

The Poetry of Revolution:

Phillis Wheatley and the Transformation of Black Religious Thought

Johanne H. Karizamimba

Undergraduate Senior Thesis

Department of History

Columbia University

Seminar Adviser: Elisheva Carlebach

Second Reader: Hannah Farber

Acknowledgements

To Coach Pickering, for showing me the flame.

To my family, for helping me to make it grow.

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Introduction

This “Negro poetess so well fits the Uncle Tom syndrome...She is pious, grateful, retiring, and civil.”¹ That “Negro poetess” was Phillis Wheatley and those words, offered by Seymour Gross in 1966, captured the dominant scholarly perspective of her work. Other critics of Wheatley described her as “an early Boston Aunt Jemima,” “a colonial handkerchief head,” and “utterly irrelevant to the identification and liberation of the black man.”² In fact, she was understood as being “oblivious to the lot of her fellow blacks.”³ This resentment of Wheatley within the scholarly tradition, and specifically within the black community, can be traced back to what Henry Louis Gates Jr. describes as “the most reviled poem in African-American literature”: Wheatley’s *On Being Brought From Africa to America*.⁴

While we will explore it in the coming chapters, this poetic work created an attitude of dismissive disdain when it came to its author. This rejection was so pervasive that the founder of the Black Arts Movement, Amiri Baraka, in 1962 maintained that Wheatley’s “pleasant imitations of eighteenth-century English poetry are far and, finally, ludicrous departures from the huge black voices that splintered southern nights with their hollers, chants, arwhoolies, and ballits.”⁵ Taking this critical view further, Addison Gayle, Jr., a major black aesthetic critic, described Wheatley as the “first black writer to accept the images and symbols of degradation passed down from the South’s most intellectual lights and the first to speak from a sensibility finely tuned by close approximation to [her] oppressors.”⁶ In 1974, Angeleno Jamison saw Wheatley and her work as “too white.”⁷ Ezekiel Mphahlele would expand on Jamison’s claim in

¹ Henry Louis Gates, *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley: America’s First Black Poet and Her Encounters With the Founding Fathers* (New York, Basic Books, 2003), 77.

² *Ibid.*

³ Gates, *The Trials*, 78.

⁴ Gates, *The Trials*, 82.

⁵ Gates, *The Trials*, 77.

⁶ Gates, *The Trials*, 78-79.

⁷ Gates, *The Trials*, 79.

1976, describing Wheatley as having a “white mind” and feeling “too embarrassed even to mention her in passing” in an overview of black literature.⁸ Even within Kenneth Silverman’s cultural history of the American Revolution at large, Wheatley’s poetic work was explained as a “simple paean to white, cultural hegemony.”⁹

This contemporary belief that Phillis Wheatley was an “Uncle Tom” of black literature or that she was an example of the “brain-washing” of the black author as evidenced by her singular work *On Being Brought From Africa to America* suffers from a fundamental misconception: it fails to scrutinize this poem in the context of the rest of her work. When brought into conversation with her other poetic constructions, *On Being Brought from Africa* is no “paean to white, cultural hegemony.”¹⁰ In fact, it is quite the opposite. Through her poetic verses and the religious musings found within them, Phillis Wheatley positioned herself as a point of revolutionary change within the sphere of black religious thought.

In the early eighteenth-century, slave narratives portrayed a rather distinct understanding of the relationship between black personhood and religion. In them, enslavement acted as an instrument of salvation for the African soul, as it introduced them to Christianity and their “Creator.” However, this idea, common among black authors in the pre-Revolutionary era, underwent a transformation. That transformation started with Phillis Wheatley in 1770. Aided by the intellectual tools that became available as a result of the Revolutionary War, Wheatley acted as a stark point of departure from the religious thought of the pre-Revolutionary period, ushering in a new line of religious reasoning that transformed black religious sentiment. By 1774, she had redefined black personhood within the Christian faith, creating an unprecedented religious

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Gates, *The Trials*, 82.

¹⁰ Ibid.

argument. She argued that a fundamental tension existed between slavery and Christianity. Slavery was no longer a means of religious salvation. Wheatley explained that in fact God was a means of salvation from slavery. Wheatley's religious ideas were replicated, employed, and expanded upon by other black authors, both within her time and in the following years.

Wheatley's rethinking of black individuality's place within Christianity went hand-in-hand with a transformation of the black author's role in the formulation of the religious beliefs they held. As Wheatley created her new religious belief system, she brought the question of agency into focus. In addition to the notion of "redemption achieved through slavery," pre-Revolutionary black religious thought was defined by the powerlessness of black authors. In her departure from that thought, Wheatley positioned herself at the apex of black religious agency. With that said, this notion of agency, and specifically black religious agency, was a key component to the evolution of black religious thought. Therefore, we must define it.

For this exploration, agency is synonymous with control and power. The agency of an author would be understood as the extent of the author's power over their own intellectual functions and the creation of their own beliefs. However, the extent to which an author is able to exert control over the external portrayal of their power and the manner in which that portrayal interacts with the already-existing environment is equally important. Religious agency would then be defined as the power to formulate religious ideas and opinions, or the extent of the author's power over his or her own religious beliefs and the process by which they came to those beliefs. Additionally, a definition of religious agency would consist of the extent to which the author has control over the external portrayal of his or her religious beliefs and the manner in which those beliefs interact with the existing religious system. Narrowing this understanding of agency even further, we must ask how this notion of religious agency applies specifically to

black authorship. With the time frame of this exploration placed within the Revolutionary context, the social environment that these black authors would find themselves in must be considered. As such, the crossroads between religious agency and black authorship is found at the point where black authors maintain authority over their power and control despite the process by which existing social structures sought to usurp that authority. Simply, black religious agency is the extent to which black authors maintain power and control over their own religious beliefs and the portrayal of those beliefs within a social context where that power and control is always threatened. With this in mind, Phillis Wheatley presented the first instance in which we can note the full realization of this definition, setting a threshold for future black authorship.

This thesis seeks to fill a major gap within the existing research. By overturning our understanding of her message, it seeks to give Phillis Wheatley her just due. In his account of the relationship between enslavement and the American Revolution, Edmund S. Morgan, representative of the majority of scholars in this debate, disregards the voices of those who were actually oppressed: African slaves.¹¹ Of course, historians have followed Morgan's 1975 work in order to give a platform to those voices. Nevertheless, existing scholarship fails to fully answer the following question: how did the black population respond to the American Revolution? Those who attempt to answer this question focus exclusively on the slave population's use of the intellectual tools made available during the Revolutionary War. This thesis argues that the current scholarly consensus was a mere prelude to the larger black response.

Earlier scholars failed to fully explore the role Phillis Wheatley played in the formulation of that response. Recent scholarship has attempted to reimagine the place of Phillis Wheatley within American history. While it may be a step above the characterization of Wheatley as an

¹¹ Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1975), 4.

“Uncle Tom” by Gross, the recent scholarly portrayals of the Boston poet fail to recognize the revolutionary nature of her work. The current perception of Wheatley is restricted to her role as representative of the black use of Revolutionary intellectual tools. In his comprehensive biography of Wheatley, Vincent Carretta examines a number of her poems only insofar as they relate to Wheatley’s engagement with the notion of liberty and its use in the Revolutionary context. He repeatedly argues that Wheatley’s verses contend “that black Americans have even more reason to call for “Liberty” and protest against restraints than their white owners.”¹² With that said, Carretta fails to engage with the revolutionary religious ideas that Wheatley introduced within those same verses. Not only does he neglect the profound transformation of black religious thought that ran within Wheatley’s poetic verses, he also fails to place Wheatley in the arc of that transformation, let alone at its apex.

David Waldstreicher similarly restricts his analysis of Wheatley and her work, only viewing her as a black mouthpiece for the rhetoric of natural rights and liberty. Waldstreicher examines Wheatley’s role in the context of the American Revolution through the lens of classicism, dealing with themes of antiquity and modernity. He argues that Wheatley complicated the dominant white narrative of the American Revolution, as envisioned by Thomas Jefferson. Waldstreicher contends that Wheatley highlighted how the American colonists’ commitment to natural rights was undermined by their subversion of the black population’s claim to the same. In so doing, Wheatley questioned whether or not American colonists “were, in fact, barbaric—that is, ancient in all the wrong ways.”¹³ However, while Waldstreicher and other historians like him maintain that Wheatley only rewrote the “boundaries of American

¹² Vincent Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage*, (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 71.

¹³ David Waldstreicher, “Ancients, Moderns, and Africans: Phillis Wheatley and the Politics of Empire and Slavery in the American Revolution,” *Journal of the Early Republic* Volume 37, No. 4 (2017), 732.

independence,” this thesis goes even further, arguing that Wheatley rewrote black religious thought.¹⁴

While the Revolutionary War was being waged for their masters’ independence, slaves had a revolution of their own within the realm of religion. Black authors no longer subscribed to the pre-Revolutionary conception of slavery as a mechanism of salvation for finding God. That understanding would be turned on its head. During the American Revolution, black religious thought would dramatically transform into a system focused around the perception that God was a means of salvation from slavery. This thesis positions Phillis Wheatley at the apex of that revolution. It combats scholarly characterizations of Wheatley as being a product of “white oppression,” an “Uncle Tom,” or merely a small part of a larger trend toward a new religious perception of enslavement. A critical engagement with Wheatley, the work that came before her, her own contributions, and the work of black authors that she influenced, places this “black poetess” at the very center of this revolution. A dramatic and revolutionary transformation in black religious thought, that went hand-in-hand with a transformation of black religious agency, occurred during the stirrings of colonial revolution in America. The impetus for that black religious revolution, both in the realm of religious belief and religious agency, was a young African poet named Phillis Wheatley.

¹⁴ Ibid.

“Out of Darkness into his Marvelous Light”: Salvation through Slavery

Narratives that recounted the enslaved individual’s transition from Africa to their lives within slavery made use of religion primarily through the lens of salvation and redemption. In many of these works, the majority focusing on the early eighteenth century, enslavement was presented as the means by which the author, or Africans in general, came to know God, acting as a salvation mechanism for the African soul. In the exploration of this particular religious justification of slavery, there are a number of threads that connect the rhetorical presentations of this black religious thought in early America, allowing us to gain new insights into the multiple religious opinions regarding the institution of slavery. As we explore these elements of eighteenth century black religious thought, we ask: who created it? As we explore this religious notion and the role of black authors in its inception, we must critically engage with the question of agency.

