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Jennifer Thorn

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Phillis Wheatley's Ghosts: The Racial Melancholy of New England Protestants

Jennifer Thorn
St. Anselm College

"We hardly know how to confront the psychical imprints of racial grief except through either neglect or sentimentalization."—Anne Anlin Cheng¹

The *Boston Post-Boy* of August 3, 1761, carried an advertisement seeking a buyer for a female slave, the value of whose exceptional skills did not outweigh the perceived costliness of her fecundity:

To be Sold. A Likely Negro Wench, about 28 Years old, that understands her Needle, is a very good Cook, and can do any Kind of Household Business:—Is a considerable Breeder, for which Reason only she is to be Sold. ALSO—A Negro Child of 3 Years, to be sold with or without the Wench—and a fine young Male Child to be given Away.

Even as this advertisement would seem broadly to provide new support for Orlando Patterson's characterization of all forms of chattel slavery in terms of "natal alienation," it also makes starkly apparent the differences between Northern "family" slavery and the forms of slavery that characterized the South and the Caribbean.² Under Northern slavery, slaves lived in their masters' homes and were understood as integrated into their families. Both in this inclusion of the hierarchy of master-and-slave within the legitimating rubric of "the family" and in its economic functions, Northern slavery was distinctive. This essay focuses on the aspect of Northern slavery that perhaps most defies expectation: its anti-reproductivity. The fact that Northern slave owners valued slave children most greatly in their absence, preferring that they not even be conceived, suggests two key tasks for future feminist theory in eighteenth-century studies, to both of which this project seeks to respond. First, the paucity of studies of the anti-reproductivity of Northern slavery prompts recognition of the continuing relevance of Hazel Carby's impassioned call, twenty-five years ago, for the "problematiz[ation of] the use of the concept of 'reproduction' . . . in relation to the domestic labor of black women." In what might now be understood as a criticism typical of second-wave feminism, Carby urged close

examination of the work done by “black women . . . outside of their own homes in the servicing of white families” in terms of its impact on “the construction of ideologies of black female sexuality which are different from, and often constructed in opposition to, white female sexuality.” In Carby’s pioneering 1982 essay, “white women” are pressed to recognize and reject the false universal of concepts fundamental to their self-definition, and “black feminists,” to extricate their own sexuality from its imbrication in culturally dominant ideals categorically opposed to it.³

Even as this essay squarely continues in the trajectory urged by Carby, it also encourages examination of the model of identification and identity-formation that Carby perhaps implies. Here lies a related, but distinct future for feminist theory in eighteenth-century studies: one that responds to the task set by Anne Anlin Cheng working within the field—not of feminist theory—but of race studies. Cheng criticizes models of “the connection between subjectivity and social damage” for the false dichotomies they presume and, in her view, often moralize simplistically; like Carby, she would denaturalize the false universalism of a white ideal: “racialization in America may be said to operate through the institutional process of producing a dominant, standard, white national ideal” that is categorically inaccessible to “racialized others.”⁴ Unlike Carby, Cheng sees such ideals as productive of “grief” in all those who live with them, “both [the] dominant white culture and racial others.” This “hidden grief” takes “abject and manic forms,” Cheng writes; the former is evident whenever “white American identity and its authority is secured through the melancholic introjection of racial others that it can neither fully relinquish nor accommodate and whose ghostly presence nonetheless guarantees its centrality.”⁵ I will argue here for the salience of this paradigm, with some adaptation, to the Northern slave owners who took slaves into their “families.” For Cheng, “manic” racial grief involves the relation of “the racial other” to racialized and impossible cultural ideals: “his or her racial identity is imaginatively reinforced through the introjection of a lost, never-possible perfection, an inarticulable loss that comes to inform the individual’s sense of his or her own subjectivity.”⁶ Throughout her book, Cheng uses the verb “negotiate” to characterize the processes that the racially devalued must undertake, “at some point if not continually, with the demands of that social ideality, the reality of that always-insisted-on difference.”⁷ She stresses that her terms—“hidden grief” and “racial melancholy”—seek not to describe “the feeling of a group of people”; rather, the “entangled relationship[s] with loss” that they connote “provid[e] a critical framework for analyzing the constitutive role that grief plays in racial/ethnic formation.”⁸ Extending the work of Judith Butler, Diana Fuss, and Elin Diamond, Cheng asserts that the normativity of melancholic ego formation “complicates practically all of the explicit and implicit terms of identification.”⁹ That is, even as racism inflicts harm disproportionately on “racial others,” they are no more fundamentally pathologized by it than are those whose superiority and material power it seemingly legitimates.

Motivated by “the need to find an intellectually rigorous vocabulary to talk about racial grief, not as merely a symptom but as an analytical paradigm responsive to the material *and* imaginative realities of racial dynamics,” Cheng works to articulate terms with which to approach the effects of racialized national ideals of identity on both those to whom they are, and are not, accessible.¹⁰ A great value of her framework is its careful linkage of the racially privileged and the racially denigrated—“both [those] living with the ghost of the alien other within and [those] living as the ghost in the gaze of another”—an approach to racial identity formation that avoids the simplistic opposition of power and powerlessness.¹¹ Cheng develops her terminology from Freud’s 1917 “Mourning and Melancholia,” which defined melancholy as the refusal of the letting-go enabled by grief and time: confronted by the loss of a beloved object, place, or ideal, the melancholic refuses consolation in order to remain attached, in unconscious fantasy, to the love-object. Melancholy denies loss, even as it binds the bereaved intimately to the lost object.¹² Cheng sees racial melancholy through American history in its celebration of ideals of freedom and equality that in practice were built upon racialized subjection and exclusion. Her adaptation of “grief” seeks to give purchase to the processes by which racialization shapes the imagination of individual relation to group and national identity, invisible aspects of grief less readily parsed than those channeled into, and legitimated as, grievance—assertions of unjust victimization requiring redress, usually legal and/or economic.

The terms in which a group of “Boston Negroes” petitioned for their freedom in 1774 suggest the conceptual traction to be gained from shifting our attention from “grievance” to “grief”:

The endearing ties of husband and wife we are strangers to for we are no longer man and wife than our masters and mistresses think proper married or unmarried. Our children are also taken from us by force and sent many miles from us where we seldom or ever see them again there to be made slaves of for life which sometimes is very short by reason of being dragged from their mother’s breast. Thus our lives are embittered to us on these accounts. By our deplorable situation we are rendered incapable of showing our obedience to almighty God. How can a slave perform the duties of a husband or a wife or parent to his child? How can a husband leave master and work and cleave to his wife? How can the wife submit themselves to their husbands in all things. How can the child obey their parents in all things?¹³

Fidelity to God here requires fidelity to family; “family slavery” offends divine order by obstructing a universalized and impossible familial duty. William Piersen finds in the petition evidence that “those bondsmen who labored most faithfully for their owners discovered that full integration into their masters’ family usually precluded the development of independent black families

for themselves."¹⁴ In Cheng's terms, this sensible reading of the petition as a deliberate exposure of the contradictions of "family slavery" helps us to see "grievance," but not "grief." Piersen's remark prompts our awareness only of the loss to slaves of their family members, sold or given away, dying young; the ghosts we can see or imagine, looking at family slavery from this perspective, are only those of lost family members, obstructed unions, children never conceived. Cheng would encourage us to shift our focus from "grievance" of this kind to "grief," seeing a kind of haunting in the Petitioners' relationship to "ruling episteme that privileges that which they can never be."¹⁵ Though she writes as an historian, Jacqueline Jones emphasizes identity in similar terms, opening space for the approach of slavery's epistemological, as well as material, deprivations. Enslavement, she writes, made ideologically irrelevant "the affective ties between parent and child, and specifically mother and child" so crucial to the imagining of early national identity: "under bondage, the affective ties between parent and child, and specifically mother and child, served no larger public purpose—a fact of profound significance in the context of family history."¹⁶ The Petition's articulation of a right to racial freedom rests on an implied norm of gender subordination, reminding us that "grief" can be multiply constituted, as here, where family slavery offends God by preventing wives from submitting to their husbands.

