Trauma in Phillis Wheatley's Juvenilia

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James Weldon Johnson was the first in a long line of literary critics to argue that the poetry of the trafficked and enslaved teenage girl Phillis Wheatley lacked an emotional connection to her African homeland. In *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922), Johnson finds the reference to her kidnapping in her poem "To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth" to be "unimpassioned." And he voices a lament that reverberates through Wheatley reception today: "But one looks in vain … for some agonizing cry about her native land" (xxvii-xxviii). Since the early 1980s, a steady stream of scholars has recuperated Wheatley as an astute critic of slavery and anti-Black racism who ingeniously manipulated Christian imagery, Republican rhetoric, and neoclassical aesthetics to convey a subversive political message hidden in plain sight. But the perception that her poetry does not manifest grief about the separation from her birth family and country has endured. For example, Tara Bynum writes: "[W]hen I listened for this certain suffering in her verses and letters, I didn't find it. I didn't hear the sadness" (42). Reading Wheatley's poetry as juvenilia and reading her poetry and letters in relation to one another can productively complicate the view that her poetry is devoid of traumatic affect. This approach illuminates her agency in grappling with how to represent her traumatic childhood experiences.

When we think of juvenilia in terms of trauma and intersectionality, we are led to ask: How can we recognize childhood trauma in children's writing? How do we distinguish between the absence of trauma, traumatic forgetting, and strategic silence in the writings of dependent subjects? These questions are particularly germane for writing by enslaved children who manifest trauma while subjugated and vulnerable members of the master's household. As Rachel Conrad reminds us, we must resist the tendency to read the first-person speakers in children's poems as voicing transparently autobiographical sentiments of the author. To theorize a child writer's agency in juvenilia requires "recognition of children's agency in using, resisting, and remaking the category of 'child' and other age-related categories" (19). To *hear* trauma

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in Wheatley's poetry requires recognition of her agency in representing her traumatic childhood experiences and their effects on her memory, attachment, and affect. I argue that the poems Wheatley published while under age twenty-one provide insight into the challenge of representing the traumatic separation from her mother when her physical and psychic survival depended on her affective relationship with her mistress Susanna Wheatley. What we can hear in Wheatley's poetry about her childhood in Africa and her upbringing in the Wheatley household must be teased out of the performance of obedience and gratitude expected of her as an enslaved child (Hodgson 676).

Honorée Fanonne Jeffers's recently published collection of poetry, *The Age of Phillis*, likely marks a significant turning point in Wheatley scholarship with regard to perceptions of trauma in her writings. The collection's eponymous poem, "The Age of Phillis," challenges the idea that Wheatley ever forgot what she had been forced to leave behind: "And what was the age // of Phillis when she stopped turning East, / thinking of water in faithful bowls, / of her parents, // of love only ending in death? / There is no such age." The poem paints a picture of Susanna Wheatley insisting that Wheatley renounce her birth name and identity and respond to the new name she has been given: "Enough // punishments—but hopefully, no whippings— / would have broken her boldness, the kissing / of teeth in imitation of her Nation" (58). Phillis Wheatley emerges from this poem as a child who learns early in life that she must stifle her birth language and culture in order to avoid upsetting her new caregiver and provoking harsh disciplinary consequences.

Jeffers's poem "The Age of Phillis" provides a productive heuristic for the reading of trauma in Wheatley's poetry. Scholars have been reluctant to read Wheatley's work as juvenilia, authored from a position of legal, economic, and often psychological vulnerability and dependence. Yet Wheatley's collection of occasional poetry, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773), was written and published before she turned twenty-one and before she was legally emancipated, while she was enslaved by people who controlled the life of her body and her writings, and while a parentless child who required adult care in order to survive. Wheatley was indebted to her owners for all aspects of her poetic production, including her education, the time to study and write, her collection's subscribers, and the trip to London that enabled her to edit her collection for publication. It stands to reason that she may have moderated her recollections of her life before enslavement and her expressions of trauma in order to appease Susanna Wheatley, who had apparently devoted herself to Phillis Wheatley's development as a poet.