This early black religious notion of slavery as a means of salvation, in conjunction with the agency of black authorship, is illustrated in all its nuances through the life of Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African slave. Originating in Bornu, Africa in 1705, Gronniosaw was revered within his homeland as a prince, as he was the grandson of the king of Zaara. Spending his first 15 years of life within his kingdom, Gronniosaw was stolen from Africa by an ivory merchant from the Gold Coast and sold into the bondage of slavery. He eventually found himself enslaved by a Calvinist minister, Theodorus Frelinghuysen, in New York. It would be there, under the guidance of Frelinghuysen, that Gronniosaw would learn to read and be taught his Christian foundation. Following the death of his Calvinist master, Gronniosaw stayed with the Frelinghuysen family until he was dismissed and set free for financial reasons. From there, he made his way to British-control territories, joining the British army. After being discharged, Gronniosaw settled in England, married an English widow and began a family. During this process, Gronniosaw existed

in poverty as he moved across the English countryside, jumping from Colchester to Norwich and from Norwich to Kidderminster. It was at Kidderminster, in 1772, where Gronniosaw produced the story of his life, relating his experiences in Africa beginning in 1705, his capture, his existence in slavery, and his life of poverty in England. This narrative, named *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince, As Related by Himself*, is truly emblematic of early black religious thought and its implications, portraying slavery as religious redemption and the agency of the slave author in the creation of that image.¹⁵

This intertwining of religious redemption with slavery begins with Gronniosaw's title page. Gronniosaw argued that slavery fulfills an early eighteenth century divine mission, through invocation of biblical scripture. Setting the theme and message for his entire narrative, Gronniosaw pairs the title of his autobiographical work with Isaiah 42:16. While this verse is meant to act as a song of praise for God, the fact that it is evoked within the context of Gronniosaw's narrative leads one to understand that the verse is speaking of the African soul. Gronniosaw's opening rhetoric sets forth what is to be understood as God's perception of the African people, stating the following: "I will bring the Blind by a Way that they know not, I will lead them in Paths that they have not known: I will make Darkness Light before them and crooked Things straight. These Things will I do unto them and not forsake them."¹⁶ Since this verse is evoked within the context of a man recounting his experiences within slavery, the audience seems to be lead to believe that the "they" and "them" mentioned in the verse is in fact the African people. As such, the mission that Gronniosaw referred to entered the realm of a divinely-ordained plan meant to bring redemption

¹⁵ James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince, as Related by Himself* (1772). All biographical information outlined in this paragraph are taken from the narrative in its entirety.

¹⁶ Gronniosaw, *Narrative*, title page.

to the African soul. Taking it a step further, with the knowledge that the African people were only introduced to God and Christianity within a very specific context, the path by which this God-ordained mission will be achieved is set up as one that can be found within the institution of slavery. The “Way”, the unknown “Paths”, the making of “Darkness Light”, and the making of “crooked Things straight” can then be seen as being brought about by God through the mechanism of slavery. As such, through his invocation of Isaiah 42:16, Gronniosaw captures a core belief of this early eighteenth century religious notion: slavery is the mechanism by which the African soul can be brought before God and achieve salvation.

In going about his assertion of this “redemption at the hands of slavery” through an interpretation of biblical scripture, Gronniosaw employed a series of rhetorical applications and imagery that were emblematic of this eighteenth century conception of slavery found in pre-Revolutionary American society. With the relationship between slavery and religion being primarily viewed through the principles of salvation and redemption, Gronniosaw, through his interpretation of biblical scripture, paradoxically presented enslavement as the process by which Africans were delivered out of darkness into light. One can see this in nearly all presentations of early eighteenth century slavery. In the divine mission of slavery that he opens his autobiographical account with, Gronniosaw emphasizes that God seeks to “make Darkness Light before them and crooked Things straight.”¹⁷ This journey from darkness to light, usually referring to the transition from sin to piety, is applied to the situation of Africans in their native lands, with slavery acting as the path by which “Light” is brought to them. While Gronniosaw expands further upon this religious idea in his narrative, the manner by which it is done raises a question of his agency in the

¹⁷ Gronniosaw, *Narrative*, title page.

formation of his own religious beliefs. To fully understand his notion of “redemption through slavery” we must raise the question of his role in its creation.

This question of Gronniosaw’s agency, and that of other slave authors, focuses around the conception of the author’s role in the creation and articulation of the religious beliefs that they hold. This question first presents itself in the aforementioned divine mission that Gronniosaw attached to his title page. Rather than making use of his own words to articulate the notion of “redemption brought through slavery,” Gronniosaw employs a Bible verse to do so. While he may not be the direct author of the idea of a divine mission that is achieved through slavery, Gronniosaw seems to maintain a form of agency by allowing this verse to grace the title page of his life account in slavery. By deciding to attach this verse to his narrative, Gronniosaw promotes the idea that slavery is the means by which God “will make Darkness Light” for the African soul.

One can see the exact same invocation of biblical scripture that Gronniosaw employs in many narratives of the period, and in later years. Arguably one of the more famous and well known narratives is that of Olaudah Equiano, the enslaved Nigerian man who presented one of the best known accounts of the Middle Passage and slavery in his narrative, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*. Similar to Gronniosaw, Equiano asserts a form of agency in the creation of his own religious beliefs on the title page of his work through the portrait that he chose to attach to it, setting the perception by which one is to read the rest of his narrative. Lynn Casmier-Paz, a scholar of American slave narratives, presents a method by which this visual presentation, or what she calls “the rhetoric of author portraiture,” can be understood.

Casmier-Paz focuses on the cover portrait that Equiano chose to attach to the title page of his narrative. In his portrait, Equiano’s Bible is open to Acts 4:12, which reads, “And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be

saved.”¹⁸ Casmier-Paz argues that this opening portraiture rhetoric is used by Equiano to assert that the “salvation of the “lame by birth” African...is possible through the name of Jesus.”¹⁹ The controversial nature of this assertion, Casmier-Paz argues, “emerges in the historical awareness that Christian salvation for the African occurs in the context of chattel slavery.”²⁰ Similar to Gronniosaw, Equiano, through his employment of Acts 4:12, sets forth what is to be understood as a standard dictating how salvation is to be achieved, established by God Himself. The fact that it is attached to the opening pages of a slave narrative primes the reader to see this verse as a religious justification for slavery, as salvation must seemingly be brought about by any means necessary. Consequently, slavery is then understood as the means by which this biblical salvation is afforded to the African soul. And just like Gronniosaw, Equiano asserts his agency in the creation of this religious justification by choosing to have this particular verse, as well as the portraiture it can be found in, on the opening pages of his work. However, this apparent agency asserted through the adoption of biblical scripture, as portrayed by Gronniosaw and Equiano, should actually be understood not as an assertion of agency but rather a subversion of the slaves’ control over their own belief system.

However, while Gronniosaw may assert some form of agency in the creation of the religious notions that he promotes, this agency is again complicated and undermined with the knowledge Gronniosaw in fact did not create his own narrative. In the opening paragraph of the narrative’s preface, the audience is presented with evidence of the usurpation of Gronniosaw’s control over both his own life story and his religious belief system. We are told that the “Account of the Life and spiritual Experience of JAMES ALBERT [Gronniosaw] was...committed to Paper by the

¹⁸ Lynn Casmier-Paz, “Slave Narratives and the Rhetoric of Author Portraiture,” *New Literary History* 34, no.1 (2003): 94.

¹⁹ Casmier-Paz, “Slave Narratives,” 95.

²⁰ Casmier-Paz, “Slave Narratives,” 95.

elegant Pen of a young LADY of the Town of LEOMINISTER.”²¹ Not only this but we are told that this “young LADY” created Gronniosaw’s narrative “for her own private Satisfaction” and specifically “without any Intention at first that it should be made public.”²² This calls into question the first aspect of agency that Gronniosaw seemed to assert through his specific invocation of Isaiah 42:16. Was this “young LADY of the Town of LEOMINISTER” the one who attached the Bible verse to the title page? The presentation of the divine mission of God achieved through slavery could very well have been articulated by this unknown second-party, not Gronniosaw. Not only does this particular revelation influence the previous agency we attributed to Gronniosaw, it also impacts any future conversation of Gronniosaw’s agency within the progression of his narrative. Control over the presentation of his own life story, his experiences in slavery, and his understanding of the relationship between slavery and religion was essentially taken out of Gronniosaw’s hands by an unknown woman, allowing for the potential white-washing of his experiences and beliefs. While one may not know the extent to which this unknown author influenced the presentation of Gronniosaw’s understanding of “redemption achieved through slavery,” we can note Gronniosaw’s lack of agency by reading the preface in its entirety, as it primes the entire narrative with the dominant white society’s presentation of this religious idea to enslave Africans.

Similar to the narrative itself, the preface to Gronniosaw’s life account was also not written by him. It was written by a white man named Walter Shirley. Shirley was a leader in the Calvinist wing of Methodism along with his cousin, English religious leader Selina Hastings, spending his life as an English clergyman and a renowned hymn-writer. In his preface, Shirley can be seen as priming the audience to view the life account they are about to read in a particular light: as a story

²¹ Gronniosaw, *Narrative*, Preface III.

²² *Ibid.*

of divine deliverance from darkness. He presents the motive behind this narrative: to uncover how God deals with the “benighted Parts of the World where the Gospel of Jesus hath never reached.”²³ Employing this rhetoric of light and darkness, Shirley asserts that this question is answered through the life of Ukawsaw Gronniosaw. Despite his being “born under every outward Disadvantage, and in Regions of the grossest Darkness and Ignorance,” Gronniosaw, presented by Shirley as a microcosm of his entire race, was acted upon by God, as God “brings them [Africans] to the Means of spiritual Information, gradually opens to their View the Light of his Truth, and gives them full Possession....of the inestimable Blessings of his Gospel.”²⁴ In fact, Shirley asserted that Gronniosaw “belonged to the Redeemer of lost Sinners; he was the Purchase of his Cross.”²⁵ Shirley signed ownership of Gronniosaw’s life over to God, taking Gronniosaw’s power over his own religious experience out of his hands. With the context that slavery is what allowed all of this to occur, Shirley introduced this narrative as the story of how Gronniosaw’s soul was brought to salvation, or, as he put it, how God brought Gronniosaw “out of Darkness into his marvelous Light.”²⁶ Shirley presented slavery as Gronniosaw’s very path to salvation, saying that God allowed his enslavement to occur so “that he might lead him to a saving Heart-Acquaintance and Union with the triune God.”²⁷

This religious redemption achieved through slavery, as well as Gronniosaw’s lack of agency in his creation and adoption of it, is also present in the narrative itself. The audience is made to understand that from a very young age Gronniosaw grasped for the concept of God. We are made to believe that even though he was “born in an exalted Station of Life” as an African prince, he always held a form of discontent for his existence in Bornu, as he always understood that there

²³ Gronniosaw, *Narrative*, Preface III.