The advertisement quoted above typifies a thread that runs steadily through Northern newspapers throughout the colonial period, unsettling common assumptions about the impact of the institution of slavery on reproduction.¹⁷ The *Boston Post-Boy* of April 15, 1745, for example, sought a purchaser for "A very likely healthy Negro Wench, a notable Breeder, under Twenty years old, with a fine Male Child at her Breast"; on April 30, 1750, the same newspaper sought a purchaser for "A Very likely healthy Negro Wench, about 24 Years old, that breeds like a Rabbit, with a Female Child about five Weeks old. Her sole Fault is that she breeds too fast for her present Master." The *New-York Mercury* of January 21, 1765, specifically cites the sterility of the competent bondswoman offered for sale there in the list of her sale-able qualities: she has "no Fault, and can be well recommended," has already had the smallpox, "has nor gets no Children, was brought up in the Country, can bake, iron, wash, and do all kinds of Country or City House-work." The *New-York Gazette* of April 2, 1770, offered for sale "A Hearty strong young Negro Wench, 18 Years of Age" valued by her owners for her skills, abstinence from "strong Liquors," and attitude: she is "no ways sulky, as Negroes commonly are.—The Reason for selling her, is, that it don't suit the Family, her getting young Children." A rationale for the negative value ascribed to fertile bondswomen and their offspring is suggested by the terms in which an undesirably fecund female slave was offered for sale in New York City's *Royal Gazette* of February 26, 1783: "A Negro Wench. Warranted healthy, strong, honest, and sober, together with her male child of a year old, the property warranted . . . The present proprietor does not like noise." Here

would seem to be additional evidence for Jennifer Morgan's important recent argument for the "significance of reproductive potential" to the colonial formation of "Europeans' and Euro-Americans' general attitudes toward slavery."¹⁸ But while these bondswomen's "reproductive potential" clearly defines their value to their owners, it does so in terms that in fact utterly contradict Morgan's thesis. Morgan writes that "a child born under slavery became part of the slave owners' profit margin, and women's voluntary or involuntary complicity in their own commodification and that of their children might be seen as the ultimate sign of resignation and accommodation"¹⁹—a structure of value that obtains only in the Southern and Caribbean slave societies that are routinely taken as metonyms of "slavery" as a whole.

Whereas in the South, the commodification of slave women devolved upon their "reproductive potential" in that it was the means through which slave owners might produce or obtain, without cost, children-as-commodities, slave women's "reproductive potential" in the North defined their value in its erasure or suppression. Morgan rightly cautions that "the meanings of childbirth for the women and men who parented children, watched infants die, or raised children born of parents who were dead or had been sold away are not historically transparent."²⁰ Here, slave women's fertility was problematic in that food was expensive, living quarters were shared, and children were believed to distract their mothers from their work, usually inside the house, as cooks and maids of all work. These ads suggest that for Northern slave owners, the trouble of enduring a slave's pregnancy and childbirth and the presence of an infant in the household outweighed the potential profit of selling slave children as soon as they were born. The perception of slave children as a financial loss evident here resonates tellingly with the Northern practice of purchasing slaves as children, as in this offer of "Small Negroes"—young ones—in another ad in the issue of the *Boston Post-Boy* with which this essay opened:

To be Sold, a Parcel of Likely Negroes, imported from Africa, cheap for Cash or short Credit; enquire of John Avery at his House next door to the White-Horse, or at a Store adjoining to said Avery's Distill-House, at the South-End, near the South Market:—Also if any Persons have any Negro Men, strong and hearty, tho' not of the best moral character, which are proper Subjects for Transportation, may have an Exchange for small Negroes.

The Northern preference for young slaves reflected the belief that their economic value as servants, cooks, tradesman, and laborers was best secured by raising them "in the family" and far from groups of slaves with whom they might identify in terms that fostered resistance. Cheng characterizes racial grief as a "dynamic of rejection and attachment." Though it may be easier to see white "rejection" of the humanity of the "strong and hearty" African men destined for the plantation economies of the South and the Caribbean than of the

"small Negroes" offered here, both groups are usefully approached in terms of this "paradox." The "suspended position" into which Northern slaves were placed rested doubly on assumptions about childhood and family: native-born child slaves, attached to and living with their mothers, were valueless, even as high prices would be paid for African-born child slaves, alienated, isolated, and hence the more easily "assimilated" into "the family."²¹

This is the culture that the child who would become Phillis Wheatley entered on her arrival in Boston in 1761, for she was among the "Likely Negroes" advertised here. Her experiences of "family" were significantly of a piece with those of the 16,000 slaves held in New England in the late eighteenth century. As was the norm in New England, she was purchased young, so as to be more malleably absorbed into her master's family.²² She had lighter household duties than other Northern bondswomen, but her duties included, in a very real sense, her writing and her constant attendance on her mistress.²³ Some of the topics on which she wrote were provided by Susanna Wheatley and the influential Bostonians who visited the Wheatley household on King Street specifically to see Susanna's "little black genius" perform, and her poetry-writing brought fame and praise to the Wheatleys, especially to Susanna.²⁴ That is, Phillis Wheatley's atypicality—her status as the first African-American, and the second American woman, to publish a book—exists on a continuum with her typicality as a Northern bondswoman. The effacement of her sexuality, and, in particular, her reproductivity, was crucial to her success. Yet this desexualization was essential to the procedures and assumptions that broadly characterized Northern family slavery: it is another form of the same racialized deviance from an impossible—because-white ideal of familial life and community that prompted the sale of the skilled but valueless "considerable Breeder" with which this essay opened.

Susanna's treatment of Phillis Wheatley exemplified family slavery as it had already been practiced in New England for more than a century. Her perception of Phillis as "my dear child" was selective. Susanna may have loved Phillis as her child, but Phillis's children were certainly not her grandchildren; and she seems to have felt no maternal duty to assure the financial security of "her child" either by seeing her married or by including her in the family will, as did some other New England slave owners. In the sections that follow, I examine the ways that perceptions of Phillis Wheatley and Susanna Wheatley's relationship have tended to devolve to Susanna's credit and Phillis's discredit. I conclude with a reading of two of Wheatley's family elegies in terms of their gendered representation of parenting, focusing especially on the importance of the "Muse" as a mediator and enabler of communities of grief from which she is seemingly excluded.

It might seem that reading Wheatley's poems, especially her elegies, in the context of their dramatization of a religious familial norm from which she was categorically barred would provoke precisely grievance "and its implied logic of comparability and compensation."²⁵ Even as these elegies, lamenting the loss

of real white children taken prematurely by death, do so indirectly, they, like the "Petition" quoted above, evoke the ghosts of the black children that they help us to imagine who were never conceived, nor born. Cheng cautions the would-be reclamer of "melancholic evidences—the kind of evidence that *registers loss, even as it recognizes the unrecognizability of the content of loss*"—against mistaking the imagined object for a lost reality.²⁶ We can neither quantify nor describe the marriages, children, and relationships that, we might imagine, were made difficult or impossible by Northern slavery. Framing what is represented (dead white people) in the context of what is implied (enslaved Northern black people and the terrible gap between their lived experience and the familially inflected rhetoric of eighteenth-century Protestantism and nationalism) suggests, then, the constitutive irony of Wheatley's celebration both of white families and of "family." That irony, while important to register, is insufficient for two reasons. First, in its abstraction, it does not help us read Wheatley's poems individually. In addition, and relatedly, it verges perilously close to the kind of "cultural rescue mission" that evidences contemporary critical desire at least as much as it provides access to the particularities of texts and histories.²⁷

"FELL TEMPTATION": PHILLIS, SUSANNA, AND RACIAL GRIEF

Writing of Southern slavery thirty years ago, Eugene Genovese urged scholars of "the self-deception inherent in the idea of a 'family, black and white'" to recognize, even respect, the complex intensity of such self-perceptions.²⁸ Wheatley's assertions of love for Susanna in her letters, coupled, perhaps, with the absence in her life of beatings and rapes and with a critical reliance on an 1834 memoir of Wheatley written by a descendant of her mistress, have effaced the nature and force of Wheatley's enslavement. Wheatley's enslavement is often regarded as merely nominal, not "real slavery" at all—it is a "gilded cage"; she was her owners' "adopted child."²⁹ This assumption is related, though not reducible, to the pervasive occlusion of the Northern slavery against which Joanne Pope Melish has so forcefully argued, countering the "triumphant narrative of a historically free, white New England in which a few people of color were unaccountably marooned, a class of permanently 'debased' strangers."³⁰ If Northern slavery is occluded for its deviance from a Southern norm, so too is the saturation of domestic spaces with racial and gender hierarchy readily overlooked. Expressions of love do not preclude the possibility of domination: the fact that Susanna Wheatley described her slave as "like her child," or that slave referred to her mistress as "more than a parent," cannot be taken at face value.

