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Reading Pleasures

Everyday Black Living in Early America

TARA A. BYNUM

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For my mother, Ethel V. Locks
12 January 1952–26 January 2021

and my sister, Tia Anise Bynum
23 January 1985–18 November 2021

Pleasuring Readers

Reading Pleasures unsettles and disrupts the unspoken expectation that, for Black people, life, as Ralph Ellison summarizes, is lived as "an abstract embodiment of a living hell." Living is, in fact, a daily practice, a getting up and a lying down. Living is a conditioning, an exercise that can only make sense, at times, because there is something or someone in whom to take pleasure or with whom to feel good.[70] What's inside of our living is chaotic and affective. It isn't always easy to find or access, especially without photographs or hashtags. It is legible to those who are literate enough to read its pleasures. It's interiority—the depths of one's very human understanding of self—that gives pleasure its power. Because interiority and its resulting pleasures are imaginative, it possesses a materiality that refuses the limits of agency and resists certainty.

Interiority asks us to rid ourselves of the fear of what's unknown and what resists counting. It has something to say if we are willing to listen into what it has left and what it will leave. Reading for pleasures is a necessary way to seek to understand just what makes living easier and worthy of sharing. Reading for pleasures posits a way of reading that privileges mundanity, where authors tell jokes and stories of feeling good—because even Phillis Wheatley tells jokes. David Walker promises happiness. And, John Marrant tells the story of his younger self, hoping to prank an audience of churchgoers, in order to celebrate how his faith changed him. James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw wants to share the good news of his faith. We can laugh with them if we just read closely enough to observe the limits of suffering and the very real possibility of a profound pleasure.

CHAPTER 1

Phillis Wheatley's Pleasures

The frontispiece of Phillis Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773) compels us to stare at her body, fixed as it is in form and time. The engraving—one of the first of its kind to share the likeness of a young, African woman and her poetry—greets readers with this seated, young woman. She wears a bonnet and holds a quill pen in her hand. In the border that surrounds her, there is her name, Phillis Wheatley, and a nod to her political status as "a servant to John Wheatley of Boston."[1] She sits alone in what is assumed to be an empty room, except for her chair and the desk that holds a sheet of paper, an inkwell, and an unnamed book. Her gaze is pensive and elsewhere. The frontispiece seems to direct us to what is still most noteworthy and, at times, compelling about how we read what may matter to her—namely, who she is and to whom she belongs. It publicizes Wheatley's body to her readers, at the behest of her patron, Selina Hastings, the Countess of Huntingdon. Her body is there to be read as a "genius" and a curiosity to those who doubt the intellectual acumen of this African girl. And, it's her body that readers, presently, know how best to see and to read.

While the frontispiece asks readers to look at Wheatley's body, her poems and her various writings call us to what's inside this body. The engraving doesn't memorialize much of Wheatley's story. Rather, in the pages that follow the frontispiece, the poems bring readers inside her imaginative musings. Her poems take readers into her interiority, into what literary scholars Christopher Castiglia and Julia Stern define as those "feelings, fantasy, desire, and affect (which we define as the emotional weather system that is expressive of one's imagined emotional states)."[2] When Castiglia and Stern imagine the interiority of early American persons, they speak of it as "not

transparent, but is a construction that must be reached through the mediation of language and representation."[3] And, Wheatley, as a writer, mediates this language with her words. What she writes represents or speaks for not just her bodily form but also that which she can only feel and say in rhyme, in a sonnet or elegy, or even in an epistle. She authors a privacy, an intimacy that "builds worlds; it creates spaces and usurps places meant for other kinds of relation."[4] It demands a "reckoning."[5] As her cast-off eyes and the quiet melancholy of the engraving suggest, it's what's unspoken and, at times, what she imagines that inspires Wheatley's pen.[6] Hers is an interiority, like most, that lives inside her body, and it lives way into those poems and sites where the dreaming lovers of her poetic voice sigh and where language helps make sense of who she is and who we, her readers, are.

