes, *sista*?’” (pp. 83-84). This statement reflects a condescension toward the same African culture that Gates celebrates in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (1988), where he traces “the black voice” in African-American literature to Esu Elegbera, the Yoruba trickster who has the power to create free-play and indeterminacy in the Black text. Esu received this power from a calabash that the High God Olorun [or Olodumare] in Yoruba mythology gave him.[7] If Gates is apprehensive about African-centric interpretations of Wheatley’s work, why does he end *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley* with an anagram-translated form of “On Being Brought” in which the narrator says:

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

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

The Trials of Phillis Wheatley makes great contributions to Black Atlantic Studies in its own ways by representing Wheatley as an African slave who achieved radical transformations in her status and in that of the entire African race through intellectual means. The most pleasurable moment in the book is when Gates writes: “Essentially, she [Wheatley] was auditioning for the humanity of the entire African people” (p. 27). Some fifteen years after she was brought to America as slave, Wheatley became the first Black writer to publish a poem, dismantling the racist view that Black people were not intelligent or human. As Gates has convincingly shown in his book, Wheatley’s success has had a strong impact on American culture, notably on Thomas Jefferson’s views on race and African-American literature and on the tradition of minimizing Wheatley’s work that it has engendered. However, though it is warranted, Gates’s critique of Jefferson’s legacy in Black literary criticism is problematic because it centers mainly on the critics of the Black Arts Movement who rightfully seek racial and/or cultural affirmation and authenticity in Wheatley’s poems. These critics were simply trying to place Wheatley’s work in the global history of the struggle and survival of

Black people and cultures.

Notes

[1]. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 3.

[2]. Paul Gilroy, “Cultural Studies and Ethnic Absolutism,” in Lawrence Greenberg, et al., eds., *Cultural Studies* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 193.

[3]. Paul E. Lovejoy, ed., *Identity in the Shadow of Slavery* (London and New York: Continuum, 2000), p. 1.

[4]. In the preface to *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley*, Gates says that his book “is an expanded version of the Thomas Jefferson Lecture in Humanities” that he delivered at the Library of Congress in March 2002 (p. 1). While this is accurate, some of the arguments that Gates develops in the book have their roots in the early essay. See Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “The Day When America Decided That Blacks Were of a Species That Could Create Literature,” *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 5 (Autumn 1994): pp. 50-51.

[5]. See Winthrop D. Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Williamsburg: The University of North Carolina Press, 1968), pp. 219-220; Arthur P. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), pp. 58-60.

[6]. Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1964), p. 139.

[7]. In *The Signifying Monkey*, Gates describes Esu Elegbera as the messenger of the Yoruba god Ifa. Esu has a calabash given to him by Olorun, the god’s emissary. The Calabash has the power to propagate itself (p. 8). The calabash also has the “ASE,” the element with which Olodumare, the supreme deity created the universe (p. 7).

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