Melish deems it likely that "the most terrible psychological burden of slavery" as lived by Northern slaves was the imposition of the "duality" requiring slaves "to be exactly like whites while remaining absolutely unlike them," a dynamic that provides telling frame for the racial grief, in Cheng's sense, that

characterized Wheatley's reproductive life.³¹ Bearing three children in six years of marriage, all of whom died very young, Wheatley both resembles and utterly differs from her "sister," Mary Wheatley. When the six-year-old Phillis was purchased by John Wheatley to be a companion and servant to his wife, Mary, who was eighteen years old at the time, gave Phillis the lessons in reading, writing, religion, and Latin that her mother largely substituted for housework. In 1771, ten years after Phillis's arrival, Mary, at the age of twenty-eight, achieved the prestigious marriage for which she had been raised, marrying Reverend John Lathrop of Old North Church, Boston—called "the Revolutionary Preacher" for the ardor of his embrace of rebellion. She bore six children over the next seven years, dying in 1778, aged thirty-five, possibly of complications of an incomplete pregnancy.³² Two of Mary's six children survived. Both women were steadily pregnant throughout the brief years of their married lives; the lives of both were likely shortened by the strain of pregnancy and delivery, and both bore children who did not live long. (Indeed, Susanna Wheatley also bore two children who died in infancy, before bearing the twins, Mary and Nathaniel, in 1743.) But only superficially could Mary Wheatley and Phillis Wheatley be understood as comparable in relation to their era's pious and patriotic valorization of fecundity, widely evident in portraiture of the era. By bearing children, Mary Wheatley fulfilled her era's ideals of Republican motherhood and Protestant domesticity, however painfully; Phillis Wheatley's pregnancies and births did not perform this cultural function. Seeing this helps us to see the rupture between her literary and reproductive lives. Indeed, Wheatley's poetry writing and her transatlantic celebration as eighteenth-century icon of African humanity depended fundamentally, if covertly, upon her being non-reproductive and physically unthreatening: in this sense, "like a child."

Additionally, where Mary Wheatley's lives as "daughter" and "mother" were continuous, Phillis Wheatley's were starkly sequential. After her arrival in 1752 in Boston as an enslaved child, probably from Senegal, Wheatley lived in two baldly successive American lives: first, she lived, from ages six to twenty-one, as a well-fed child genius and famous "daughter"-writer, with the Wheatleys. Having been taught to read and write by Mary Wheatley, Phillis Wheatley began writing poetry, and in 1767, aged fourteen, she published a poem for the first time, an elegy to George Whitefield. In 1773, her book *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* was published in London, making her the first African-American to publish a book; she was twenty years old. At that time, Wheatley traveled to London with Nathaniel Wheatley, Mary's twin brother, where she was received as a celebrity. She could have remained in London as a free woman, but she returned to Boston to tend her mistress on her deathbed.³³ Susanna manumitted Phillis a few months before her death in 1774. After John and Mary Wheatley's deaths in 1778, Phillis lived her second American life, as a struggling, sickly, and no-longer-famous freewoman, wife, and mother.³⁴ Though she may have met John Peters when he delivered a letter to her from

her friend Obour Tanner, a slave resident in Providence, she seems to have accepted his proposal of marriage only when financial support from the Wheatleys ended with the deaths of Susanna and John and Mary.³⁵ At some point after their marriage, the couple moved with their first child to Wilmington, Massachusetts. Wheatley and her three children are known to have returned to Boston in 1780 to live with one of Susanna's nieces, Elizabeth Walcutt, who, with her daughter, Lucy, ran a girls' school on Purchase Street.³⁶ After six weeks, Peters came to retrieve his family and brought them to their new home, an apartment in a poorer section of Boston. Wheatley died four years later, on December 4, 1784, aged thirty-one. Newspaper reports of a funeral procession seen on Court Street (in Wheatley's day, Queen Street) led William Robinson to suspect that she is buried in the Old Granary Burial Grounds, on Tremont Street, one of five town cemeteries that received black bodies.³⁷ Her grave, which also contains the body of her youngest child, is unmarked.

History has been kind to Susanna Wheatley; June Jordan speaks for many later observers when she celebrates Susanna Wheatley's "extraordinary kindness" in lightening Phillis Wheatley's household duties, educating her, and championing her literary career.³⁸ Alice Walker critically glossed Phillis Wheatley's visualization of the goddess of liberty in "To His Excellency, George Washington"—"The goddess comes, she moves divinely fair, olive and laurel binds her golden hair"—as evidence of Wheatley's thoughtless replication of the white ideals around her: "It is obvious that Phillis, the slave, brushed the goddess's hair every morning, perhaps prior to bringing in the milk. . . . With the benefit of hindsight, we ask, 'How could she?'"³⁹ In Cheng's terms, Walker commits the error of formulating "the connection between subjectivity and social damage" simplistically, "resigning colored people to the irrevocability of 'self-hatred.'" ⁴⁰ Close attention to both the ways that Susanna and Phillis Wheatley typify Northern family slavery and the critical occlusion of domesticity as a sphere fraught with racial and gendered hierarchy makes this dichotomizing model of agency—resistance *or* complicity—untenable. Most crucially, Susanna practiced family slavery with particular possessiveness. She forbade Wheatley association with other blacks—from the Wheatley family's other slaves and from the several other kinds of all-black association then prevalent in New England. To the contextualizing absences that surround Wheatley's work, then, we must add, for example, the annual election, by the slaves of Boston, of their own "governor," in keeping with a practice common in cities across New England for about a century, beginning in about 1750. The owner of the slave elected governor paid for the festivities, which involved eating, drinking, speechifying, and the casting of ballots.⁴¹ Equally barred for Wheatley were the meetings of religious "societies of Negroes" that met across New England from the late seventeenth century into the nineteenth for prayer and religious instruction. Melish remarks that "opportunities to gather privately in numbers must have held considerable appeal for slaves isolated individually

in white households," and the leadership of many of these groups by women may have made them especially appealing to women; two of the best-known female bondswoman leaders of such groups were Susanna Anthony and Sarah Osborne, of Newport, Rhode Island, whose January 1767 meeting was attended by as many as 525 enslaved people of color.⁴² Mary Beth Norton notes the shrewdness of Osborne and Anthony's assertions of public authority: they did so by asserting that ministering to blacks was like caring for children, and thus an appropriate activity for females.⁴³ The ironic similarity of this claim to what seems to have been Susanna's *modus operandi* in her "kindness" to Wheatley makes tantalizingly vivid the possibilities that were blocked for Wheatley both by family slavery and by Susanna's particularization of it.

Phillis Wheatley's writing also benefited Susanna in that the Wheatleys' cultivation of Phillis brought them fame, and perhaps even made more likely the visit from Whitefield that they may have received in 1770. In addition, the pious and conservative Susanna was empowered to act forcefully and publicly, yet still in accordance with feminine decorum, by acting as the champion of Phillis Wheatley. Eminent Boston families prepared their daughters for life both by securing them marriages with partners who would provide well for them, and by including them in their wills. In contrast to other Massachusetts slave owners' provisions for beloved former slaves, no provision was made for her in the Wheatleys' wills. Other New Englanders of the era left money and property to specially favored slaves.⁴⁴ Even as the possible association of such bequests with sexual impropriety may have discouraged John and Susanna Wheatley from including their "daughter" Phillis in their wills, their failure to provide for her makes plain the different senses of "like my child" that animated Susanna in relation to Phillis and to Mary. The fact that it was not unthinkable for slave owners to leave money, property, or even the family home to slaves and former slaves means that we must rethink both the myth of the Wheatleys' exceptional generosity and the criticism and history that it has informed. This myth derives significantly from Margaretta Matilda Odell's 1834 *Memoir and Poems of Phillis Wheatley*, on which later commentators have relied heavily for biographical information about Phillis Wheatley.⁴⁵