Surely, Wheatley is enslaved—until 1773—to the Wheatley family in Boston, and she is the poet, writer, and author of a world that is hers to read or write. Readers happen upon this inner life with every "I" that finds its way into her poetry and her writings. There's "I speak, while I speak sincerely and love" (line 37) in "On the Death of Rev. Sewell." In "On Imagination," she writes, "The monarch of the day I might behold, / And all the mountains tipt with God, / But I reluctant leave the pleasing views" (ll. 46–47). With every "I" that interrupts the poetic voice, there's a lot of feeling too. At times, she feels "less happy, cannot raise the song, / the fault'ring music dies upon [her] tongue" (ll. 46–47).[7] Sometimes, she strives. She snatches laurels off the head of Maecenas, "While you indulgent smile upon the deed" (line 47). Other times, in her letters, she writes that she is pleased to hear from or take a walk with a friend.

This chapter seeks after the many interiorities of Phillis Wheatley. I wrestle with these in her extant letters, in particular, though her poetry first introduced me to the very possibility of her inner life. I say "many" because interiority is either public or private and always variable and plentiful. Even as it suggests a particular "emotional weather system," its depths are unspecified, multidimensional, and its complexities are neither fixed nor certain.[8] Her letters lead me in pursuit of that which is inside her, because it's there that Wheatley delights in the pleasures of her living in spite of and because of the world-at-large. The poetic voice is turned into a real person when Wheatley writes to her friends and acquaintances in Boston, Newport, New Haven, Wales, or London. Wheatley writes letters (and about twenty-three or so are still extant) to many well-known and lesser-known men and women: namely, the Countess of Huntingdon, popular Newport minister Rev. Samuel Hopkins, John Thornton, and her friend Obour Tanner.

Wheatley's letters are neither too lengthy nor too short, but just long enough to evidence what matters most to her. And of course, what matters most depends upon to whom she is writing. For example, when Wheatley writes to Selina Hastings, the Countess of Huntingdon, she seems most concerned about whether or not her travel plans will hinder her ability to meet the countess. When she writes to John Thornton, Wheatley notes Susanna Wheatley's death and is thankful for his book recommendations and for her own return to better health. Her letters take us into her everyday life with its travels, its Christian worship, and its commitments to friends and acquaintances. In her letters, she is no longer a solitary young woman on a frontispiece or an enslaved teenager who is compelled to write poems to amuse and delight the Wheatley family.[9] Every letter takes us out of the confines of the engraved room of the poetry collection's frontispiece into geographies of community, worship, friendship, and eighteenth-century urban and revolutionary-era living.

Reading her letters, it's easy to see that Wheatley isn't just a lonely poet, but rather she admits to her various interiorities while in conversation with her interlocutors. She confesses to her likes, her desires, and to her Christian worship. Wheatley's letters have her admit to an interiority that is, at best, difficult to access because it is inward and personal. Yet, it is useful to pursue because it can, as Castiglia and Stern note, "register not the stasis or fixity of identities and social positions, but the moments where the phenomenology of life change becomes the basis for imaginative dissent and revision."[10] It's not only dissent and revision but also the site of those pleasures that make life's changes private, palatable, and possible.

Pleasure and what it means to be pleased, to enjoy, or to be happy happens inside of and because of the body. So, it is no surprise that Wheatley holds interiorities closely within her very public self and body. They are hers to know and to make do with as she pleases. Wheatley's interiority seems to possess the sort of "quiet" that Kevin Quashie argues is the "source of human action." Its quiet and subtlety do not presume a lack of "expressivity" but rather invites a consideration of living that does not depend solely upon publicity or demonstrative feelings.[11] Feelings and the interior space in which they are felt aren't always for everyone to witness. Rather, interiority is familiar and affective. It only seeks after itself and its desire for privacy and quiet.