It is impossible to know whether Wheatley said little about her separation from her country and family of origin in her work because she couldn't remember her early childhood, because she avoided representing this separation in her poetry, because she felt compelled to ingratiate herself to Susanna Wheatley and her community of subscribers, or for some other unknown reason. Certainly, her early life in Africa would have been of interest to her readers, yet she makes only three brief and

relatively nonspecific references to that life in her poetry. "To the University of Cambridge, in New-England" and "On being brought from Africa to America" mention her departure from Africa in the context of Christian salvation, and "To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth" stages her kidnapping. All three references establish distance between the speaker and the presumably traumatic separation, and, in them, expressions of loss and suffering must be sought in order to be found.

"To the University of Cambridge, in New-England" and "On being brought from Africa to America" appear to conform to the conventional proslavery belief that enslavement was a benevolent act in that it removed subjects from a non-Christian environment and exposed them to Christian teachings. Susanna Wheatley might well have held such a view, and she apparently encouraged Phillis Wheatley's acceptance of the Christian faith. In "To the University of Cambridge," the speaker tells her audience of college students about her past to emphasize their good fortune as members of a privileged Bostonian elite class and to encourage them to avoid sin:

> 'Twas not long since I left my native shore
> The land of errors, and *Egyptian* gloom:
> Father of mercy, 'twas thy gracious hand
> Brought me in safety from those dark abodes. (11)

On the surface, the poem confirms the Christian perception of Africa as the "dark" continent bereft of the "light" of Christianity. The lines do not contain even a hint that the speaker has suffered from her forced removal from her "native" culture. But a reading of the poem as a whole that assumes a critical attitude toward slavery does find suffering. Katherine Clay Bassard understands the poem as an anti-slavery message from one who has experienced it firsthand, delivered to the very young men who will eventually have the power to curb the slave trade. The "sin" the speaker is telling them to avoid is slavery (42). According to Bassard's reading, Wheatley is "not … thankful for her slavery, but for her safety," and "'dark abodes' could signify nothing but the hateful and unsanitary ship's holds" where the enslaved and perhaps Wheatley herself were kept during the Middle Passage, chained and tortured by the lack of space, sanitation, nutrition, water, and clean air (45). But even this reading puts emphasis on rescue from the horrors of the "dark abodes" rather than on familial and cultural separation.

"On being brought from Africa to America" can also be read as a critique of the slave trade, and contains an oblique expression of the trauma of separation. It appears just one poem following "To the University of Cambridge" in the collection, and echoes its diction and phrasing:

> '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:
> Once I redemption neither sought nor knew. (13)

While the first three lines of the stanza appear to support the view of enslavement as a benevolent salvation, the last line gestures towards the coercion implicit in "redemption." The speaker's desire to be redeemed follows rather than precedes her kidnapping. "Once" she inhabited a world in which she was content, imbued with an alternate knowledge of life and afterlife. After being "brought" to Boston and "taught" a new religion, Wheatley has little choice but to accept a new identity. The poem implies that Wheatley, removed from her "land," has to seek religious salvation in order to provide financial "redemption" to the Wheatleys who have purchased her. The stanza suggests that a strict obligation to become a convert and protégée requires a renunciation on Wheatley's part of the cultural beliefs of her childhood.

The passage in "To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth" that James Weldon Johnson found "unimpassioned" is comparatively the most emotional of Wheatley's references to forced relocation as a seven- or eight-year-old girl:

> I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate
> Was snatch'd from *Afric's* fancy'd happy seat:
> What pangs excruciating must molest,
> What sorrows labour in my parent's breast?
> Steel'd was that soul and by no misery mov'd
> That from a father seiz'd his babe belov'd[.] (40)

In this poem, the speaker hasn't "left" Africa or been "brought" to America; she has been "snatch'd," connoting the surprise, speed, and violence of the removal. Although the descriptor "cruel" is modified by the mitigating word "seeming," it is nonetheless included. Though Wheatley's kidnapping may have only *seemed* brutal to some, it was nonetheless brutal in its essence. Similarly, Wheatley's African home may have only *seemed* wonderful to some, but it was wonderful to someone, likely the speaker. The "pangs excruciating" and "sorrows" of the next two lines are all the more powerful because they are not mitigated by potentially dismissive modifiers. They also take on affective weight in contrast to the "Steel'd … soul" of the kidnapper.