Odell's portrait of the loving mutuality of her ancestor, Susanna Wheatley, and Susanna's favorite slave paradoxically undergirds both her condemnation of slavery and her praise of New England's beneficent virtue in relation to it. Both processes suggest racial grief, in Cheng's sense, providing a case study of the "mutual definition through exclusion" of "dominant white culture and racial others" in terms of which Cheng frames her paradigm. Indeed, "mutual definition through exclusion" is the grammar of the *Memoir*, in which the rhetorical separation of races is imbricated with related fantasies of regional separation and of separate spheres. In the *Memoir*, Odell exonerates New England by feminizing it, characterizing slavery and the South in terms of violent men, and a highly gendered male violence. "The stain of slavery has long

been erased from the annals of New England," writes Odell: "the groan of the African is not heard among her beautiful hills, nor the whip of the taskmaster among in her pleasant vallies."⁴⁶ Here slavery can be recognized as such only in the presence of "groans" and "whips." Odell only recognizes slavery in phrases that condemn it, and these phrases envision only violent coercion and resistance, of men and by men: "The white man . . . strive[s] to bind him as vainly as the Philistines strove against Sampson. . . . [H]ow often has he [the slave] made the hearts of his keepers to quail, and their cheeks to blanch with fear, when they have looked on their wives and little ones, and heard the cry of vengeance fill their plantations with dismay."⁴⁷ Here the achievement of enslavement ("binding") is specifically male and violent; the act of equally violent resistance is equally male; and oppressors' capacity to recognize the injustice of slavery derives from their (male) devotion to "wives and little ones." Odell's regionalization of kinds of agency (violent-male-South, loving-female-North) suggests that love and wrongdoing are incompatible. Susanna Wheatley becomes the beneficent exemplum not only of virtuous New England, but also of virtuous womankind—loving, domestic, and, by this logic, incapable of evil coercion. This grief-inducing idealization of Northern white women—truly an exemplum of the "fragility and bravado that haunt American national integrity," to borrow Cheng's phrase—was widely shared by Odell's female readers.⁴⁸ The April 1834 issue of the *American Ladies' Magazine*, for example, praised the particularly feminine appeal of the recently, and anonymously, published *Memoirs and Poems of Phillis Wheatley*: "To the heart of woman it should be precious, for it shows her sex, both as mistress and slave, in an amiable and elevated light."⁴⁹ Injustice and coercion are logically incommensurate and unthinkable in relation to Northern women's "amiable" devotion to superiors and inferiors alike.

It might seem that the cognitive dissonance that this structure enables is better described as denial than as grief. And indeed, because Cheng's framework acknowledges only secular ideals, it can sometimes lack traction in relation to the identifications wrought by religion. For Cheng, an Enlightenment-inspired "idealism" generates a national self-definition that is belied by the reality of racial subordination: "The history of American national idealism has always been caught up in this melancholic bind between incorporation and rejection. If one of the ideals that sustained the American nation since its beginning has been its unique proposition that 'all men are created equal,' then one of America's ongoing national mortifications must be its history of acting otherwise."⁵⁰ "Since its beginning," however, the nation has been "sustained" by religious ideals, generators of idealized self-definitions that are more significantly regional than national. New England's self-image as "a city on a hill" idealized not "incorporation" but righteous leadership and instruction of benighted environs, national and global. In stark contrast to the ideal of universal equality, this ideal openly celebrates hierarchy. Different kinds of ideal breed different kinds of failure and, to adapt Cheng's paradigm, different kinds of racial grief.

The “manic” form of colonial New England’s racial grief, then, could be expected to reflect the loss of an idealized self-definition in relation to a valorized regional superiority and separateness. Even as Odell strenuously reifies this New England, the racial grief that she models derives less from this fantasy of difference than from uneasy acknowledgement of the involvement of “loving” women—in particular, of Susanna—in coercion and thus in slavery. The most telling line in the *Memoir* occurs midst Odell’s description of Wheatley’s death in poverty. “It is painful to dwell upon the closing scene,” she writes:

In a filthy apartment, in an obscure part of the metropolis, lay the dying mother, and the wasting child. The woman who had stood honored and respected in the presence of the wise and good of that country which was hers by adoption, or rather compulsion, who had graced the ancient halls of Old England, and rolled about in the splendid equipages of the proud nobles of Britain, was now numbering the last hours of life in a state of the most abject misery, surrounded by all the emblems of squalid poverty!⁵¹

Odell seems to mean to intensify readers’ sympathy for Wheatley’s degradation by contrasting it with former elevation. Odell’s national honor is affronted that an American who did the nation proud in relation to “the proud nobles of Britain” should have been brought so low. Initiating a tradition that would continue for a century, she blames Wheatley’s husband, John Peters, as a bad provider. Such blame of a black man in late eighteenth-century Boston for failing to achieve financial stability is conceptually akin to the kinds of blame voiced in the advertisements with which this essay opened. The *Newport Mercury* of April 21, 1766, offered such a woman for sale, “about 25 Years of Age,” and an excellent cook, “For Half her Value (for no other Fault than having Children without a Husband).” If it is astonishing to see a bondswoman blamed by her owners for the marital status normative to her enslavement, it is still more so to see the mocking terms in which a younger, and presumably more vulnerable, “able-body’d Wench” is offered for sale “for no other Fault but her Breeding” by the *New London Gazette* of October 17, 1766. This sixteen-year-old, “with a sucking Child, can do all Sorts of House-Work,” the ad tells us. An editorial at the bottom of the same page permits itself this condemnatory addendum: “We are told, that the Negro Wench, advertised for Sale in this Paper, has had Three living Children, tho’ she is only 16 Years old.—A rare Instance of Prolifickness!”

Racial melancholy, Cheng writes, enacts “a dynamic of rejection and internalization that may help us comprehend two particular aspects of American racial culture: first, dominant white culture’s rejection of yet attachment to the racial other and, second, the ramifications that such a paradox holds for the racial other, who has been placed in a suspended position.”⁵² Odell presents Wheatley’s working life in terms consonant with this “dynamic” and this “paradox.” She assents to Susanna’s fiction of Wheatley’s freedom: “nothing was

forced upon her, nothing suggested, or placed before her as a lure; her literary efforts were altogether the natural workings of her own mind."⁵³ Even as Phillis was "kept constantly about the person of her mistress" and even as she was forbidden association with the household's other slaves, "Mrs Wheatley did not require or permit her services as a domestic."⁵⁴ In such precedent descriptions of Northern family slavery as Cotton Mather's *The Negro Christianized* (1706), the master is credited with the slave's (alleged) responsiveness to the religious instruction, which it is his sacred duty to provide. Similarly, here Phillis's salvation redounds to Susanna's credit, not her own; and Susanna's approval reflects Phillis's worth—an economy in which Susanna is always the center, in which Phillis is always her creature. "Indeed, we consider the strongest proof of her worth to have been the earnest affection of this excellent woman, who admitted her to her own board. Phillis ate of her bread, and drank of her cup, and was to her as a daughter, for she returned her affection with unbounded gratitude, and was so devoted to her interests as to have no will in opposition to that of her benefactress."⁵⁵ Melish notes that Northern "family slavery" "in practice demanded agency and feared it, demanded passivity and was disgusted by it."⁵⁶ Throughout the *Memoir*, Phillis is given only enough agency to make it count that she corroborates the beneficence of the "family" over which Susanna presided. Odell praises Susanna for her extraordinarily generous education of her slave and for her "good sense and discretion," qualities that informed her dislike of public praise for "those good deeds . . . which were performed in the privacy of her own happy home."⁵⁷ Where both women are admirably pious, modest, and retiring, these qualities are ascribed to Phillis in terms not inappropriate for a pet: "She was very gentle-tempered, extremely affectionate," bound to her mistress by "the golden links of love, and the silken bands of gratitude. She had a child's place in their house and in their hearts."⁵⁸ And yet the promise of being their "child" was partial. Odell's grandmother, who knew the Wheatleys, tellingly also relied on family to explain Phillis's final poverty and sickness: "people had other things to attend to than prose and poetry, and had little to bestow in charity, when their own children were clamorous for bread."⁵⁹ The impoverished and sickly Phillis could not, then, rightfully "clamor" as Susanna's child.