This is the quiet of Wheatley—with hand on her cheek—on the frontispiece. The engraving is two-dimensional, yet it insists upon a depth that refuses to advertise what it knows—namely, "the full range of one's inner

life—one's desires, ambitions, hungers, vulnerabilities, fears."[12] It leaves readers to wonder who this servant of John Wheatley really is and what or who else may govern or participate in her living.

To wonder who Wheatley is is to hope for a glimpse of a what writer Ralph Ellison speaks of as a very human "something else." Ellison reads this sort of inner life as the "something else" that he cannot name even though he can feel it as part of his everyday living; whatever it is—that "makes for our strength . . . for our endurance and our promise"—posits an alternative reading of living that does not privilege suffering as the only way to be. Both Quashie and Ellison pursue—in something other than the publicity of "grit" or "ruggedness," "hardship," and "poverty"—that which is "complexly and compellingly human" inside the experience of personhood.[13] By "compellingly human," Ellison gestures toward the kind of quietude that, Quashie argues, lays bare the varied inward and affective experiences that make meaning. For Quashie, it's those feelings that make everyday life pleasant or, at least, livable in spite of itself.

Wheatley reconciles her compelling humanity, and in so doing reminds us that, as Kevin Young notes, "for while corresponding to the outside world, the slave's map was chiefly an interior one—which all too often has left it unread, misplaced, or denied."[14] Even though it's easy to miss this interiority while hunting forms of public expressivity, the enslaved know how to read it, see it, and look for it. It is legible to those who know that reading is just as much a practice of living, faith, and religious enthusiasm as it is forms of schooling or book learning. For this reason, Wheatley doesn't have to advertise this interiority, and she shouldn't. It's hers to speak, write, or share with those who know how to read and listen to it. More importantly, it is where she can celebrate herself and praise her God. In this place, Wheatley's Christian faith belongs to her; God is hers. For Wheatley, God listens and acts "as the spiritual interrogator," as literary scholar Katherine Clay Bassard observes, who "asks questions that prompt a response from the 'heart'."[15] This response may take many forms, but Wheatley is often pleased and she speaks of her experiences of a faithful joy. Her interiority is where her pleasure is felt and experienced.

When I speak of this feeling, pleasure, I mean to suggest the affective experience that results from the satisfaction of a desire. Pleasure is fickle, mundane, radical or, sometimes, a kind of quest. Pleasure is an invitation inward into the sensorial experience of desiring, anticipation, and ultimately satisfaction. It is an intimate and bodily knowing that names the "complex, messy, sticky, and even joyous negotiation of agency and desire."[16] Periodically, it leans toward and takes on the ecstatic or that which "exceed[s] or

transcend[s] the self" and language.[17] It feels good. It is an everyday kind of good feeling that names what it means, as James Baldwin describes, "to respect and rejoice in the force of life, of life itself, and to be *present* in all that one does, from the effort of loving to the breaking of bread."[18] Where this force lands—on the body or inward, beyond the physicality of the body—depends upon what has meaning or material significance.

I am often met with doubt whenever I mention Wheatley's access to joy or even its possibility as its recollected in her poems or letters. I am inevitably asked some version of this question: "Might this so-called joy actually be anxiety or a misplaced grievance?" The question in its many forms presupposes the inaccessibility of pleasure to Wheatley or enslaved women, more generally. It refuses to consider the many ways in which Wheatley represents or writes into being the stuff that might make her smile.

Even while enslaved or as a free woman, Wheatley lives those good feelings that are "not necessarily subversive," as historian Treva B. Lindsey explains of Black women's pleasures, "transgressive, or even progressive iterations" of her racialized or political subjectivity.[19] Wheatley tells jokes and imagines herself to be funny. She teases John Thornton when he invites her to go on a mission trip to Africa with Newport-based missionaries John Quamine and Bristol Yamma. Not only does Wheatley say "no" to Thornton's request, she calls out its absurdity and questions his good sense or lack thereof. She notes the obvious fact that if she can't speak the language, then she can't do the work. Wheatley's joke expects a laugh or a scholarly acknowledgment of her ability to laugh. Her jokes evidence the sorts of ungoverned feelings that signify joy and make life worth living. Because Wheatley neither hides her pleasures (or at least some of them) nor are they all lost in the archive, it seems to me that her various interiorities, subjectivities, and pleasures mean a lot to her.