²⁴ Gronniosaw, *Narrative*, Preface III-IV.

²⁵ Gronniosaw, *Narrative*, Preface IV.

²⁶ Gronniosaw, *Narrative*, Preface IV.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

was some “GREAT MAN of power” that was above the African objects of worship.²⁸ Yet, it was through the bondage of slavery and his exposure to the white world that Gronniosaw was able to reach what he grasped for. The role of Gronniosaw in the creation of the religious beliefs he held, and the white-washing of those beliefs, moves front and center when we are made to understand that it was Gronniosaw’s master, Theodorus Frelinghuysen, a Calvinist minister, who allowed him to truly understand who God was and the extent of his power, officially ushering him into the Christian faith. The narrative relates that Gronniosaw’s Calvinist master explained to him that “God was a GREAT and GOOD SPIRIT, that HE created all the world, and every person and thing in it, in Ethiopia, Africa, and America.”²⁹ With his conversion to Christianity being related through the voice of an unknown author, Gronniosaw asserts that he was pleased that his master told him “there was a God because I had always thought so.”³⁰ The fact that his religious opinions and beliefs stemmed from the religion of this white minister becomes even more apparent when, with this new religious dedication, Gronniosaw wants to return to Africa to relate the news to his family, but he is unable to because he is in fact owned by the white minister who converted him to Christianity. Taking it a step further, as his narrative touches upon his existence in the bondage of slavery and his suffering in the destitution of poverty, Gronniosaw is presented as praising God through it all, seemingly believing that God is but testing him and drawing him closer to His divine will. In this narrative, with the multiple aforementioned threats to Gronniosaw’s role in its creation, one can see that there is less of a focus on the horrors of slavery and the slave trade and more of a concentration on the Africans’ introduction into a new world and, specifically, their introduction to a new religion at the hands of white society through enslavement.

²⁸ Gronniosaw, *Narrative*, Preface IV-1.

²⁹ Gronniosaw, *Narrative*, 12.

³⁰ Gronniosaw, *Narrative*, 13.

This episode clearly conveys the full arc of the notion of “redemption achieved through slavery,” as Gronniosaw is brought to God and his soul is redeemed from darkness through his bondage in slavery and interaction with his white master. However, this introduces a paradox into the early 18th century notion. While slavery was the means by which Gronniosaw was redeemed and brought to God, slavery is also the mechanism that is keeping him from returning home to bring about the redemption of his African family. Slavery seemingly only took on the role of a redeeming force with its execution by and relation to the dominant white society, calling into question the agency of the black population in the creation of its religiously redeeming nature.

This process of African slaves gaining their religious foundations from their interactions with the dominant white society is not only restricted to Gronniosaw’s narrative. In his narrative, Equiano articulates that he was first introduced to his religious beliefs while on the ship of his master Michael Henry Pascal. Upon seeing snow for the first time, he asked a fellow ship mate “who made it.” The mate told him that it was made by “a great man in the heavens, called God.” Highlighting how reliant he was on the white society for his religious understanding, Equiano explains that he was “at a loss to understand him [the mate],” leading him to go to church. At the church, Equiano writes, “they gave me to understand it was worshiping God, who made us and all things.” In drawing a distinction between the religion practiced by the white people and his African community, Equiano asserts that he “was astonished at the wisdom of the white people in all things I saw, but was amazed at their not sacrificing or making any offerings, and eating with unwashed hands and touching the dead.”³¹

Taking it even further, Equiano relates that he was later introduced to the Bible by another white ship mate, Daniel Queen. This man taught him “to shave and dress hair a little and also to

³¹ Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa the African* (London, Printed for and sold by the Author, 1789), 34.

read in the Bible, explaining many passages to me which I did not comprehend.”³² In fact, upon his introduction to the Bible by the hands of a white man, Equiano spoke to Queen about how he was “wonderfully surprised to see the laws and rules of my country written almost exactly there.”³³ It becomes apparent that Equiano’s introduction to Christianity was in fact an introduction to the dominant white society’s religion when Equiano notes that the rest of his ship mates “styled me the black Christian.”³⁴ Showcasing the true impact of this religious introduction at the hands of white society, Equiano explains in the closing lines of his narrative that all he experienced and endured in his life was in fact the will of God. Or as Equiano puts it, “I early accustomed myself to look for the hand of God in the minutest occurrence and to learn from it a lesson of morality and religion.”³⁵ Expressing a similar sentiment as the one he began his narrative with, Equiano wraps up his life account with the way the reader should view his life with the following: “After all, what makes any event important, unless by its observation we become better and wiser, and learn ‘to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly before God?’”³⁶

Through Gronniosaw’s narrative, one is able to fully grasp the idea that slave authors of this period truly lacked any form of agency in the creation of the rhetorical religious thought that they espoused. Rather, their religious beliefs and their perceived understanding of slavery was very much based on the religion of white masters and their rhetoric. This is demonstrated through Gronniosaw’s lack of agency in the creation of his own life account, the prefacing of that life account with the expression of a religious idea from a member of the dominant white society, and Gronniosaw’s introduction and exploration of Christianity always being at the hands of white ministers and masters.

³² Equiano, *Interesting Narrative*, 50.

³³ Equiano, *Interesting Narrative*, 51.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Equiano, *Interesting Narrative*, 146.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

This early rhetoric of “redemption achieved through slavery” espoused by African slaves, and their role in its creation, underwent a transformation as the end of the eighteenth century drew near. With the coming of the Revolutionary War, and the rhetoric of liberty and freedom that accompanies it, the slave’s understanding of the relationship between religion and slavery takes on a new nature as the slave gains more agency in the creation of their own understanding.

“Language of Liberty”: The Beginnings of a Black Revolution

The beginning of the transformation of black religious thought is marked by a clear departure from its origin epitomized by Gronniosaw in his narrative. The agent of this departure and transformation is found within the American Revolution itself and, specifically, within its ideological building blocks. This relationship between the black religious revolution and the American Revolution is defined by the latter’s foundational tenets, which many slave holders espoused and were willing to fight for. From their exposure to this Revolutionary ideology, slaves were introduced to a vocabulary to call for their freedom, essentially transforming these tenets into intellectual tools for the American slave.

These intellectual tools form the basis of how existing scholarship views the relationship between slaves and the Revolutionary War. The scholarly perception of the black experience within the American Revolution is built on a foundation laid by Benjamin Quarles in his work *The Negro in the American Revolution*. He cut “to the heart of the black response to the Revolution.”³⁷ Laying the groundwork for later exploration, Quarles argued that the “Negro’s role in the Revolution can best be understood by realizing that his major loyalty was not to a place nor to a people but to a principle. Insofar as he had freedom of choice, he was likely to join the side that made him the quickest and best offer in terms of those ‘unalienable rights’.”³⁸ This black commitment to “unalienable rights,” commonly referred to as natural rights, is expanded upon by a number of historians. Summarizing the arguments of historians building from Quarles’ 1961 foundation, Woody Holton argues in his work *Black Americans in the Revolutionary Era*

³⁷ Gary B. Nash, “The African Americans’ Revolution,” *The Oxford Handbook of the American Revolution*, Ed. Jane Kamensky and Edward G. Gray, (Oxford University Press, 2015), 252.

³⁸ Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution*, (Williamsburg, VA: Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1961), xxvii.

that “the Revolution, with its focus on liberty and natural rights, did provide African Americans with the useful language with which to express their long-standing grievances.”³⁹

Yet, while they made use of their masters’ rhetoric and ideology, this “language of liberty,” at its first introduction, did not yet influence the black population’s understanding of their faith. While this beginning stage is defined by the assertion of black agency, their contention had no relation to their religious perception of slavery. As such, this progression was dominated by African-Americans asserting their rights to freedom on the same basis that American colonists did to Britain. However, to understand this initial proclamation of freedom and, as such, the beginning of the black religious revolution, one must first understand the “language of liberty” that slaves relied upon in order to make such an assertion. The intellectual tools found within this “language of liberty” were the means by which the American slave understood, staked out, and further exercised their agency.

This “language of liberty” is defined and outlined by the Boston lawyer, who, along with the Virginian revolutionary Patrick Henry, was an attorney at the forefront of the Revolutionary cause: James Otis of Massachusetts. In 1764, Otis published a pamphlet entitled *The Rights of the British Colonies Asserted and Proved*. This pamphlet was a pivotal work within its contemporary context, as it was one of “the most frequently reprinted and widely circulated pamphlets of the American Revolution.”⁴⁰ Otis aptly summarized the colonial argument for independence by asserting that the “Colonists being men, have a right to be considered as equally entitled to all the rights of nature with the Europeans, and they are not to be restrained in the exercise of any of these rights.”⁴¹ Establishing the importance of these rights, Otis went so far as

³⁹ Holton, *Black Americans*, 5.

⁴⁰ Holton, *Black Americans*, 35.

⁴¹ Holton, *Black Americans*, 36.

to argue that if their liberty “‘tis taken from them without their consent, they are so far enslaved.”⁴² Armed with the knowledge as to where colonists derived their freedom from, Otis argued that the “Colonists are by the law of nature free born, as indeed all men are, white or black.”⁴³ Tying the claim to American independence to fundamental laws of nature, Otis asked, “Does it follow that tis right to enslave a man because he is black?”⁴⁴ From the aforementioned grounding of American independence, can “any logical inference in favor of slavery, be drawn” simply from the differing outward appearances of the races?⁴⁵

These very questions led Otis to the conclusion that, based on the ideal’s origin in the fundamental laws of nature, it “is a clear truth, that those who every day barter away other men’s liberty, will soon care little for their own...”⁴⁶ In fact, Otis highlighted how the rhetoric of liberty and natural rights that was used against the British by the American colonists could very well be used by the slaves of those American colonists against them. Many slave petitions from the Revolutionary period point out this same consideration that Otis articulated: that the notions of natural rights and liberty transcended the concept of race. Consequently, slaves made use of Revolutionary rhetoric to assert their right to freedom on the same grounds that American colonists did.