Wheatley described her mistress's death in two extant letters, one of which I consider here. She wrote to Tanner, her close friend and a fellow slave, on March 21, 1774, thanking him for an "obliging Letter" before embarking on the description of her feelings at her mistress's death:

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 her child than her Servant; no opportunity was left unimprov'd, of giv-

ing me the best of advice, but in terms how tender! how engaging! This I hope ever to keep in remembrance.⁶⁰

Even as Wheatley clearly describes affection, she does so without directly asserting status as familial. She does not say that Susanna was a mother to her, or even that she was like a mother to her; rather, she “united” “the tenderness” of “parent,” sister, and brother. Relatedly, she describes her own treatment by her mistress in comparative, rather than absolute, terms: it was “more like a child than [a] Servant.” In the private elegies, to be mother-like is to grieve with special and naturalized intensity for the loss of a child. Here, to be “more like a child than [a] Servant” is to have regularly received “the best of advice,” the “instruction” that, as we have seen, legitimated “family slavery,” exempting it from the biblical injunction not against slavery, but against cruel slavery. Even as these aspects of the letter leave room for reading Wheatley as aware of her “like but unlike” status as familial, she evades the material fact of her enslavement, describing John Wheatley’s purchase of her as being “taken in” by Susanna—a response that is all the more striking given the fact that she is writing to a close friend and fellow bondswoman. Evoking Odell’s idealizing emphasis upon religious instruction as both motivator and legitimator of family slavery, Wheatley hopes here always to remember Susanna’s “tender” and “engaging” way of delivering “the best of advice.” To remember Susanna is to continue to assent to instruction by her: Wheatley’s affection here seems both sincere and dutiful, even impersonal. Remembering Susanna, then, does not seem to imply grieving her with “salty brine,” the response granted to “the Parent” as well as to “the Mother” in her elegies, the focus of the following section. Rather, Wheatley’s grief assents to the continuation of Susanna as monitor to her ongoing “ghosting” by Susanna, the face of the impossible Northern ideal of righteous “family.”

Odell explains the lack of any “testimony of [Wheatley’s] gratitude to her benefactors” in her oeuvre as the outcome of Susanna’s “Christian humility, [which] induced her to shrink from the thought of those good deeds being blazoned forth to the world, which were performed in the privacy of her own happy home.”⁶¹ The only extant poem that refers directly to Susanna is “A Farewell to America. To Mrs. S. W.,” commemorating Wheatley’s departure for London in May 1773. Rather than “gratitude” or grief at separation, the poem asserts Wheatley’s pleasure in the restoration of health that accompanies her journey away from New England, her “astonish’d” pleasure in “explor[ing] / The wide-extended main.”⁶² Max Cavitch wonders whether it might not have been “among Susanna Wheatley’s dying intentions” to “keep [Wheatley’s] place at the margins of that family and its society” by forbidding Wheatley to write an elegy about her.⁶³ Wheatley’s representation of Susanna in “A Farewell to America,” coupled with the frequency with which “the Muse” orchestrates communities of grief without inhabiting them, suggests a more complex re-

sponse to Susanna. Wheatley traveled to London in May 1773 with Nathaniel Wheatley (who had business to tend there), to oversee and help publicize the publication of *Poems on Various Subjects*.⁶⁴ The poem, which consists of thirteen numbered quatrains, devotes its first three stanzas to description of the "smiling meads" of New England, which cannot tempt her, as "northern skies" mean "health deny'd" to her. She grieves not for New England, but for "health deny'd." Wheatley personifies her longing for now-absent good health:

Celestial maid of rosy hue,
O let me feel thy reign!
I languish till thy face I view,
Thy vanish'd joys regain.⁶⁵

Wheatley's lover-like longing for a youthfully beautiful and feminized figure of health emphasizes her wish to submit to "her"—to "feel [her] reign." This appropriation of the tropes of love poetry to describe her desire for health, associated with London, makes Susanna's grief at her own departure seem all the more contrastive and unshared:

Susannah [*sic*] mourns, nor can I bear
To see the crystal show'r,
Or mark the tender falling tear
At sad departure's hour.⁶⁶

Though the speaker asserts that she is not "unregarding" of Susanna's "soul with grief opprest," she does not characterize her own feelings—for Susanna or for the trip—in similar terms. Instead, she wishes Susanna would stop crying: "let no sighs, no groans for me, / Steal from her pensive breast."⁶⁷

The poem continues by noting the futility with which the birds of New England call to her: her boat "sweep[s] the liquid plain," "astonish'd" by the vastness of the ocean. Health rejoins her and is duly celebrated, "Complacent and serene," and Wheatley happily anticipates the "charms" of London. She longs for sunrise, the better to see London: "For thee, Britannia, I resign / New-England's smiling fields." It is at this rapturous point in the poem's drama of happy departure—from New England's fields and birds, from poor health, and from a weeping Susanna—that "fell Temptation" appears, "seduc[ing] [her] soul away" from an unspecified evil.⁶⁸ Because the Mansfield decision manumitting all slaves who set foot on British soil had been handed down in 1772, Wheatley's longing for London may have included a longing for freedom, a possibility that makes more intriguing the way that leaving New England meant leaving sickness and frailty. Vincent Carretta notes the seeming counterintuition that led Wheatley to return from freedom and a hospitable and expansive London to enslavement and the restrictive Wheatley household in terms of the "upper hand" in negotiating the

terms of her freedom that this return to tend the dying Susanna gave her.⁶⁹ Even as I agree with this view, I would suggest that close attention to family slavery's complication of subjectivity and relationship pushes us to personalize the "Temptation" that Wheatley reluctantly rejected as she returned to America and slavery. For a taboo greater than flight to freedom would have been flight from Susanna, from "family"—from the complex dynamic of abjection and partial assimilation that Susanna presented as "love." The ambiguity and ultimate lack of referentiality of the "Temptation" make it possible that Wheatley registers here obliquely something other than a "smiling" relationship to her "tender instructor." Might this "fell Temptation" be the unspeakable, perhaps unknowable, wish to live other than as Susanna's prop and mirror?

"PERMIT THE MUSE": WHEATLEY'S ELEGIES AND MULTIPLE IDENTIFICATION

If racial grief provides an apt paradigm with which to consider both Wheatley's description of her mistress's treatment of her as "more like her child than her Servant" and Susanna's oft-voiced view of Phillis as "my dear child," so too it gives access to Wheatley's poetry. Private elegies, written in response to the deaths of ordinary people, constitute about a third (eleven) of the thirty-eight poems in *Poems on Various Subjects*: seven of these concern dead children; three, dead spouses; two, dead adult siblings.⁷⁰ Cheng's emphasis on the "deep-seated, intangible, psychical complications for people living within a ruling episteme that privileges that which they can never be" is trebly pertinent to reading these poems. They commemorate "natural" familial relationships that were categorically impossible for Wheatley and her fellow Northern slaves, and they theologize the deaths of these family members, making them metonyms of the salvific love of "God the Father." It is, however, Wheatley's unique figuration of the Muse as observer and commentator on the experience and ideological significance of grief and loss that most resonates with Cheng's model. Through the figure of the Muse, Wheatley makes us see both the derivation of her authority in her position inside and outside of the family, and its cost. The Muse melancholically permits recognition of the racist wish of "family slavery" to avoid "fully expell[ing] the racial other; instead, [it] wish[es] to maintain that other within existing structures" (to borrow Cheng's broad characterization of "racist institutions.")⁷¹ Because of the Muse, we can see the elite white families whose losses occasion these acts of piety and art in the process of "need[ing] the very thing they hate or fear," at once including Wheatley in, and excluding her from, the racialized "family" of faith that authorizes both (white) grief and (a female slave's) aestheticizing and theologizing of a valued (white) experience of loss.⁷² Though I comment here on only two of Wheatley's elegies, others in which the Muse enables shifting communities of grief from which the devoted Muse remains detached are amenable to this approach.