Because Wheatley really does write about joy sometimes and even tells jokes, I'm looking for and after her pleasures because "such inquiries," to borrow from historians Treva B. Lindsey and Jessica Marie Johnson, "allow for the interior lives and erotic subjectivities of enslaved Blacks to matter."[20] Literary scholar Frances Smith Foster rids this point of its abstraction as she remembers that "Wheatley's letters made me realize that even though enslaved (and maybe most of it was only in her imagination), she did have a love life. Then I started to remember how often in her poems her 'bosom burns, she has 'intrinsic ardor,' and her '*Fancy*' has 'raptur'd eyes'."[21] Foster gives us a short list of Wheatley's descriptive language of those ways of feeling that may matter to her. Wheatley gives us more. There's also Aurora rising out of Tithon's bed, with "Her cheeks all glowing with celestial dies"

in "On Imagination" (ll. 44–45). Wheatley writes of her pleasures in God and in what she calls, "joy," "enrapture," "passion," or a kind of "happy." And, Katherine Edes Beecher, the wife of Obour Tanner's pastor, recalls Tanner's stories of the poet's mentions of "'Mr. John Peters,' 'a complaisant and agreeable young man,' 'an acquaintance.'"[22] Literary historian Julie Ellison argues that Wheatley "represents her own poetry as pleasure, adventure and moral opportunity; she experiences as pure gain the writing of poetry and the transatlantic vision it permits."[23] Her pleasures have asked us to observe how she experiences her joy. She leaves clues to it in her poems, letters, and the sleights of her penmanship—with its attention to its swirls, squiggly lines and grammatical flourishes—and she leaves readers to imagine those affective experiences that, simply put, make her life easier.

The fact of Wheatley's pleasures admits to the very possibilities of her "unrestricted, unpoliced, unbound, and unbossed" and quotidian desires and their satisfaction.[24] While Wheatley certainly desires often and widely, she speaks mostly through a language of her Christian faith. She invokes the language of God as a way to make meaning and as a way to understand herself and her feelings.

For Wheatley, desire, at times, is both an admission of a physical need (see, for example, her requests for the profits from the sale of her poetry) and a religious imperative that seeks its satisfaction in the pleasure of godly salvation.[25] Desire is an asking and an anticipation; its fulfillment is contingent "upon conditions which may or may not have been met."[26] This uncertainty invokes and demands faith in the possibility that God will satisfy and provide for her. For Wheatley, this desire for satisfaction is praiseworthy, but it must ask for and anticipate a godly response. Wheatley announces the satisfaction of her desire for God, in particular, with every mention of feeling and in so doing confesses to that which lies deep down inside her and avows God's access to this interiority. These are Wheatley's pleasures.

"On Being Brought"; Or, Lessons from Reading the "First Black Published Poet"

It's funny to think that I had missed her lover in Wheatley's *Poems* (1773). I don't mean "haha" funny but the curious kind of funny that must eventually admit to its error. I had read this poem often, but I had never noticed before, and I can't remember how I happened upon Wheatley's dreaming lover:

> When action ceases, and ideas range
> Licentious and unbounded o'er the plains,
> Where Fancy's queen in giddy triumph reigns.
> Hear in soft strains the dreaming lover
> sigh to a kind fair, or a rave in jealousy—
> (ll. 86–90)

But there her love is in "Thoughts on the WORKS of PROVIDENCE."[27] I had missed what mattered to this young woman. Her thoughts on God's providence include not only an imaginative and earthly bounty, but also a "dreaming lover" whose sighs "to a kind fair, or a rave in jealousy" wrestle with the materiality of feeling. The sleeping lover breathes in and out those laboring passions—pleasures and vengeance—while awaiting the onset of morning and the return to the glories of God.