This transformative intersection between the Patriotic “language of liberty” and the black call for freedom is documented in a primary source common to the Revolutionary period: the slave petition. Slave petitions were commonly letters written by a singular author, in concert with a community of slaves, which were then sent to colonial legislatures, employing the Revolutionary “language of liberty” in their arguments as to why they should be granted their

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Holton, *Black Americans*, 35.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Holton, *Black Americans*, 36.

freedom. A characteristic example of such a petition was a letter signed by Peter Bestes, in concert with other Massachusetts slaves, that was sent to their local representative in the Massachusetts colonial legislature on April 20, 1773.⁴⁷ In this petition, Bestes engaged directly with the rhetoric used by American Patriots in their call for independence from Great Britain, showing how this “language of liberty” opened the door for slaves to adopt those arguments as their own.

Bestes opened his petition with the following critique of a common argument that white colonists levied against their British overlords: “The efforts made by the legislative of this province in their last sessions to free themselves from slavery, gave us, who are in that deplorable state, a high degree of satisfaction.”⁴⁸ Bestes followed this critique with a call for white Americans to be consistent in the application and pursuit of liberty. As Bestes put it, Massachusetts slaves “expect great things from men who have made such a noble stand against the designs of their fellow-men to enslave them.”⁴⁹ Since the “divine spirit of freedom, seems to fire every humane breast on this continent,” Bestes related the hope that the colonial legislature would maintain the same commitment to liberty in their relationship to their own enslaved class that they held in regard to their relationship to Britain.⁵⁰

Consequently, one can see how the slave population of the Revolutionary period made use of the intellectual tools created and espoused during their time. Executing the vision that Otis outlined in his work, Bestes asserted a form of control over his claim to freedom as he used the dominant white “language of liberty” for his own vision of black freedom. The act of applying that language, or rather those intellectual tools, to make a black claim to freedom is done

⁴⁷ Holton, *Black Americans*, 46.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

independently of outside white influence. The idea that, on the grounds of natural rights, the black man should be free in the same way as the white man, is a construction made by the slave. This is a clear departure from the powerlessness shown in the narrative of Gronniosaw. Bestes did adopt an ideology created and espoused by the dominant white society similar to the way Gronniosaw did with the foundation of his piety. However, while Gronniosaw used that ideology to support his enslaved status, Bestes used the Revolutionary “language of liberty” to directly combat the burden the white society placed on him.

Yet, while he portrayed how slaves adopted Patriot rhetoric for their own cause, Bestes also established how this call for freedom on the basis of natural rights was distinctly separate from the slaves’ understanding of the relationship between slavery and Christianity. In essence, slavery is a violation of the natural rights that all men enjoy rather than a violation of Christian principles. In fact, Bestes went so far as to assert that it is the divine will of God that he and the other Massachusetts slaves find themselves in the bondage of slavery. Drawing a bridge between slavery and Christianity that calls back to the sentiments expressed by Equiano, Bestes argued that “the wise and righteous governor of the universe, has permitted our fellow men to make us slaves.”⁵¹ Due to this, Bestes and the other slaves “bow in submission to him.”⁵² Since they “bow in submission” to the will of God in regard to their lives, they essentially “bow in submission” to the condition that God has allowed them to be in: slavery. Because of God’s divine will, Bestes laid out that they “are willing to submit to such regulations and laws, as may be made relative to us.”⁵³ In fact, Bestes promised that they will make “peaceful and lawful attempts to gain our freedom,” hoping God will have favor on their endeavors.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Holton, *Black Americans*, 47.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

This gap between the presentation of black agency by means of the tools introduced by the “language of liberty” and the slave religious understanding of slavery itself was also demonstrated in another characteristic slave petition submitted on January 6, 1773. The author of this petition, titled *Petition to the Governor, Council, and House of Representatives of Massachusetts*, signed his name simply as “Felix.” However, as Holton relates, most historians argue that this “Felix” was in fact Felix Holbrook, the same slave who signed his name to the aforementioned letter that Peter Bestes wrote to the Massachusetts legislature.⁵⁵ Following an outline of the deplorable conditions and consequences of slavery, the enslaved Holbrook asserted that “we have a Father in Heaven, and we are determined...to keep all his Commandments: Especially will we be obedient to our Masters, so long as God in his sovereign Providence shall suffer us to be Holden in Bondage.”⁵⁶ Reflecting the opinions of Bestes, Holbrook likewise presented the state of slavery as the will of God. In fact, he went so far as to lay out that it would be improper for him to suggest to God or the Massachusetts legislature any new laws. Rather, “this gives us great Encouragement to pray and hope for such Relief as is consistent with your Wisdom, Justice, and Goodness.”⁵⁷ His comprehension of slavery’s relation to Christianity had yet to be influenced by the Patriotic “language of liberty,” as one would expect him to argue that God did not want him to be in bondage and, on that divine basis, call for his freedom.

These sources show the opening progression of the religious transformation that would later be epitomized by Phillis Wheatley, as slave authors made use of the intellectual tools presented to them by their white masters during the Revolutionary period to stake out their own claim to freedom. They made use of the dominant white society’s “language of liberty” to better

⁵⁵ Holbrook, *Black Americans*, 42.

⁵⁶ Holbrook, *Black Americans*, 43.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

define their own oppression and subsequent claims to liberty. However, neither of these sources portray a form of religious power. Their authors pair a philosophical claim to freedom with a sentiment similar to that of Gronniosaw, drawing a parallel between their status in slavery and the will of God. One does not see the confluence between this “language of liberty” and a notion of black personhood within the Christian faith until the work of the poet Phillis Wheatley.

With that being said, it is at this point of confluence where this thesis deviates from the existing research. Scholars, such as Gary Nash or Woody Holton, who have sought to examine the manner in which the black population interacted with the American Revolution, would stop their exploration here, with the slave author’s adoption of the their master’s “language of liberty.” In fact, Nash argues that this process of adopting the “language of liberty” was equivalent to African Americans fighting a “revolution within a revolution.”⁵⁸ In his view, slaves embraced the white American “thirst for independence and freedom,” “determination to overthrow corrupt power,” and “willingness to die for inalienable rights” as their own.⁵⁹ So while “the white patriots’ revolution ended in victory,” the “African American’s revolution had only begun.”⁶⁰

The slave population’s adoption of the “language of liberty” was independently a crucial development, but it was only the beginning of a much larger transformation in the realm of black religion. Scholars have failed to note the effect this “language of liberty” had on black religious thought. Further, this characterization of a black revolution being contingent on the adoption of the white burden to fight for liberty threatens to again quiet the voices of the oppressed, linking the black experience solely to its relationship to a white narrative. Existing research argues that

⁵⁸ Nash, “The African Americans’ Revolution,” 266.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Nash, “The African Americans’ Revolution,” 267.

the black response to the American Revolution was the adoption and employment of the “language of liberty” by the slave population. However, that adoption was only a prelude to the larger black response inaugurated by Phillis Wheatley. Wheatley used the dominant society’s “language of liberty” to depart from the religious thought that came before her, as she redefined what it meant to be a black Christian.

Wheatley’s Guiding Pen: “The Penetration of a Philosopher”

In protesting the nature of their relationship to their British overlords, the American colonists created and relied upon a set of intellectual tools, or what the Patriot lawyer James Otis would call a “language of liberty.” In their reliance on this rhetoric to combat their political enslavement, American Patriots invariably placed these tools into the hands of the very people they were actually enslaving: Africans. From their master’s intellectual principles of natural rights, the American slave was able to better understand and pursue their own freedom. However, there was a gap between this “language of liberty” and the black religious perception of slavery. While they were able to mimic the manner in which their colonial masters claimed independence and freedom from Britain, the slave population still held onto the pre-Revolutionary perception that slavery was the will of God. Within this gap is where the West African poet, Phillis Wheatley, entered the conversation.

The city of Boston was first introduced to Phillis Wheatley on July 11, 1761 when she arrived on board a ship named the *Phillis* returning from a slave-gathering mission in Senegal and the coasts of Guinea. A Wheatley relative would later write that Wheatley must “have been about seven years old, at this time, from the circumstances of shedding her front teeth.”⁶¹ The wife of the tailor and merchant John Wheatley, a Mrs. Susanna Wheatley, went to the Phillis with the goal of purchasing a house servant. Susanna Wheatley then purchased the seven year old future poet and took her back to the Wheatley mansion in the city. The Wheatley family also included two teenagers, Nathaniel and Mary. Mary, with her mother’s encouragement, began to teach Phillis how to read. These initial educating efforts of Mary Wheatley apparently paid off as John Wheatley would write in 1772 that “without any Assistance from School Education, and by

⁶¹ Gates, *The Trials*, 16-17.

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.”⁶² Not only that but as “to her writing, her own Curiosity led her to it; and this she learnt in so short a time.” In fact, Mary Wheatley’s husband, John Lathrop, clarified in a 1773 letter to a family friend that “by seeing others use the pen, she [Phillis] learned to write.”⁶³

Wheatley began a reconceptualization of the link between the black individual and Christianity when she was only seventeen years old, just nine years after her arrival in America on a slave ship in 1761. While she wrote her first poem in 1765 at the age of eleven and had her first poem published in the “Newport Mercury” in 1767 at the age of thirteen, Wheatley first demonstrated her agency following the death of Reverend George Whitefield in 1770. Reverend Whitefield was a “widely popular English preacher” and “leader of the evangelical movement,” who was engaged in a speaking tour across America at the time of his death.⁶⁴ His passing gave Wheatley the opportunity to write an elegy for the evangelical minister, constructing poetic verses that laid the groundwork for a new way of viewing the African’s bond to Christianity. This poem, titled *On the Death of the Reverend George Whitefield* was published “within weeks” of Whitefield’s death in America, leading to widespread acclaim for the young poet.⁶⁵

Henry Louis Gates Jr. outlines the level of exposure and publication that Wheatley’s elegy received within the American colonies, as well as the results of that exposure. In his work *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley*, Gates explains *On the Death of George Whitefield* was “published as a broadside in Boston, then again in Newport, four more times in Boston, and a dozen more in New York, Philadelphia, and Newport.”⁶⁶ Leading to an even larger expansion of

⁶² Gates, *Trials*, 19.

⁶³ Gates, *Trials*, 20.

⁶⁴ Gates, *Trials*, 21.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

readership, advertisements for the broadside appeared in “more than a dozen newspapers in Pennsylvania, New York, and Boston, and at least ten times in Boston newspapers alone.”⁶⁷ After sending a letter of condolence with her elegy to Selina Hastings, the countess of Huntingdon and to whom Whitefield acted as chaplain, Wheatley’s poem was then published in London in 1771. Suddenly, at the age of 18, Wheatley had a “wide readership on both sides of the Atlantic.”⁶⁸ With this level of exposure in mind, what was the idea that Wheatley decided to present to such a wide audience? The answer to that question is quite simple: equality in the eyes of God.