Perhaps through David Wooster, the Revolutionary general turned Connecticut customs officer whom Wheatley came to know as part of Susanna Wheatley's evangelical circles, Wheatley became friendly enough with Reverend Timothy Pitkin of Farmington, Connecticut's Congregational Church to enter into correspondence with him. Her 1779 proposal for subscribers for her projected second book promised thirty-three new poems and thirteen letters, one of which was to him; we do not know when this letter was written. When Pitkin's wife, Temperance, died in 1772, Wheatley wrote what Robinson has called "a comforting and personalized eulogy" to her, which was published as a broadside in June of that same year.⁷³ "To the Rev. Mr. Pitkin on the Death of his Lady" includes one of the most moving invocations of parental love to be found in any of Wheatley's sixty extant poems. In contrast to many of Wheatley's elegies, the six-line second stanza of this fifty-line elegy opens by asserting the legitimacy of grief, finding in it an impetus to community and to comfort in the mortal realm. The importance of this stanza lies, in part, in the fact of its deletion in the final version of the poem included in *Poems on Various Subjects* (where it was retitled, "To a Clergyman on the Death of his Lady"); its presence/absence crucially informs the relation of the speaker toward the bereaved and the communities, heavenly and mortal, that he contemplates. Every stanza in both versions except this one urges the bereaved toward identificatory celebration of the dead wife in heaven, an urging onward toward death-as-reunion that both is subtly aggressive and requires the bereaved's disidentification—indeed disconnection—from the equally bereaved children. That is, the speaker's role in both poems is to place the bereaved in proper relation to the lost beloved, thereby forming and reforming communities of grief. In "Pitkin," such community alternates between inclusion and exclusion of the claims of the living upon the bereaved. In contrast, "To a Clergyman" offers a single, idealized, and all-absorbing community of grief, effacing the claims of living children and urging the grief-stricken husband/father to desire his own and his children's deaths for the entrance into heavenly reunion they may afford.

Both versions open with four lines giving visual direction—look there, "Where Contemplation finds her sacred Spring, / Where heav'nly Music makes the Centre ring."⁷⁴ This heaven, the locus and source of contemplation, music, virtue, and wisdom, is now the home of the lost beloved, who is lamented not as Pitkin's wife but as his "Spouse," welcomed by angels. The effect of this first stanza, common to both versions of the poem, is to distance the bereaved from the departed: not only is this heaven far away, it is inhabited not by individuals but by a collective, "the glitt'ring Throng" who speak with one voice, an "angelic shout."⁷⁵ In "Pitkin," this simultaneously alienating and glorious vision of a distant heaven, home to a transformed "Spouse" who clearly belongs there and not on earth, is followed by a stanza that offers an alternative vision of grief. The second stanza of "Pitkin," cut entirely from the final "To a Clergyman," first re-individualizes the departed, who is less an angel in the making

than a personality seeking attention. "The virtuous Dead, demand a grateful Tear," this important stanza begins. Because the word "grateful" indicated, in the eighteenth century, both a response to obligation and a welcomed pleasure (the latter, as in Pope's celebratory phrase "In grateful sleep" in his 1725 translation of the *Odyssey*), the phrase suggests that "the virtuous Dead" seek from the bereaved both relieving pleasure and respectful appreciation.⁷⁶ The dead wife wants us to cry for her, and the tears thus responsively shed both reincorporate the dead in her earthly family and are appropriately pleasurable in the self-comfort they bring.

In the deleted second stanza of "Pitkin," Wheatley then moves from this subtle endorsement of Pitkin's pain to urging its temporary repression, and in ways that again validate merely mortal affections. In a strategy starkly opposed to the majority of her elegies, Pitkin is urged to "forbear" his tears not in order to love God better, but because his children need him:

Not thine alone, the Sorrow I relate,
Thy blooming Off-spring feel the mighty Weight;
Thus, from the Bosom of the tender Vine,
The Branches torn, fall, wither, sink supine.⁷⁷

Extricating Pitkin from the totalizing contemplation of the dead wife and her heavenly realm we see in the first stanza, the speaker places him now in relation to his living children and the mortal realm that justly claims his attention and effort. The speaker asks Pitkin to pause in his grief, not to smother or deny it, and because his sorrow is not his alone. Pitkin's grief will, and should, continue: he is to "cease [his] Grief a-while" only to wear it differently, in ways that less solipsistically merge him with his now-angelic wife and with death.⁷⁸ Grief is a "mighty Weight" that undoes the natural work of growth and blooming as it rips the young from the chief—and here literal—support, "the tender Vine." Losing their mother, they cannot but "fall, wither, sink supine." Pity for, and duty to, children binds adults to the world: parents have important and valuable work to do here, beside which their own grief is both legitimate and secondary. This stanza, then, offers an alternative community of grief founded on identification not with the dead but with both the living and the dead, in which the claims and experiences of children trump those of an adult. "I relate" this "Sorrow": the isolated speaker describes the children's grief in order to enable their reconnection with their father. Though the speaker creates community out of grief, naming it as "Not thine alone" to the bereaved clergyman, she does not, at this point in the poem, claim a place within the union of the grief-stricken. Instead, the speaker is, at this point, so clearly outside the family that an echo of "Not mine at all" could well accompany her chastening reminder to acknowledge shared loss in shared grieving.

In stanza 2, the speaker ("I") speaks on behalf of forgotten children. Thus

the first two stanzas of "Pitkin" set a pattern by which the bereaved is offered identificatory relation with sequential objects—his angelic "Spouse" or his "sinking" children. These objects, thus far in the poem, can only temporarily coexist—Pitkin must "cease [his] Grief a-while" in order to recognize his children. In the grief-centered economy of the poem, the children and the dead wife are thus rivals. The speaker, reminding Pitkin of his children's pain and their legitimate claim on him, seeks entrance to the community of grief not for herself, but for them. He is to see that his pain is "not thine alone"—it is shared—and to admit that attention to the living might legitimately supplant heaven-directed identification with the dead. "Pitkin" thus moves from vision of great spaces (look upward!) to action (stop crying and take care of your children!). In contrast, lacking the second stanza of "Pitkin," "To a Clergyman" stays with the "Spouse"-as-object in ways that steadfastly urge the bereaved clergyman only to long for his own and his children's deaths. Cheng notes that "one of the curious aspects of melancholia—really, its pathos—is the fact that the incorporation of the lost object offers but a self-punishing pleasure[,] . . . a tenuous, ghostly connection."⁷⁹ "Pitkin," but not "To a Clergyman," interrupts the "self-punishing pleasure" of remembering, idealizing, and identifying with the dead, a trajectory that is intensified in the next stanza of the poem, which makes startlingly clear both the ghostliness of the heavenly wife as possible object and the self-punishment involved in choosing melancholic attachment to her rather than to the children. Here, rapturous and wishful identification with heaven is not interrupted by merely mortal children.

In stanza 3, the speaker returns to her initial focus on the "Spouse," the first of the two rival objects. It is precisely melancholy, loss-without-loss, that the speaker now urges upon the bereaved clergyman: "Amidst the Seats of Heaven, a Place is free, / Among those bright angelic Ranks for thee," she tells him. He is, in effect, to identify with the lost wife so as never to let her go. Having thus herself told him to resume contemplation of impossibly distant heaven, the speaker then ventriloquizes the heaven-minded dead wife to that effect. Astonishingly, the speaker claims to have been a witness to her heavenly admonitions:

Thy Spouse leans forward from th'ethereal Sky,
Thus in my Hearing, "Come away," she cries,
"Partake the sacred Raptures of the Skies!
Our Bliss divine, to Mortals is unknown,
And endless Scenes of happiness our own"⁸⁰

The dead wife cites the children only to wish them dead and in heaven, too: "May the dear Off-spring of our earthly Love, / Receive admittance to the Joys above!"⁸¹ Here grief is forbidden, and children figure only as angels-to-be. By deleting the second stanza as she revised "Pitkin" for inclusion in *Poems on*

Various Subjects, Wheatley gives the astonishing intensity of the wife's eager encouragement of her grieving husband's imagination of death an aggressive charge. Without the pause to remember the children and to imagine a practice of grief that accepts care of them as necessary and moral, "To a Clergyman" both erases the possible validity, even holiness, of familial duties and joys, and severs the roles of "wife" and "mother." The lost Mrs. Pitkin left behind children who miss her; the lost "Lady" left behind only a husband who must be made ready to join her in heaven. That is, "Pitkin," but not "To a Clergyman," describes a grief that can be completed by having been fully experienced. Deleting the second stanza, Wheatley deleted the living—children—and the sustaining ethical imperative of attachment in and to the mortal realm.