Despite the insistent breaths of this dreaming lover, I had missed the sighs, dreams, and love in this poem and throughout Wheatley's volume of a poetry amid my expectation for authenticity and any bit of a reference to slavery or the Middle Passage. I read these verses for stories of a harrowing enslavement or a run to freedom because I hadn't yet learned that Phillis Wheatley, the "first" Black woman to publish a book of poetry and servant to John Wheatley, not only writes melancholic elegies but also poems that delight in the curious play of Fancy, Reason, and God.[28] I didn't yet know how to read her as she writes with her pleasures in mind. Because I hadn't yet read her letters or learned of her friendship with a woman named Obour Tanner, I still wanted her to represent the story of a linear and deeply racialized tradition that moved with ease from her poems to the narratives of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs and then on to the fiction of Toni Morrison.

I expected Wheatley to tell me again the origin story of this great literary tradition that begins, in Africa, with her "On Being Brought from Africa to America;" she declares, "'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" (ll. 1–3).[29] It continues through the infamous Middle Passage, though an explicit reference to this fact is absent from Wheatley's extant writing, to Boston where she is named after the slave ship that carries her to colonial America. There, a precocious Wheatley writes subtle and ironic verses that mask her fight against oppression—like, "Remember, *Christians*, *Negros*, Black as *Cain* / May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train" (ll. 7–8).

I read into this poem a tradition that I needed to tell me stories of collective suffering (e.g., the physical privations of slavery) or resistance to white supremacy and heroic accounts of overcoming (see of course, Douglass's autobiographies). I expected Wheatley to discuss slavery and the very public matters of her existence all the time. I needed her to memorialize a past that

I presumed was dependent upon the suffering and resistance of her racial body—just like one that appears in her frontispiece. I read her poetry with, as literary scholar Jordan Alexander Stein explains, "an overdetermined interpretative frame that presumes that" what matters most to the enslaved is the public experience of enslavement.[30] My misreading privileged slavery and the master's gaze as the sole site of a racialized and cultural becoming. I expected Wheatley to serve as a "first" in the makings of a literary tradition made real—from the Revolutionary War to the present—by racialized suffering and a desire for literacy.

What I wanted to read and what I expected Wheatley to write were right in part if we are to assume that race and representation are Wheatley's only concerns. It is certainly the case that Wheatley is important to the history of African American literature. She and her book of poems are famous enough for Thomas Jefferson to cite her and for George Washington to thank her for her poetry, and there are many other notable references to Wheatley and her writing by the likes of eighteen of Boston's "most respectable characters," Long Island–based poet Jupiter Hammon and French Enlightenment thinker Voltaire. As a "first" in this so-called tradition, her famed poems might be read as proof that her experience of racial identity is part of a collective resistance to slavery or as evidence of her humanity.[31] Amid the brevity of "On Being Brought from Africa to America," it is easy to hear, in Wheatley's couplets and rhyme, protests of the misreading of her race's "sable" skin as a "diabolic die" (line 6). It seems she resists the admonition that "Negros, Black as *Cain*" cannot achieve the refinement of white Christians (line 7). It appears that she, in fact, exemplifies this refinement in her verse and her steadfast belief in a Christian God.

Just as it seems plausible that Wheatley resists her adversity and her enslavement, it also seems true that Wheatley experiences a very real suffering. Take, for example, her testimonial in "To the Earl of Dartmouth":

> I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate
> Was snatch'd from *Afric's* fancy'd happy seat:
> What sorrows labour in my parent's breast?
> Steel'd was that soul and by no misery mov'd
> That from a father seiz'd his babe belov'd:
> Such, such was my case. And can I then but pray
> Others may never feel tyrannic sway.
> (ll. 24–31)

Although she gives away no specific details of her capture or the Middle Passage, Wheatley remembers, in her poem to the Earl of Dartmouth, William Legge, the "cruel fate"—with its steeled soul, unmoved by the sight of human misery—that snatched her from an unnamed place in Africa. She recollects her profound sense of loss and her father's suffering. She returns to and imagines a longing for family that seemingly still haunts her. Wheatley professes the origins of her desire for freedom and admits to a past she no longer knows. It may be true that Wheatley knows suffering well and resistance too and uses both to attend to and compel the sympathies of her audience.