The lines in "To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth" about the impact on the speaker's father do establish distance between Wheatley and the kidnapping. The speaker disassociates her present self from the girl who was seized from her father, and the emphasis on her father's suffering deflects attention from her own. But the contrast between the mitigated suffering of the speaker and the unmitigated suffering of the father could imply that the speaker cannot speak frankly

or directly about her own pain. She is nonetheless the "babe belov'd" in the scene, deprived of paternal love and left with traumatic memories and questions about her father's mental state: her father's suffering is her suffering, and her father's loss is her loss. The questions themselves—"What pangs excruciating must molest, / What sorrows labour in my parent's breast?"—tell us that the speaker herself does not know how her father feels, reminding us that she has been irrevocably separated from him. And the last two lines of the stanza remind us that the speaker is telling the story of the kidnapping in order to explain to her addressee, the Earl of Dartmouth, the traumatic source of her "love of *Freedom*": "Such, such my case. And can I then but pray / Others may never feel tyrannic sway?" (30–31). The repetition of "such" emphasizes the weight and impact of her experience on her psychic development.

The poem's omission of any reference to a grieving mother may reflect the fact that the speaker did not have or cannot remember a living mother who experienced and grieved her kidnapping. But it also avoids confronting her mistress with the specter of a mother-daughter attachment. Two letters that Wheatley wrote in the months after Susanna Wheatley's death suggest that her recognition of Susanna as a compassionate caregiver necessarily displaced references to her mother or previous maternal caregivers. In these letters, Wheatley expresses sadness and filial gratitude regarding Susanna's death as if she had never suffered such a loss before. A passage Wheatley wrote to her friend Obour Tanner, a young woman enslaved in Rhode Island, seemed designed to establish her familial relationship to Susanna and simultaneously refute the possibility that her death recalled any previous familial losses:

> I have lately met with a great trial in the death of my mistress; let us imagine the loss of a Parent, Sister or Brother the tenderness of all these were united in her. —I was a poor little outcast & a stranger when she took me in: not only into her house but I presently became a sharer in her most tender affections. I was treated by her more like a child than her Servant; no opportunity was left unimprov'd, of giving me the best of advice, but in terms how tender! how engaging! This I hope ever to keep in remembrance. (153)

In the first sentence, Wheatley eschews the term "mother," choosing the more generic "Parent," evading any implication that Susanna usurped the maternal role she assumed from a preexisting maternal figure. The phrase "let us imagine" implies that Wheatley and Tanner would not have had at the ready any recollections of lost parents or siblings, but would have to make a mental effort to create a parallel sensation. In the second sentence, Susanna's role as ostensible savior and adoptive parent elides her role in rendering the young girl an "outcast & a stranger" in the first place. As the wife of a man who bought and owned slaves, Susanna contributed to the traffic in children that uprooted Phillis from her home. The story of how Wheatley came to be

abandoned is unwritten, keeping the focus on her status after her kidnapping and the Middle Passage that deposited her on the wharf in Boston to be purchased.

At the same time, the passage in Wheatley's letter to Tanner contains subtle hints that there were limitations to Susanna's caregiving. In the last sentence, Wheatley expresses her sense of obligation to Susanna for having advised her as she would a child rather than a slave, using the conventional British colonial term "servant" to obfuscate the legal and economic reality of human ownership. But the "more" in "more like a child than her Servant" leaves open the possibility that Susanna nonetheless treated her like a slave. And the "but" in "but in terms how tender! how engaging!" suggests that Susanna's advice may have been unwelcome, that it may have, for example, required Phillis to renounce her life before she became a "poor little outcast" to be rescued by an apparently benevolent Christian white woman. The phrase "more like a child than her Servant" markedly avoids the possessive "her child," establishing a gap between Susanna's treatment of Wheatley and that of her biological children. Wheatley remains a child in the Wheatley household, not a child of the Wheatleys. Susanna's "tender" and "engaging" pedagogy did not necessarily enact maternal behavior or affection. Wheatley "hopes" to remember Susanna's treatment, as if there is the risk that it could be forgotten or gainsaid over time. Perhaps Wheatley avoided the term "mother" in the first sentence because Susanna's loss could never evoke the loss of her birth mother, in that Susanna never felt *like a mother* or *like her mother* to Wheatley.