Within her poetic admiration for the legacy of Reverend Whitefield, Wheatley dedicated a whole stanza to the divine message that Whitefield sought to deliver. Within that message, Wheatley included a rather pointed introduction to the notion of religious equality. In outlining Whitefield’s beliefs as to why certain subgroups should seek salvation or enter into a relationship with God, Wheatley first addressed the American people. With this poem coming in the midst of Revolutionary stirrings, Wheatley asserted, “Take him my dear *Americans*, he said, / Be your complaints on his kind bosom laid:”⁶⁹ Knowing the period in which she was publishing this work, Wheatley specifically used the word “complaint” to recall the claim by which American colonists combatted the British subversion of their independence. Calling back to the work of James Otis, this claim is one comprised of an assertion to independence on the grounds of natural rights. In this poem, Wheatley gave that claim a relationship to the divine, as she informed Americans that their complaints about the violation of their independence can be heard by God. This then attached some form of divine importance to the underlying premise of the colonists’

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Gates, *Trials*, 22.

⁶⁹ Phillis Wheatley, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, (London: Archibald Bell, 1773), 23.

complaint: natural rights. However, her next verse explained that the divine importance of natural rights, or the “language of liberty,” did not only apply to the American colonist but to the African slave as well.

After laying the groundwork for a nexus between the “language of liberty” and God’s will, Wheatley opened the boundaries of that nexus to include the slave population. In establishing the reason why the African people should seek God, Wheatley asserted the following: “Take him, ye *Africans*, he longs for you, / *Impartial Saviour* is his title due: / Wash’d in the fountain of redeeming blood, / You shall be sons, and kings, and priests to God.”⁷⁰ In arguing that God is an “*Impartial Saviour*,” Wheatley introduced a conception of religious equality. Speaking to a population of people who had experienced both physical and religious persecution and oppression on the basis of their differing skin color, Wheatley declared that God did not hold the same biases that had defined their mortal existence. Rather, salvation gave souls, African or not, the equal opportunity to be washed “in the fountain of redeeming blood.” Hinting at a new association between slavery and Christianity, Wheatley established that, following the salvation of their souls, God would deliver the African people from their low position within society, stating that “You shall be sons, and kings, and priest to God.”

While she would later expand upon and explore this notion of God acting as a means of deliverance from slavery, Wheatley asserted a form of religious agency that was seen neither within her period nor in the pre-Revolutionary era. She constructed a belief that, in the eyes of God, all men are equal at the moment of their redemption. Establishing this notion of equality, Wheatley included “*Africans*” in her previous message to and definition of “*Americans*.” As such, while the American colonist’s claim against the British on the grounds of natural rights

⁷⁰ Ibid.

maintained a divine importance, Wheatley established that the African slave's claim against American colonists on the same grounds had a divine import as well. In this elegiac poem, Wheatley drew a theological bridge that connected the "language of liberty" that defined Peter Bestes's and Felix Holbrook's claims to freedom and the divine will of God. At the same time, this poem, with its trans-Atlantic approbation, gave Wheatley the opportunity to further expand upon that nexus in a whole book, titled *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*.

Following Wheatley's widespread acclaim, Susanna Wheatley, the wife of Phillis Wheatley's master, set about having a collection of her slave's poems published as a book. Susanna Wheatley turned to the Countess of Huntingdon, Selina Hastings, the woman Phillis Wheatley sent her Whitefield elegy to, for aid. Susanna Wheatley, following the advice of Hastings, then reached out to a London publisher, Archibald Bell, to publish the work.⁷¹ So in 1773, Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* became the first book of poetry published by an African in English. One of the poems that opened the work was the elegy that had originally allowed Wheatley to gain her notoriety: *On the Death of Reverend George Whitfield*. Wheatley took her book of poetry as an opportunity to further explore the new religious ideas and conceptions that she first presented in her widely-praised elegy. Not only did she firmly plant the nexus between the Revolutionary "language of liberty" and black religious thought that she began in 1770, but she also further explained the newfound connection between slavery and Christianity that she introduced. While her work included a number of poems that furthered her religious philosophy, Wheatley constructed one particular poem that traced the relationship between faith and enslavement from the pre-Revolutionary convictions of Gronniosaw to the recent foundation that she herself built. This concise presentation of the belief

⁷¹ Gates, *Trials*, 29-31.

system that she engineered is also arguably her most well-known work: *On Being Brought From Africa to America*.

Wheatley opened her poetic verses by framing the intellectual underpinnings of the pre-Revolutionary perception of enslavement. She applied the understanding of slavery as a mechanism of salvation for the African soul to her own experiences. Asserting that slavery was the force that brought her before God, Wheatley declared, “‘Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land, / taught my benighted soul to understand / that there’s a God, that there’s a Saviour too.”⁷² Using the exact same word “benighted” that Walter Shirley employed in the preface to the narrative of Gronniosaw, Wheatley characterized the process by which slavery allowed for her redemption from ignorance and darkness as well as her introduction to the light of God. It was by the “mercy” of God Himself that Wheatley was delivered from the godless shadow of Africa. With the knowledge of how she was actually “brought” from her native land, Wheatley equated the “mercy” of God with the institution of slavery, reflecting a principle that Gronniosaw utilized in his life account. Even further, Wheatley directly linked this “merciful” agent of slavery to her comprehension of not only God but also the concept of salvation. Capturing the pre-Revolutionary black religious thought almost in its entirety, Wheatley contended that God, through slavery, not only introduced her “Pagan” soul to the notion of Christianity but also redeemed it.

Yet, while she painted slavery as God’s agent of salvation, Wheatley also argued that that very same idea cannot be maintained on Christian principle. She took a moment first to note the dominant white society’s view of her race. She stated that “Some view our sable race with scornful eye, / “Their colour is a diabolic die.””⁷³ From the argument that the color of a slave’s

⁷² Wheatley, *Poems*, 18.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

skin entailed a relationship to the Devil, the exploitation and subjugation of that slave acquired a religious justification. The intrinsic nature of the African slave went directly against the nature of God. The effects of this construction were present in the belief system of the black community prior to Wheatley, as evidence by the work of Gronniosaw. Gronniosaw, however, was not alone. Peter Bestes and Felix Holbrook, while in the midst of their revolutionary claims to liberty, were shaped by the same construction. At the same that they petitioned for their freedom, these black authors viewed their enslavement as the very will of God.

Wheatley placed a tension between this religious portrayal of the black race and the principles of salvation as defined in Christianity. She stated, “Remember, *Christians, Negroes*, black as *Cain*, / May be refin’d, and join th’ angelic train.”⁷⁴ Presenting a conflict between Christianity and the institution of slavery itself, Wheatley touched upon the fact that, under the edicts of the faith, all Christians, both black and white, walk the same path in their pursuit of heaven. Further explaining a perception of religious equality, Wheatley set up the view that, in the eyes of God and in the realm of Christianity, all men had equal claim. Taking the verses of her prior elegiac poem into account, that would mean that all of man had equal claim to the divinely-appointed principles of natural rights. Simply, in this poem and in each of the poems included in her 1773 published work, Wheatley furthered the conviction that the Revolutionary “language of liberty” was in fact a set of rights given to man by God Himself. Bringing this divine postulate into conversation with her clearly articulated notion of religious equality, Wheatley maintained that the black slave had a right to the divinely-inspired principles of freedom and liberty just as much as the white colonist.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

Wheatley's 1773 compilation of poems was not the last place that she explored and disseminated her religious ideas. She used a letter as a final opportunity to present a comprehensive and pointed distillation of the bond between slavery and Christianity to the American masses, knowing her wide acclaim would aid in the proliferation of her message. This letter, written on February 11, 1774, was addressed to Reverend Samson Occum, a member of the Mohegan Indian Tribe and an ordained Presbyterian minister. While this was not the first time that she had sent a letter to the Mohegan preacher, Wheatley wrote this 1774 correspondence to comment on Occum's written indictment of slave-holding Christian ministers. However, Wheatley did not intend on this letter remaining private, as it was published a few months after its creation. It appeared in dozens of newspapers in the American colonies, such as *The Connecticut Gazette* and *The Massachusetts Gazette*.⁷⁵ Wheatley took this occasion as an opportunity to present the full realization of her vision.

She began by praising Occum for the presentation of his opinions "respecting the Negroes." Specifically, the reasons the minister offered to support the "Vindication of their [Negroes] natural Rights" were of primary interest to Wheatley. The white masters who took Africans from their homeland "cannot be insensible that the divine Light is insensibly chasing away the thick Darkness which broods over the Land of Africa." In this claim, Wheatley directly attacked an aspect of the pre-Revolutionary religious justification for slavery, challenging the rhetoric of "light" and "darkness" that Gronniosaw utilized to describe slavery and Africa respectively. The act of taking Africans from Africa, or, as she put it, to "invade them," did little to combat the perceived "Darkness" of the irreligious continent. Enslavement, Wheatley argued, cannot be justified on the grounds that it bettered the piety of the African continent, as she

⁷⁵ Gates, *Trials*, 72-73; Phillis Wheatley, "Letter to Reverend Samson Occum," *The Connecticut Gazette*, 11 March 1774.

believed it was accomplishing the exact opposite. Consequently, she again deemed “insensible” the notion that, through enslavement, “the Chaos which has reigned so long, is converting into beautiful Order.”⁷⁶

From this challenge to pre-Revolutionary views, Wheatley firmly established her beliefs about the divine nature of liberty itself. As she portrayed the absurdity of enslavement bringing “Light” to Africa, Wheatley argued that if this “Chaos” was in fact being converted into “beautiful Order,” that transition would reveal “more and more clearly, the glorious Dispensation of civil and religious Liberty.”⁷⁷ She spoke to the divinely-ordained nature of liberty that she had previously expressed in *On Being Brought From Africa to America* by arguing that both “civil and religious Liberty” was distributed by a divine hand. However, she cemented the nexus between the Revolutionary “language of liberty” and black religious thought in the very next line: “civil and religious Liberty, which are so inseparably united, that there is little or no Enjoyment of one without the other.”⁷⁸ Wheatley established the interconnected nature of the Patriot’s “language of liberty” and God’s divine salvation. As all men walk the same path in the pursuit of salvation, or religious freedom, in the eyes of God, all men then share the same claim to the natural right of liberty. Taking the divine nature of liberty even further, Wheatley declared that if this battle between “Light” and “Darkness” and the transition from “Chaos” to “Order” followed the beliefs of the white master class perhaps the Israelites would have “been less solicitous for their Freedom from Egyptian Slavery.”⁷⁹ By focusing on the bondage of the Israelites to portray the shortcomings of pre-Revolutionary thought, Wheatley drew a comparison between the Israelites and the American slaves, which she further explored.