But this story is too simple, too easy. It assumes—cultural critic Irving Howe's mid-twentieth-century error—that "unrelieved suffering is the only 'real' Negro experience, and that the true Negro writer must be ferocious."[32] This simple story's pursuit of suffering or resistance privileges a sense of racial determinacy with which Wheatley does not always bother. Wheatley does not narrate her plan to escape to freedom even though she does admit to a desire for freedom sometimes. She laments the death of Susanna Wheatley, her beloved "mistress" even after she concedes to a "love of freedom" too in a 11 February 1774 letter to Mohegan minister Samson Occom. She writes, "God has implanted a Principle, which we call Love of Freedom; it is impatient of Oppression, and pants for Deliverance."[33] Even if we read for irony, in "On Being Brought from Africa to America" she often celebrates her Christian God, who, she explains, gives her the redemption that she "neither sought nor knew" (line 4) in the "benighted" (line 2) and unidentified region of her birth. Wheatley's extant oeuvre can't anticipate our present-day need for simple, resistive acts, and an obvious performance of a racialized subjectivity. Wheatley does not provide any obvious pronouncement of her racialized objectivity because she can't imagine the sorts of literary tradition making that would need her to prove her loyalty to freedom, suffering, and personhood.

As literary scholar Robert Reid-Pharr explains of Wheatley's racial subjectivity, her "particular idiosyncrasy is that she is not concerned at all with announcing a Black American singularity."[34] Even as an enslaved teenager and later, a grown woman, in the midst of a growing revolution for a certain kind of political freedom, Wheatley understands that her life is not without contradiction and paradox. What if we, her twenty-first-century readers, believe her? She can and does love freedom, and she says she cares deeply for Susanna Wheatley. She can mourn her parents and praise her faith. What Reid-Pharr identifies as idiosyncratic is actually a greater concern for something other than a cohesive racial identity.

For her subjectivity in its many forms, to matter to her, Wheatley must and does create meaning on her own terms, and these terms are not necessarily consistent or obviously racialized. Wheatley speaks of a concern for

God, Fancy's roving nature, writing, book sales, or living. It is these external concerns about her racial identity and enslaved status that prompt Wheatley to write and devise, as literary historian Joanna Brooks tells it, "the attestation as part of a months-long strategy to secure the London publication of her *Poems*, obtaining signatures from prominent Boston citizens at a town meeting on 28 October 1772."[35] Brooks argues that the attestation of eighteen of Boston's finest and wealthiest citizens, at the beginning of Wheatley's book of poetry, was not a public test of Wheatley's wit. Rather, Wheatley collects these signatures—from prominent Boston clergy, politicians in support of Britain or the colonies, and many acquainted with the Wheatley family—because she wants to publish a book. Wheatley seems to anticipate that there are some, in London, Boston, and elsewhere, who doubt that she can write or think well. Her aim is so often obscured by a desire for proof of her commitment to a particular kind of racialized subjectivity.

When Wheatley shares her sincerity or her pleasures with her readers she offers a glimpse into an interiority that delights and is, at times, pleasing and knows for sure what it means to be well pleased.[36] Consider the concluding stanzas of "Thoughts on the WORKS of PROVIDENCE," the poem in which her dreaming lover rests.[37] The poem—published in her first collection of poetry—sings its praises to a creative, unseen God that is to be "ador'd for ever" (line 11). It's a praise song that evidences just how much God matters to Wheatley and how much Wheatley matters to God. It honors the providential works of God as a creator of life and as a guide to the poet's soul and intention. The psalmic salute to God's generative creativity gives way to an allegorical conversation between two women, immortal Love and mortal Reason.