The last stanzas of both versions describe the dead wife having "turn'd away her Eyes, / Which beam'd celestial Radiance o'er the Skies" before offering closing visions of the ideal relation of the speaker to the bereaved.⁸² The ways that "To a Clergyman" reconfigures piety away from valuing parental devotion to living children in order to value solely reunion after death makes especially significant the poem's final insertion of the speaker into the poem:

Now sorrow is incumbent on thy heart,
Permit the muse a cordial to impart;
Who can to thee their tend'rest aid refuse?
To dry thy tears how longs the heav'nly muse!⁸³

In the erased stanza 2, the speaker urged the grieving Pitkin to dry the tears of his children; here "the muse" herself "longs" to offer her "tend'rest aid." Erasing Pitkin as comfort-giving father, Wheatley preserves only the speaker as a would-be offerer of consolation, allowing the desire to comfort to be read as specifically female, where in "Pitkin" it is not so gendered. Annie Finch finds this stanza "unusually moving": "the Muse becomes almost a motherly figure," offering comfort, wanting to dry the griever's tears.⁸⁴ If this is the case, and if Wheatley's first readers read the poem's first-person point of view as Wheatley's own, then this "motherly figure" is a twenty-year-old, responding to the grief of a man old enough to be her father (Pitkin was born January 13, 1726/27). The gendered racial grief suggested by this implied offer of comfort by a young female slave to an older white minister lies in the ghosts that accompany both her performance of a maternal role denied her by her enslavement and her imagined inclusion in the Pitkin family. Finch comments further of Wheatley's relation to sentimentalism that her "use of her race for its poetic connotations has a sentimental cast: like a nineteenth-century woman writing a poem explicitly in her capacity as a mother, Wheatley allegorizes herself and her public role for emotional purposes"—a comparison of Wheatley's raciality to white women's reproductivity that is painfully ironic in the context of Northern slavery, which made it impossible both for Wheatley to "writ[e] a

poem explicitly in her capacity as a mother" and for her readers to tolerate the simultaneous contemplation of her authorship and her reproductivity.⁸⁵

One is struck equally, in this vision of a piously death-wishing dead wife and mother, by the multiple possibilities for identification enabled by Wheatley's handling of point of view. In stanza 2 of "Pitkin," she speaks for the forgotten children. In all the other stanzas of both versions, she speaks for the dead wife, claiming that she both witnessed the wife's happy ascension and heard her declare her wish that her husband and children might speedily join her. Cavitch notes that the representation of death in elegy involves "some element of wish. One cannot represent a death without in some figurative sense causing that wish to occur once again."⁸⁶ The poem's closing vision of the Muse comforting the bereaved might, by these lights, suggest a third "community of grief," one that links the comforting muse and the comforted clergyman, to which the children and the dead wife are both irrelevant. At the same time, the most obviously recurrent wish for death in the poem is the wife's, for the deaths of her husband and children. The (temporary) unwillingness of "Pitkin" to valorize paternal self-absorption in grief makes this shift to a vengeful God, slaughterer of "our hated Foes" and enabler of eternal life, an especially sharp contrast. The final stanzas of both versions conclude by shifting the burden and potential morality of grief from the bereaved to "the World." The bereaved husband/father can and should stop crying in the face of his loss, as those who see him thus "Complain no more" will grant him "a pitying Tear."⁸⁷ The poem thus opens and closes with collectives—an angelic "glitt'ring Throng" and a commiserating "World"—who respond, respectively, with gladness at the ascension of the lost beloved and with sympathy at the pain endured by the unwillingly abandoned bereaved. It is the speaker, "exactly like whites while remaining absolutely unlike them," who mediates the bereaved's relationship to these groups, and to the wife and children who are positioned between them.⁸⁸

If "Pitkin" asserted, and then erased, the special liability felt by children deprived by death of their mother, "To a Lady and her Children, on the Death of Her Son and their Brother" asserts, and then withdraws, the special grief felt by a mother deprived by death of her son. Like "Pitkin," "To a Lady and her Children" asserts a specifically maternal emotional nurturance of children only to efface it. Again, the speaker describes her motivation to "song" in terms of service to communities of grief. In the poem's opening lines, responsiveness to "o'erwhelming sorrow" characterizes the poetic vocation: this grief "demands my song: / From death the overwhelming sorrow sprung."⁸⁹ Death causes sorrow; sorrow "demands" the speaker's "song": her poetic vocation is legitimized as responsiveness to emotion, rather than the existential condition that causes it. The poet answers to sorrow, not directly to death. That sorrow is made manifest in the bodily signs then catalogued: "What flowing tears? What hearts with grief opprest? / What sighs on sighs heave the fond parent's breast?"⁹⁰ The gender-neutral "parent" is joined by "the brother," "the hapless

sisters," and "the poor," whose collective "increasing woe" "swell[s] the crystal brine."⁹¹ The first stanza concludes by turning its focus from the crowd of griever to the multiply-roled departed loved one, who joined in one body "the benefactor," "the friend," and "the kind companion."

The poem's initial pluralization of grief—its focus on multiple griever, lamenting the loss of a multiply-roled lost beloved—gives way in the second stanza to a sustained focus on the symptoms of grief manifested by "th' unhappy mother," who, watching over her son's body, "sees the sanguine rill, / Forget to flow."⁹² The abstraction of the poem's diction is complicated by this vivid image of a mother alone with her child's body, newly a corpse. First grief is collective and abstract; then it is individual and corporeal, a vacillation that pervades the rest of the poem. The speaker then inserts herself into the poem's shifting configuration of communities of griever centered on the dead boy, offering both the pious reminder that "no grief recalls [*sic*] your best belov'd" and a consoling image of ascension, the son's imagined acquisition of "pinions swifter than the wind."⁹³ This short-lived, intense recognition of a mother's special and gendered grief is followed by striking ambivalence, as if the speaker is unable to sustain the effort to respond personally to idealized maternal grief—to forge a relationship of grief and comfort with one (white) mother, rather than with a collective of "hearts with grief oppress." "Of celestial joys I sing in vain," the speaker notes, "Attempt not, muse, the too adventurous strain."⁹⁴ Is it "too adventurous" for the speaker to offer "celestial joys" to this mother at this moment, or for Wheatley, even less personally connected to the Boylstones than to the Pitkins, to write an elegy for and about a family of which she was not a part?⁹⁵

It is surprising to note the pervasive inattention of Wheatley scholarship to the contexts of gender, both racially and regionally inflected, in which she lived and worked.⁹⁶ The positive valences given to Wheatley's literacy in her day depended in complex ways both on the shape of family slavery in Boston and, relatedly, on the ways she was perceived as an unthreatening girl child. Registering the familial norm that Wheatley rendered poetically and could not live matters as it counters the persistent effacement of both New England slavery and women's labor more generally. It also poses key questions for the reading of her poetry, dominated as it is by elegies to family members. The vision of familial ideals and experiences given in Wheatley's poems is racial precisely where it is gendered. Their racial suggestiveness is enacted largely through the speaker's self-placement in relation to familial grief with which she can, and cannot, identify. Missing Wheatley's sexuality is of a piece with missing her slavery; both reflect the persistent effacement of the gendered particularities of Northern slavery. Without the food and shelter that accompanied her enslavement, and without Susanna's tireless promotion, Wheatley would not have become the first African-American to publish a book. This achievement required, however, the effacement of her potential and actual sexuality and

thus the prolongation of her "childhood." Such a denial of reproductive, adult autonomy was the case generally for Northern bondswomen, whose value, as Jones has remarked, "increased in direct proportion to [their] experience as . . . childless houseservant[s]." ⁹⁷ Wheatley's private elegies, celebrating affective ties in which she both could, and could not, participate, supported Northern self-definition as righteously pious and patriarchal. So doing, they allow us to imagine grief for the loss and ideological devaluation of her own childhood and her own children. It is both important and limiting to frame Wheatley's family elegies ironically in this way: limiting, in that focusing on ghostly losses, the meaning and shape of which can never be known, may keep us from examining the "dynamic" racial grief that negotiates locally with inaccessible ideals, or in Cheng's phrase, with "both coercive and transformative potentials for political imagination." ⁹⁸

In closing, let us attend to the constitutive and potentially "dynamic" absence in Wheatley's oeuvre both of any elegy remembering the "lovely face" and "radiant eyes" of her own departed children and of any elegy remembering Susanna. Meditating on the absence of a tribute to Susanna in Wheatley's oeuvre, Cavitch reflects that Susanna's deathbed interdiction against Phillis writing about her—as reported by Odell—may indicate Susanna's final unwillingness to consider Phillis part of the family. ⁹⁹ Equally possible in this silence is Phillis's own final unwillingness to smile at the family slavery that would seem to have fed her and objectified her, educated her and infantilized her, made her famous and helped her die young.