⁷⁶ Ibid. .

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

While she argued that on the basis of pre-Revolutionary religious thought the Israelites would not have so desired their freedom from the Egyptians, Wheatley made clear that they still would have pursued it. For “in every human Breast, God has implanted a Principle, which we call Love of Freedom; it is impatient of Oppression, and pants for Deliverance; and by leave of our modern Egyptians I will assert, that the same Principle lives in us.”⁸⁰ She firmly maintained her belief that the black pursuit of freedom is a desire implanted by God Himself. By linking the American slave population to God’s chosen people, Wheatley designated God as the slave’s path towards deliverance and salvation. In fact, Wheatley, speaking of the enslavement that Africans suffer, prophesied that “God Grant Deliverance in his own Way and Time.”⁸¹ She essentially argued that Africans would be delivered from their bondage in the same way that the Israelites were delivered from theirs: by the hand of God.

Phillip Gould touches upon the effect of Wheatley’s development of black religious thought. He specifically focuses his exploration on Wheatley’s letter to Reverend Occum, in which she presented her audience with the full realization of her religious vision. He argues that Wheatley specifically relates the notion of liberty to black identity rather than focusing on the sinful suppression of liberty by the white oppressors. As such, Gould argues that Wheatley characterizes the black pursuit of liberty as an “enlightened model of progressive history...symbolized by “light.”” Slavery is then a “regressive darkness” that impedes that progression. Gould argues that through her exploration of liberty and slavery, Wheatley leaves her audience with “troubling questions about who exactly are God’s chosen people in the 1770s—suffering patriots or, more likely, enslaved Africans in America?”⁸²

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Philip Gould, “The Rise, Development, and Circulation of the American Slave Narrative,” *The Cambridge Comparison to the African American Slave Narrative*, (Cambridge University Press, 2007) 27.

As she went about establishing a new understanding of the connection between the black individual and the Christian faith, Wheatley inevitably provided a new examination of how the latter related to the state that she and other members of her race found themselves in: slavery. While her linkage of liberty to divine providence may have allowed her to stake out a new place for the black soul within Christianity, Wheatley also used that nexus to foster a critical tension between the American colonists' practice of slavery and their practice of Christianity. The foundation of this friction between the two focused on the process by which Wheatley leads the reader to question the viability of slavery in light of her arguments pertaining to the faith. In arguing that the colonists' understanding of natural rights also applied to those they enslaved, Wheatley questioned the colonial use of such a "language of liberty." If religious liberty and civil liberty are tied together with an inseparable bond, was enslavement going against the will of God? If God was the path to deliverance from slavery, how does God then view enslavement? If African slaves were God's chosen people and American colonists their Egyptian oppressors, was slavery jeopardizing the latter's relationship to God?

The continued expansion of this tension formed the basis of an incompatibility between the two, leading Wheatley to use Christianity to critique the very institution of slavery itself. She introduced an inherent adversarial opposition between enslavement and the Christian faith from an unprecedented conviction about the relationship between black individuals and Christianity. In her letter to the Mohegan minister Samson Occum (1774), Wheatley wrote that she desired for God to deliver African slaves from the bondage of slavery and to get "honour upon all those whose Avarice impels them to...help forward the Calamities of their fellow Creatures" in order to bring about, among the white colonists, recognition of the contradiction between their actions

and their faith.⁸³ She explained that “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.”⁸⁴ She asked the reader: how can a people be willing to fight and die for their claims to liberty at the very same moment that they suppress that right from an entire race of people? She decided to end the summation of her religious vision with the same sentiment. Adopting a satirical tone, she exclaimed, “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.”⁸⁵

Wheatley’s perceptions and sentiments differed drastically from the religious thought that came before it. In the narratives of slaves like Gronniosaw, Africa was portrayed as a place of godless darkness. Africans, then, were believed to be shrouded within that darkness, lacking any connection to God. It was of the utmost importance for Africans to be introduced to Christianity and the concept of God. Through their exposure to the white world, the African soul was brought to salvation. The mechanism by which they were exposed to the white world, slavery, was then perceived as a divine agent of salvation. Therefore, the relationship between black individuals and the Christian faith was focused around the redemption of inherently corrupt souls, with slavery acting as the tool that God used to bring this about. By positing a nexus between liberty and God’s will, Wheatley fundamentally reformulated the understanding of black individuality within Christianity. In this metamorphosis of black religious thought, Wheatley demonstrated the fundamental tension in the association between slavery and Christianity, as it was essentially at odds with her perception of black personhood within the Christian context. While the ideas that

⁸³ Phillis Wheatley, “Letter to Reverend Samson Occum,” *The Connecticut Gazette*, 11 March 1774.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

Wheatley explored and developed were unprecedented in themselves, the level and extent of the agency that she exercised in their creation reveals an even greater contribution to the transformation of black religious thought.

“Come Magnify Thy God”: The Reception of Wheatley

Wheatley’s contributions to the black religious revolution constituted an act of religious agency that was not present in the pre-Revolutionary period. The assertion itself was two-fold. Wheatley independently created an unprecedented belief system focused around black personhood within the Christian faith, articulating divine perceptions of equality, the nature of liberty, and the black claim to human freedom. She then used that self-created belief system to formulate a vision of slavery as standing “diametrically opposite” the teachings of Christianity, critiquing an institution that was previously maintained by the very same precepts. This two-folded assertion supported the argument for Wheatley’s status as the epitome of the black religious revolution. That status was cemented by the response to her contributions.

The responses to Wheatley’s contributions fell within two realms: criticism and proliferation. Wheatley’s expression of a new and powerful form of black agency garnered much criticism during her lifetime, stemming from the desire to preserve the existing social and religious order. Wheatley’s creation of a new belief system and critique challenged the society’s religious foundation on an ideological basis, undermining the beliefs that had previously supported the institution of slavery. However, Wheatley’s contributions to the black religious revolution also challenged, on a fundamental level, the underlying premise of that foundation: the inherent inferiority of black individuals. Thomas Jefferson aptly summarized the 18th century understanding of the association between race and reason in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, employing the arguments of 18th century philosophers to do so. While he recognized a racial distinction along the lines of color, appearance, and perceived characteristics, Jefferson primarily focused on a racist perception of innate mental ability. Quite simply, Jefferson appealed to the notion of intellectual black inferiority, asserting “in reason [African-Americans are] much

inferior, as I think one could scarcely be found capable of tracing and comprehending the investigations of Euclid; and that in imagination they are dull, tasteless, and anomalous.”⁸⁶

Wheatley’s act of agency, in and of itself, was a challenge to a fundamental tenet of the 18th century societal structure and its Christian foundation. Her collection of poems displayed the extent of her mental acuity, directly combatting Jefferson’s claim and others like it.

Consequently, it received a critical response. Of course, Wheatley’s work received criticism from the white sphere. In fact, Thomas Jefferson deemed Wheatley’s poems as “below the dignity of criticism” within the very same passage that he maintained the black race’s intellectual inferiority.⁸⁷ Taking a look back, Wheatley was not able to garner enough support within the American colonies to published *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* because, as historian Henry Gates Jr. put it, “not enough Bostonians could believe that an African slave possessed the requisite degree of reason and wit to write a poem by herself.”⁸⁸ Wheatley was forced to go about an extensive process of attestation, in which she was questioned by a council of eighteen educated white men to verify the authenticity of her work. Even once she was “examined by some of the best Judges” and “thought qualified to write” her poems, Wheatley was unable to secure an American publisher, leading her to look towards England. These acts of subversion at the hands of the white society attest to the unique and challenging nature of Wheatley’s idea. More remarkable was the criticism she faced within her own race, which clearly positioned Wheatley as a revolutionary departure from previous black religious thought.

Historian Woody Holton argues that there were two black poets that provide tangible evidence of black religious faith during the period that saw the transformation of black religious

⁸⁶ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, (Philadelphia: Prichard and Hall, 1787), 149.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ Gates, *Trials*, 22.

thought: Phillis Wheatley and Jupiter Hammon. Hammon relied on pre-Revolutionary thought in order to understand his existence. Employing the sentiments expressed by Gronniosaw, Equinao, Bestes, and Holbrook, Hammon argued in one of his works that “if we are slaves it is by the permission of God.”⁸⁹ Wheatley, on the other hand, “struggled to understand slavery in light of Christian principles.”⁹⁰ So while Hammon accepted his enslavement as the will of God, Wheatley “repeatedly pointed out the hypocrisy of those who inveighed against British’s attempts to impose political slavery upon free colonists while practice actual slavery themselves.”⁹¹ However, Jupiter Hammon had something to say about the difference between his and Wheatley’s perceptions of the Christian faith. Coming from someone who was Wheatley’s contemporary in the sphere of black religious poetry, Hammon established a recognition and critique of Wheatley’s unprecedented actions within the confines of black religious authorship. He directly engaged with Wheatley’s departure from the pre-Revolutionary thought that he himself subscribed to.

Following the publication of Wheatley’s *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773), Jupiter Hammon dedicated a poem to Wheatley in 1778. With this poem, titled *An Address to Miss Phillis Wheatley*, Hammon pushed back against the religious notions that Wheatley painted in her work. Utilizing pre-Revolutionary thought, Hammon took on a chastising tone in his engagement with Wheatley’s intellectual departure. Hammon opened his poem with an invocation of slavery’s use as a salvation mechanism, telling Wheatley to “adore / The wisdom of thy God, / In bringing thee from distant shore, / To learn His holy word.”⁹² Mimicking Gronniosaw’s rhetoric of Africa being a place of darkness, he continued by

⁸⁹ Holton, *Black Americans*, 3.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Holton, *Black Americans*, 5.

⁹² Jupiter Hammon, “An Address to Miss Phillis Wheatley,” *The Longman Anthology of Poetry*, (Pearson, 2006).

reminding Wheatley that “Though mightn’t been left behind / Amidst a dark abode.” However, “God’s tender mercy brought thee here.”⁹³ With the acknowledgement that Wheatley was only brought to the American colonies on board a slave ship as property, Hammon echoed the pre-Revolutionary notion of slavery as the “mercy” of God. Hammon presented a pointed reminder to Wheatley: “Thous hast left the heathen shore; / Through mercy of the Lord, / Among the heathen live no more, / Come magnify thy God.”⁹⁴ Restating the conviction that God, through slavery, delivered her from her “heathen” origin, Hammon implied that Wheatley was still acting as if she lived within the “dark” continent. Thus, he directed Wheatley to “live no more” among “the heathen.” As this poem was specifically addressed to Wheatley in reaction to her 1773 poems, Hammon held that Wheatley’s work went against religious teachings. Wheatley’s ideas constituted a maintenance of “heathen” ties. Hammon advised Wheatley to turn away from her musings on Christianity and “Come magnify thy God.”