The dreams, lovers, and vengeance of the previous stanzas give way to a question, "What most the image of th' Eternal shows?" (line 105). It's the "mental pow'rs" (line 104) of the unnamed speaker that have asked. To whom is uncertain, but a dialogue ensues that seemingly responds in a parable form. The divine Love—the "celestial queen" (line 116)—approaches corporeal Reason with a different question that confesses their mutual strife: "Say, mighty pow'r, how long shall strife prevail / And with its murmurs load the whisp'ring gale?" (ll. 108–9). There is a conflict between them that may hold the answer to the aforementioned question. The nature of the conflict is unspecified, but it seems to have inspired gossip—"murmurs load the whisp'ring gale"—and suggests something (maybe, its affection or trust) is missing.

Love begs Reason to "Refer the cause to *Recollection's* shrine." Because she is powerful, divine, and worthy of affection, Love hopes to end their dispute. Wheatley's Love is also creative, infinite, and "where'er we turn our

eyes appears" (line 122). Love supplies the wants of every creature. What Love explains to Reason are those reasons for her godly significance. She chronicles her love and godly exploits for Reason. She must prove herself because Reason seems to have lost her ability to see, find, or experience properly Love as love or God (see 1 John 4:8). Immortal and celestial Love dispels the doubt that has Reason miss just what "th'Eternal shows" because as Wheatley writes, "This most is heard in *Nature's* constant voice" (line 124).

Reason is persuaded by Love and responds, "my soul enraptur'd feels / Resistless beauty which thy smile reveals" (line 118). Reason speaks ardently in response to and at the sight of Love. Love's smile engenders Reason's soul to feel an intense pleasure. Love returns Reason to herself.[38] Love anticipates this reunion; it seems Love has always suspected that Reason would find her way back to love. Reason loves again. What Reason's senses take in—this "resplendent" (line 117) love—makes for an enthusiasm that prompts her to "clasp'd the blooming goddess in her arms" (ll. 120).[39]

Reason gathers Love up in her arms because she remembers her vital need to love and to hold this love. She understands fully "the human requirement to discern and declare God as Creator and God of love."[40] Reason's gesture or "hug" evokes "an embracing of the yearning for mutuality" and proper discernment.[41] Her clasping embrace reunites them and reconciles the strife that Love calls to an end. Reason praises Love with an affective and physical touch; Reason recognizes Love as that which makes her mortality worthy. Their heart-to-heart ends with their embrace, and a new stanza begins with the start of a new day. Love makes morning and evening rejoice as the immortal goddess ushers forth "to serve one gen'ral end / The good of man" (ll. 128–29).

With Love and Reason, Wheatley narrates an imagined and invariable friendship that reconciles reason to love and evokes her God as love. She conjures a friendship that compels both to realize the necessity of who they are as friends. Love and Reason set the terms of their affection, their conflict, and their reconciliation. This reconciliation remembers the friendship of God that Wheatley speaks of in the 30 October 1774 letter to John Thornton: "What a Blessed Source of consolation that our greatest friend is an immortal God whose friendship is invariable! from whom I have all that is *in me* praise worthy in mental possession."[42] God is her greatest friend, a consoler who gives her "all that is . . . praise worthy" in her. God loves her enough to make her, inwardly, praise worthy. She—as an enslaved, African girl (then, woman)—matters to God. Wheatley's God is Love, a "she" and a figurative source of her profound faith and, together, their "coupling is an alliance, a political and spiritual union."[43] A lover and friend, her God con-

spires to conciliate her reason and her love. This love has no bounds. God's friendship surrenders Wheatley to this companionship. With God, she can yearn toward and know the satisfaction of a mutual and self-serving love that fully accepts her as a child of God.