A second extant letter that Phillis Wheatley wrote about Susanna's death, in this case to John Thornton, a wealthy English merchant and supporter of the missionary activities of the Countess of Huntingdon to whom Wheatley had dedicated her *Poems,* contains a similar ambivalence to the first:

> By the great loss I have Sustain'd of my best friend, I feel like One [fo]rsaken by her parent in a desolate wilderness, for Such the world appears to [me], wandring thus without my friendly guide. I fear lest every step Should lead me [in]to error and confusion. She gave me many precepts and instructions; which I hope I shall never forget. (158)

Once again, Wheatley avoids the term "mother," this time using "best friend" in addition to "parent." The verb "forsaken" contains a mildly accusatory attitude toward Susanna's departure, which could be interpreted as a commentary on Wheatley's status as a free Black young woman without parents. She finds herself "in a desolate wilderness" at risk of "error and confusion." Before her death, Susanna did insist on Wheatley's emancipation from slavery, but she did not, as far as we know, arrange any form of financial settlement that might have secured Wheatley's future. After Susanna's death, Wheatley had only herself to depend on. She found herself "on her own footing," dependent on book sales for her survival (Carretta 141–42). At the end of the passage, Wheatley once again expresses the possibility that she may

"forget" or even discount the advice she received from the closest thing she had to a mother in her childhood as a natally alienated enslaved person living in a white household.

Wheatley may have articulated and critiqued the notion that she was treated like a child rather than a slave by Susanna because this notion was expressed by the Wheatleys themselves within their social circle and became part of an oral tradition that circulated in Boston at least into the early nineteenth century. The earliest extant posthumous sketch of Wheatley's life by the French abolitionist Henri Grégoire, published in French in 1808 and translated into English in 1810, cemented the enduring conception that Wheatley was "brought up as a spoiled child" in the Wheatley household (236). Grégoire's biographical sketch served as the primary source for brief pieces in works such as Lydia Maria Child's *An Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans Called Africans* (1833), which perpetuated the neglect of her African childhood and the theme that Wheatley was treated more like a child than a slave. This is also the central message of the first extended biography of Wheatley, Margaretta Matilda Odell's *Memoir and Poems of Phillis Wheatley, a Native African and a Slave* (1834), which has most shaped contemporary interpretations of her work (Elrod 105-107). The *Memoir* fleshes out Grégoire's sentimental narrative with details Odell gathered from white oral histories. Recent scholarship has established that Odell was indeed a "collateral descendant" of the Wheatleys as she claimed (Glatt 155), but the *Memoir* is not a reliable source in many respects (Carretta 175-176). By drawing on an oral tradition promulgated by Wheatley's white owners, their relations and friends, Odell's book reflects less Wheatley's own experiences than the representation of those experiences among white people who sought to present themselves as benevolent saviors rather than exploitative oppressors.

Taken together, Wheatley's poems and letters complicate the unanswerable question of whether she couldn't remember her childhood in her native country or whether she chose not to share those memories in her written work. Nor can we know definitively whether she kept available memories to herself to keep them private or to avoid upsetting Susanna Wheatley. What we can infer from Wheatley herself and from Odell is that maintaining "worth" in the Wheatley household depended on pleasing Susanna and retaining her approval. And this acceptance in turn depended on taking and following her "guidance." All children must subject themselves to the authority of their caregivers to a certain extent in order to survive, and Wheatley must have felt this compulsion more than a free child given the legal ease with which she could have been reduced again to an object to be sold away. The assumption therefore that she was treated *like a child* should not be interpreted to mean that she could exercise a high degree of overt self-determination or willfully resist her owners' demands. Rather, it means that her very survival depended on not having an apparent will of her own and on suppressing her African past. Ultimately, to understand Wheatley's writing requires recognition of her agency in representing traumatic childhood experiences while also navigating the circumstances of her enslavement.

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