In this work, Hammon tied Wheatley’s creation of a new relationship between blacks and Christianity, as well as her subsequent critique of slavery, to her “heathen” origins. Hammon understood Wheatley as being godless on the basis of her deviation from the dominant perspective that slavery was an instrument of redemption used by the hand of God. The interaction between Wheatley and Hammon constituted a conversation between pre-Revolutionary black religious thought and Wheatley’s revolution. Through Hammon’s criticism of her departure, Wheatley’s status as an agent of religious revolution within the black intellectual sphere was recognized. This critical engagement with her ideas, paired with the proliferation of her contributions, demonstrates how she stood at the turning point of the black religious revolution.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

Despite the critical view of her work by agents and representatives of pre-Revolutionary thought, Wheatley's doubly significant religious ideas saw an almost immediate positive response among black authors. While both aspects of her agency gained exposure and acclaim between 1770 and 1774, Wheatley's impact on black authors did not occur all at once. Her new relationship between black individuals and Christianity influenced the black population sooner than did her new association between slavery and Christianity. Consequently, while her impact on the black religious revolution can be seen as soon as 1779, this first instance was focused around the propagation of her belief system, namely her understanding of black individuality within the Christian faith.

Just as the revolution's opening stage of the "language of liberty" was showcased in slave petitions made during that time, the effect of the revolution's epitome was also portrayed by a group of slaves in their claim to freedom. Created five years after the publishing of Wheatley's letter to Samson Occum, a petition to the New Hampshire Legislature was communally drafted by a number of New Hampshire slaves, with the first name signed being a Nero Brewster. Within this claim to freedom, these New Hampshire slaves employed a religious construction of liberty that was not present in the petitions of Felix Holbrook or Peter Bestes. The divine nature of liberty was, however, explored in the poetic works of Phillis Wheatley. These slaves opened their petition by stating their motive: to "sheweth, That the God of Nature gave them life and freedom, upon the terms of the most perfect equality with other men."⁹⁵ This clearly invoked the framework that Wheatley constructed, going directly against the pre-Revolutionary sentiments of Gronniosaw. Not only did they assert that "freedom is an inherent right of the human species," but these New Hampshire slaves also proclaimed that "all men being amendable to the Deity for

⁹⁵ Holton, *Black Americans*, 72.

the ill-improvement of the blessings of His providence, they hold themselves in duty bound strenuously...to obtain that blessing of freedom, which they are justly entitled to from the donation of the beneficent Creator.”⁹⁶ Wheatley’s notion that liberty was a divine principle that all mankind was entitled to was further exercised in the concluding remarks of this claim to freedom. They stated that, on the basis of God giving them a right to their freedom, they “pray for the sake of injured liberty, for the sake of justice, humanity, and the rights of mankind, for the honor of religion and by all that is dear” that they may “regain” their liberty.⁹⁷ Brewster and other New Hampshire slaves, in their 1779 claim to freedom, were only a few of the many who demonstrated the proliferation of Wheatley’s constructions.

Boston King was a slave who gained his freedom by fighting for the British during the Revolutionary War. Following the war, he joined the mass migration of former slaves to British-controlled Nova Scotia. In Nova Scotia, King experienced a “conversion,” becoming a Methodist minister. In 1792, he, along with other black Loyalists, resettled Sierra Leone. For King, the mid-1790s were comprised of preaching and studying in England. In 1796, King published an account of his life in the 1798 issue of *Methodist Magazine*, titled *Memoirs of the Life of Boston King, A Black Preacher, Written by Himself*.⁹⁸

King appeared to have internalized the ideas of Wheatley as he went about describing his existence in, and subsequent escape from, slavery. In his opening line, King summarized his life account by stating “yet my gratitude to Almighty God, who considered my affliction, and looked upon me in my low estate, who delivered me from the hand of the oppressor, and established my goings, impels me to acknowledge his goodness.”⁹⁹ King clearly stated that God was the means

⁹⁶ Holton, *Black Americans*, 72-73.

⁹⁷ Holton, *Black Americans*, 74.

⁹⁸ Holton, *Black Americans*, 119.

⁹⁹ Holton, *Black Americans*, 120.

by which he was delivered from his enslavement, recalling the words of Wheatley. This was a drastically different association between slavery and Christianity than the one presented in Gronniosaw's narrative. For Gronniosaw, slavery was God's mechanism of salvation. For King, God was a mechanism of salvation from slavery. In describing the moment in which he escaped enslavement, King assigned his success to the will and protection of God. Stating that "at prayer one Sunday evening, I thought the Lord heard me, and would mercifully deliver me," King attempted his daring escape.¹⁰⁰ "Therefore, putting my confidence in him," King escaped via submersion in a river right under the noses of many guards. In fact, he told of an interaction between two guards in which one swore that he saw King cross the river and the other brushed it off as not true. King accounted the following: "I fell down upon my knees, and thanked God for his deliverance."¹⁰¹ Yet again, King manifested a clear conception of God as the means of his salvation and deliverance from slavery. In fact, he went so far as to characterize his very escape as the "great deliverance," a specific rhetorical construction that Wheatley employed in her letter to Reverend Occum.¹⁰²

Just like her religious rhetoric and ideas, Wheatley's second contribution, of a fundamental tension between slavery and Christianity, also proliferated amongst the black population. Wheatley's critique of contradiction was utilized by black authors as soon as 1791. On August 19th of that year, Benjamin Banneker wrote a letter to Thomas Jefferson in which he outlined an adversarial opposition between slavery and Christianity. Banneker was a black man who was born free due to the actions of his grandmother. She was a white woman, who bought an African slave, freed him, and then married him. Later in life, Banneker gained recognition as

¹⁰⁰ Holton, *Black Americans*, 124.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

an established almanac author, aiding in the survey of what would become Washington D.C. Similar to Wheatley, Banneker believed his work challenged the presiding notion of black intellectual inferiority. He wrote to Thomas Jefferson to prove it, sending him a handwritten copy of his almanac.¹⁰³ In the letter attached to his almanac, Banneker not only reflected the religious constructions that Wheatley created but relied on her critique of contradiction as well.

Following an extensive description of Jefferson's beliefs regarding the interaction between race and reason, Banneker directed Jefferson to a consideration: how did the Founding Father's beliefs relate to Banneker's own religious convictions. Banneker asserted that his beliefs must run "concurrent" with Jefferson's as they both subscribe to the Christian faith. In summarizing those sentiments, Banneker declared that "one universal Father hath given being to us all" and "made us all of one flesh...and endowed us all with the same faculties."¹⁰⁴ Recalling Wheatley's notion of equality in the eyes of God, Banneker argued that despite any variations in skin color, religion, or circumstance "we are all of the same family and stand in relation to him [God]."¹⁰⁵ From these perceptions, the almanac author went so far as to declare "that it is the indispensable duty of those...who possess the obligations of Christianity, to extend their power and influence to the relief of every part of the human race, from whatever burden or oppression they may unjustly labor under."¹⁰⁶ Again showing the influence of Wheatley's critique of enslavement, Banneker argued that those who abide by Christian ideals and principles must call for and pursue the freedom of all slaves due to a fundamental religious obligation. Highlighting a contradiction within the nation's foundation in the same manner as Wheatley, Banneker maintained that while Jefferson believed in and defended the equal distribution of rights by the

¹⁰³ Holton, *Black Americans*, 108.

¹⁰⁴ Benjamin Banneker, *Copy of a Letter from Benjamin Banneker, to the Secretary of State, with His Answer*, (Philadelphia: Daniel Lawrence, 1792), 4.

¹⁰⁵ Banneker, *Copy of a Letter*, 5.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

hand of God among man, his actions spoke differently. He explained that “you [Jefferson] should at the same time counteract his mercies, in detaining by fraud and violence so numerous a part of my brethren, under groaning captivity.”¹⁰⁷ Simply, Banneker, reflecting the intellectual framework of Wheatley, found Jefferson and his fellow Patriots “guilty of that most criminal act, which you professedly detested in others, with respect to yourselves.”¹⁰⁸

The nature of Wheatley’s religious power supported her status as the paragon of the black religious revolution, due to its marked departure from the thought that came before it.

Wheatley’s musings charted an unprecedented religious pathway for the black individual. The recognition of that novel account made it revolutionary. The popular response to Wheatley’s declaration of agency, both critical and supportive, cemented her transformative role. The unprecedented nature of her control, which jeopardized the existing social and religious order, was fully recognized and criticized by her contemporary environment, showing a confrontation between pre-Revolutionary thought and its evolution to another stage. The creation of her new belief system marked a clear and dramatic change in black religious thought, as her specific religious ideas, rhetoric, and critique spread among the people of her race. Simply, the interaction between Wheatley’s argument and her environment fully established her as a revolutionary apex in the transformation of black religious thought.

¹⁰⁷ Banneker, *Copy of a Letter*, 8.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

Conclusion

Black religious thought and black religious agency underwent a drastic, co-dependent transformation within the American Revolutionary context. Prior to the Revolutionary War, slave narratives of the early eighteenth century painted a distinct image of the Christian faith and the black individual's relation to it. The narrative of Ukawsaw Gronniosaw fully captured this early eighteenth century relationship. In this thought, the continent of Africa was viewed as a place of religious darkness. The inhabitants of that continent were mere reflections of their environment. Born and raised within a godless darkness, the African individual was a heathen whose soul lacked any connection to the divine Creator. That connection between the African soul and the divine Creator was only brought into being via the former's exposure to the white world. The means by which they were exposed to the white world was perceived as a divine agent of salvation. According to this view, slavery was a tool that God used to redeem the African soul from the darkness of its homeland. The link between the black individual and the Christian faith was focused on the redemption of an inherently corrupt soul.