There's a lesson in her dreaming lover and in Love's reconciliation with Reason—that Wheatley can neither anticipate the racialized anxieties of the twenty-first century, nor does she write to prove just how "Black" she is because she is too busy living and loving. What I have learned to read instead is quite simply indicative of the leisurely exercise of dreaming and allegory. It is at the site of this play between Love and Reason, where day turns to night and dreams rove, that I hear first the "soft strains" that give way to eventual sighs. In the depths of the poem's restless sleep, the melodies of breath herald "pleasure now, and now on vengeance bent" (line 91). It's the pleasure—albeit alongside a bending vengeance—that begs me to wonder at the site of this dreamscape.

Wheatley writes a friendship that not only lives through the trauma of conflict but also the creativity, sweetness, and play of peacemaking. As Reason takes up her beloved in her arms, Wheatley seems to declare that she too plays with language, with possibility, within poetic traditions, and most importantly, with herself. Admittedly, her declaration isn't explicit because this is not an entirely public activity. Instead, Wheatley confesses in the sighs of her dreaming lover and the reunion of Love and Reason to the kinds of play that take place in an interiority that twenty-first-century readers don't often read onto or into enslaved women.

Wheatley, by way of her poems and her musings about the likes of Love and Reason, is willing to play and to show that love, God, and imagination matter to her. Wheatley's writing, in its many forms, discloses an inward landscape that she crafts and creates. Wheatley takes those who can listen rightly or read well enough into this inward space wherein she can write a friendship between women, remember a violent conflict on King's Street, or the face of a dreaming lover. Wheatley creates an intimacy with her real and imagined readers that realizes what matters. What matters for her is the heartfelt stuff: dreaming lovers, ideas, godly grace, and the shared experience of religious faith.

When Phillis Wheatley Writes Letters to her Friends

While her poetry uses metaphors, allegory, and neoclassical styling to hint at her poetic voice and its concerns, Wheatley, in her letters to various

people, takes readers into what matters to her, into her interiority, and into the quiet of her prayers. Wheatley's letters move over land and waterways by way of persons, known and unknown. They travel in a series of hand-to-hand transactions. As is customary, Wheatley usually names the person who has carried the letter to her or to whom she is writing. There is Cato Coggeshall, Mr. Whitwell, Mr. Wooldridge, Rev. Samuel Hopkins and his son, "a young man of your Acquaintance," Mr. Pemberton, Mrs. Tanner, and presumably unnamed persons in between. With every mention, she contextualizes and places herself as a friend, servant, slave, and woman in New England and the greater Atlantic World.[44] Wheatley's letters locate her within communities of readers and writers within which ideas are discussed and traded as friends talk among themselves.[45]

Wheatley's correspondence bears witness to the ways in which she creates religious, reading, and "writing communities" made up of various religious converts, faithful followers, and fellow readers and writers brought together by circumstances: such as, enslavement, geography, Congregationalism, Methodism, George Whitefield, or the Countess of Huntingdon.[46] When Katherine Clay Bassard names this early "writing community," she remembers a productive possibility that unfolds as it seeks itself. It is a "potentiality" wherein writing moves language and ideas across time and geography toward those who can read its form.[47]

Writing presupposes a version of reading that understands how to make sense of what's written; writers need readers—with listening ears or discerning eyes—to generate meaning. I don't mean to limit reading to the book learned, but rather I mean to remember the kinds of reading that discern how to hear or see language. It's worth remembering that Wheatley's poems are most often spoken aloud and heard. She recites her poems in front of eager audiences that must know how to interpret her words. Her letters may have been read aloud to their recipients. This uncertainty suggests that reading is as much a practice of seeing, listening, and discernment; because—as Barbara Christian tell us—"writing and reading . . . 'bridge the joinings,' across differences not only of time and space, but also across differences between selves within and without any number of groups or categories by which we define ourselves."[48] And, every letter puts Wheatley, at the center of discourse and conversation, knowledge, and exchange. Her correspondence narrates what's of interest to her and, in particular, what's inside her, and what pleases her: God, household quibbles, her travels, her health and Wheatley family issues, poems to grieving widows or her everyday concerns.

Writing and reading in this manner make way for invention and conversation in a community or as part of communities. What results from