At the same time that he was outlining these religious beliefs, Gronniosaw suffered from a lack of religious agency on multiple levels. First, Gronniosaw did not have control over the presentation of his own life story and religious experiences, as we are told in the preface of his narrative that both were "committed to Paper by the elegant Pen of a young LADY of the Town of LEOMINISTER."¹⁰⁹ Second, within the preface, its author, the white minister Walter Shirley, primed the audience to view Gronniosaw's life account as an attestation to the redeeming power of enslavement. Third, the narrative itself argued how Gronniosaw only gained his religious knowledge and a familiarity with God at the hands of white masters and ministers. These threats

¹⁰⁹ Gronniosaw, *Narrative*, Preface III.

to the agency of this black author called into question his power over the religious beliefs he held but also his control over his portrayal of those beliefs.

This was typical of how black writers understood their relationship to Christianity until the Revolutionary War. Wartime rhetoric of liberty and natural rights, or what Boston revolutionary James Otis dubbed the “language of liberty,” provided African slaves with the intellectual tools they needed to fully understand and combat their oppression. By adopting the same arguments that American colonists were using against their British overlords, American slaves asserted a form of agency in their call for freedom on the basis of natural rights. However, those intellectual tools and the agency they asserted with them were not religious in nature. Evidenced by the slave petition of Peter Bestes and Felix Holbrook, slaves maintained the pre-Revolutionary belief that their enslavement was the divine will of God, at the same time as they made their claims for freedom. For black authors, the Patriotic “language of liberty” and the Christian faith, at that stage, remained two distinct and separate spheres. The connection between the two would not be drawn until 1770, when the young black poet Phillis Wheatley gained notoriety for her work *On the Death of Reverend Whitefield*.

Beginning with her elegiac poem, Wheatley established a nexus between the “language of liberty” and God’s will. She established the idea that liberty was divine in nature and was a right guaranteed by God Himself. Via this nexus, Wheatley fundamentally redefined the understanding of black personhood within Christianity. As God favored the American colonial struggle for liberty from Great Britain, He held the same favor for the struggle of African slaves for liberty from their American colonial masters. This was due to the fact that all of mankind walked the same path towards salvation and the afterlife. In terms of the Christian faith, Wheatley argued, all mankind was equal in the eyes of God despite any differing characteristics.

While she was expanding and reformulating the concept of black personhood within Christianity up until 1774, through both poems and published writings, Wheatley took her religious musings a step further into the realm of critique.

Wheatley revealed a fundamental tension between slavery and Christianity. She called into question the religious justification for enslavement given her new framing of black personhood. She argued that the institution of slavery stood in adversarial opposition to Christianity, in that it challenged the black individual's claim to the divine right of freedom and religious equality. God was a redeeming force *against* slavery. Wheatley drew a parallel between African slaves and biblical Israelites. Wheatley maintained that just like God's chosen people, African slaves will be delivered from their oppression by God Himself. Through this parallel, Wheatley spoke to the godless nature of white masters, comparing them to the biblical Egyptians. In fact, Wheatley went so far as to emphasize the contradiction between colonists' beliefs and their actions.

In the creation of these new religious ideas, Wheatley exhibited a form of religious agency that was unprecedented. Despite her social environment, Wheatley maintained power over her own religious beliefs. Not only this, but the extent of her control over the external portrayal of her religious beliefs and the manner in which they interacted with her existing religious environment was vast. She not only created new religious principles never before seen in black writing, but she used her poems and writings to shape the way that religious belief system would interact with the prevailing pre-Revolutionary religious thought. In essence, she used a set of religious ideas that she created herself to challenge the very institution that was previously maintained in the name of Christian principle. However, the way her agency and

religious expressions were received by her social environment cemented her place at the heart of that revolution.

As Wheatley's work and agency was unprecedented, it came against opposition from multiple fronts. As the black poet was challenging the established religious foundation and social structure of the nation, many white contemporaries attacked or disregarded Wheatley and her contributions. For much the same reason, Jupiter Hammon, Wheatley's contemporary in the realm of religious poetry, deemed Wheatley and her work as maintaining ties to her "heathen" origins. Seeking to preserve the status quo, these voices of critique recognized the dramatic departure that Wheatley orchestrated. Together, these voices sought to push back against the evolution of the religious thought that they themselves believed in.

Despite the criticism, the black poet's influence was seen in the work of many black authors. In the slave petition of Nero Brewster and other New Hampshire slaves, Wheatley's rhetoric of religious equality and the divine nature of the black claim to freedom was employed again and again. Black Methodist preacher, Boston King, internalized the religious belief system of Wheatley, citing his escape from enslavement as a spiritual deliverance granted by God Himself. In a letter to the Wheatley critic, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Banneker not only relied on the religious expressions of the revolutionary poet but he also used the Christian faith to critique the institution of slavery in the same way that Wheatley did.

Both the critical and supportive reception of Wheatley's unprecedented act of religious agency portrayed the crucial nature of her contributions to the black religious revolution. She was not just simply a part of a transformation of black religious thought. She was its very inspiration. Before her, the dominant religious view was that slavery was an agent of redemption for God. Wheatley recapitulated that viewpoint. God became an agent of redemption from

slavery, as the latter violated the tenets of Christianity itself. The sudden and dramatic transformation of that religious view was recognized by those who subscribed to it, drawing criticism forthwith. That very same transformation was also recognized by those who were oppressed by the prior religious mindset, resulting in its propagation. This dual-natured recognition established Phillis Wheatley as the apex and epitomization of the revolution in black religious thought.

This thesis's framing of the black religious revolution, as well as the role of Wheatley in it, explores a not yet scrutinized aspect of what is known as the "central paradox of American history." It gave a voice to a few of those who were looked-over or disregarded in the dominant narrative of American history. In essence, it surveys the black response to the American Revolution. But in order to understand how it does so, we must first examine the "central paradox of American history" as posited by historian Edmund S. Morgan.

There was a terrible paradox present in the colonial narrative of early America: while colonists struggled to claim their liberty from their British overlords, they oppressed their enslaved population of Africans. This paradox is what Edmund S. Morgan explores in his work *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia*. Morgan understands the "central paradox of American history" as being how "two such seemingly contradictory developments were taking place simultaneously over a long period of time, from the seventeenth century to the nineteenth century."¹¹⁰ The key to this paradox, Morgan argues, is the colony of Virginia, as it was the "largest of the new United States, in territory, in population, in influence—and in slaveholding."¹¹¹ Through his exploration of Virginia, its notions of freedom, and its dependence on labor, Morgan argues that the colonial "dedication to human liberty and

¹¹⁰ Morgan, *American Slavery*, 4.

¹¹¹ Morgan, *American Slavery*, 5.

dignity” and the colonial “system of labor that denied human liberty and dignity” actually went hand in hand, with slavery providing a foundation that allowed the Virginian desire for liberty to progress without fear.¹¹²

In order to show how the enslavement of the black population and the white struggle for freedom eventually became a symbiotic relationship, Morgan explores the colonial perception of how liberty related to wealth. The idea that poverty was a threat to liberty was a key feature of the arguments made by John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon in *Cato's Letters*, as well as the prevailing British republican thought of the period. Morgan adopts their idea that the ideal citizen was the independent yeoman farmer, with their independence acting as a check to the “encroachments of tyranny.”¹¹³ Those who were dependent on the larger society, or the poor, were seen as a threat to its liberty and equality, as they contributed nothing to the common welfare and were easily disposed to rise against it. As such, influential thinkers like James Burgh and Andrew Fletcher proposed the enslavement of these lower, nominally independent persons of society to protect the liberty and equality of the whole, as slaves posed no threat. Racism “thus absorbed in Virginia the fear and contempt that men in England...felt for the inarticulate lower class.”¹¹⁴ Although the members of the white master class were not economically equal to one another, the same racism that allowed Virginians to “see Negroes, mulattoes, and Indians as one also dictated that they see large and small planters as one.”¹¹⁵ With slavery absorbing the threat posed by the lower strata to the larger society, “racism became an essential, if unacknowledged, ingredient of the republican ideology that enabled Virginians to lead the nation.”¹¹⁶ Establishing

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Morgan, *American Slavery*, 382.

¹¹⁴ Morgan, *American Slavery*, 386.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

a controlled, unarmed, and restricted lower slave class, Virginia was then able to profess, pursue, and even fight for democratic ideals of liberty and equality, as there was no fear of class-based unrest.

However, Morgan distinctly examines this “paradox” in so far as it runs parallel to the white narrative of the American Revolution. He quite explicitly focuses on the dominant white society in colonial Virginia. On an individual level, Morgan prioritizes the portrayal of how white Virginian revolutionaries were able to lead the nation in one aspect of their lives and enslave people in another. He treats those who were enslaved as merely supporting characters in the story of white liberation. He disregards how the “central paradox of American history” potentially interacted with the race of people that were integral to its very definition: African slaves. It is within this neglect of Morgan’s account, representative of the majority of the scholarly debate at large, where this thesis resides. It attempts to give a voice to those forced into the background.

This thesis is not the first to attempt to correct Morgan’s account. Those who have attempted to examine the black experience in the American Revolution however have also suffered from the same mistake as Morgan: they explore the black experience insofar as it relates to a white narrative. They may take a step further than Morgan’s disregard of African slaves, but they do not go far enough to fully realize the nature of the link between slaves and the American Revolution. Rather, they characterize the black response to the latter as merely a reflection of the dominant society’s “language of liberty.” The existing scholarly consensus understands this adoption of the white American commitment to freedom, natural rights, and independence by the black population as constituting a black revolution.¹¹⁷ While the “language of liberty” allowed

¹¹⁷ Nash, “The African Americans’ Revolution,” 266.

slaves to understand and combat their own oppression as well as complicate the American colonists' commitment to freedom, on its own, it did not define the interaction between the black populace and the American Revolution. It was merely a prelude to the transformation crafted by Phillis Wheatley.

So, with this in mind, how did the black population respond to this "paradox?" How did those enslaved react to the "central paradox of American history" that was unfolding during their time? What did the African slaves do in response to the contradictory nature of the American Revolution? This thesis answered those questions: they created a revolution of their own.

African-American slaves nurtured a revolution of black religious thought that essentially accomplished three things. First, they demonstrated that a "religious paradox" existed within the American Revolutionary context. By noting how the enslaving actions of American colonists were "diametrically opposite" to the faith they espoused, the black population called the nation's religious foundation into question. Second, the revolution introduced a religious conception of agency and an independence of thought to the black populace. These were then tools they used to understand, stake out, and demand their freedom. Third, the revolution refigured the role of its creator in the narrative of history. Phillis Wheatley was the architect of the black response to the "central paradox of American history" and the forerunner of black religious agency. Therefore, this thesis must end with the same goal that it set out to accomplish: to give a black poet her just due. To Phillis Wheatley: "Thou didst in strains of eloquence refin'd / In flame the soul, and captivate the mind."

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