NOTES

I would like to thank Dave Collings for his astute reading of an earlier version of this essay.

1. Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (New York, 2001), 6.

2. The term "family slavery" is William Piersen's; it is the focus of chapter 3 of his *Black Yankees: The Development of an Afro-American Subculture in Eighteenth-Century New England* (Amherst, 1988). Orlando Patterson elaborates his concept of "natal alienation" in *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, Mass., 1985): it is "the definition of the slave, however recruited, as a socially dead person. Alienated from all 'rights' or claims of birth, he [sic] ceased to belong in his own right to any legitimate social order" (5).

3. Hazel Carby, "White Woman Listen!: Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood," *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader*, ed. Houston A. Baker, Jr., Manthia Diawara, and Ruth H. Lindeborgh (Chicago, 1996), 61–86, 68.

4. Cheng, 7, 10.

5. Cheng, xi.

6. Cheng, xi.

7. Cheng, 7.

8. Cheng, 8, xi.

9. Cheng, 179.

10. Cheng, xi.

11. Cheng, xi.

12. Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia" [1917], *General Psychological Theory*, ed. Philip Rieff (New York, 1976), 161–78.

13. Cited by Piersen, 41.

14. Piersen, 41.

15. Cheng, 7.

16. Jacqueline Jones, "Race, Sex, and Self-Evident Truths: The Status of Slave-Women during the Era of the American Revolution," *Women in the Age of the American Revolution*, ed. Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert (Charlottesville, 1989), 293–377, 336.

17. See also Edgar McManus's discussion of Northern slave owners' aversion to fertility in their female slaves, as evidenced by their sale of fertile slaves, their preference for older (less fertile) slaves, and their charging of premiums for the sale of sterile bonds-women (*A History of Negro Slavery in New York* [Syracuse, 1966], 45).

18. Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia, 2004), 2, 7.

19. Morgan, 10.

20. Morgan, 10.

21. Cheng, xi.

22. Slaves constituted a noticeable segment of the population. Piersen notes that the clustering of New England's slaves in port cities enabled the development of a black sub-culture, detailing the percentage of New England counties that was black (enslaved and free): for example, about 10% of eighteenth-century Boston was black; 9% of New London, Connecticut; 17% of Newport, Rhode Island; and 4% of Portsmouth, New Hampshire (15–18).

23. William H. Robinson writes, "she was made to spend most of her waking time either reading or writing her 'poetic performances' before curious guests, or close beside her mistress reading and discussing the Bible, or visiting among ladies of Boston's first families" ("On Phillis Wheatley and Her Boston," *Phillis Wheatley and Her Writings*, ed. Robinson [New York, 1984], 3–69, 25). Discussing the loss to posterity of much of Phillis Wheatley's oeuvre, he notes further that we know we lack "the uncounted, because unknown, 'performances' Phillis wrote at the request of the likes of 'Mrs. Dickerson, Miss Clymer, Mrs. Bull with some other Ladys' mentioned in a letter by Deborah Cushing in 1774 to her husband in Philadelphia" (68).

24. The phrase "little black genius" is Robinson's: "Several visitors to the Wheatley home would be obliged by a persuasive Mrs Wheatley to listen to her little black genius recite an original poem, or two, or three" (23).

25. Cheng, 6.

26. Cheng, 147.

27. Cheng discusses these difficulties in relation to her reading of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée* (139–68). Rey Chow has similarly asserted the critical self-consciousness required by intellectuals describing "natives": we must do so "in such a way as to refuse the facile turn of sanctifying the defiled image with pieties and thus enriching ourselves precisely with what can be called the surplus value of the oppressed" ("Where Have All the Natives Gone?," *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies* [Bloomington, 1993], 27–54, 30). Cheng cites Chow to make a similar point (144).

28. Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1974), 133.

29. Mark Edelman Boren terms Wheatley's enslavement a "gilded cage" ("A Fiery Furnace and a Sugar Train: Metaphors that Challenge the Legacy of Phillis Wheatley's 'On Being Brought from Africa to America,'" *CEA Critic* 67, no. 1 [2004]: 38–56, 52). On its website, the Phyllis Wheatley Community Center [sic] of Childersburg, Alabama, describes the Wheatleys as having "adopted" their slave ("The Legacy that was Phyllis Wheatley," <http://phylliswheatleycommunitycenter.org/phylliswheatley.html>).

30. Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and Race in New Eng-*

land, 1780–1860 (Ithaca, 1998), 3. Melish notes further that “the location of the family as the site in which slave relations were enacted—in which difference was incorporated and yet stringently maintained—inevitably set up sexuality as a realm of contradiction” (29). See also Lorenzo Greene’s discussion of Massachusetts’s 1705 institution of laws against miscegenation (*The Negro in Colonial New England* [New York, 1968], 124–43).

31. Melish, 26.

32. Robinson, 15.

33. See Vincent Carretta’s discussion of the possible rationale for Wheatley’s return to Boston and slavery: her freedom “may well have been a concession manipulated by Wheatley from Nathaniel Wheatley in exchange for her promise to return to Boston to care for his mother, her mistress: one promise for another. In this negotiation, Wheatley had the stronger hand” (“Introduction,” Phillis Wheatley, *Complete Writings*, ed. Carretta [New York, 2001], xiii–xxxvii, xxvii).

34. Wheatley’s inability to find enough subscribers for her projected second volume is attributable to Revolutionary turmoil, as well as to Susanna Wheatley’s absence. I note also that Robinson urges skepticism about the scope of Wheatley’s late life poverty.

35. Mary Wheatley’s twin brother Nathaniel had relocated to London in 1773, seeking expansion for the family business of which he had assumed the head in 1771, on his father’s retirement.

36. Robinson notes that “one writer” reports that “Phillis helped to earn her keep by assisting in the teaching of the charges” (58).

37. Robinson, 64.

38. June Jordan, “The Difficult Miracle of Black Poetry in America, or Something Like a Sonnet for Phillis Wheatley,” *Some of Us Did Not Die: New and Selected Essays* (New York, 2002), 174–86, 177.

39. Alice Walker, “In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens,” *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens: Womanist Prose*, rev. ed. (1974; repr., New York, 2004), 231–43, 236–37.

40. Cheng, 7.

41. Melish, 29–30, 45–47. See also Shane White, “‘It Was a Proud Day’: African Americans, Festivals and Parades in the North, 1740–1834,” *Journal of American History* 81 (June 1994): 13–50; Greene, 249–55; and Melvin Wade, “Shining in Borrowed Plumage: Affirmations of Community in the Black Coronation Festivals in New England, 1750–1850,” *Western Folklore* 40 (July 1981): 211–31.

42. Melish, 48.

43. Mary Beth Norton, “‘My Resting Reaping Times’: Sarah Osborn’s Defense of Her ‘Unfeminine’ Activities, 1767,” *Signs* 2, no. 2 (Winter 1976): 515–29.

44. The Wheatleys may have done as they did because of the association of bequest to a slave with sexual impropriety. Melish records two such cases: “Lewis Lyron of Milford, Connecticut, who died in 1738, . . . devoted the bulk of his will to providing for the future comfort of a fifth slave, Bess, who is also manumitted” (30). In 1783, the wealthy Benjamin Bowen of Providence left the bulk of his large estate to his natural children and to his current mistress, his slave Sylvia, whom he also freed (126).

45. See Margaretta Matilda Odell, *Memoir and Poems of Phillis Wheatley, a Native African and a Slave* (Boston, 1834), <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/wheatley/menu.html>. Odell’s grandfather, Christopher Marshall, was a nephew of Susanna Wheatley’s (Robinson, 61).

46. Odell, 5.

47. Odell, 6–7.

48. Cheng, xi.

49. *The American Ladies’ Magazine*, vol. VII, ed. Mrs. S. J. Hale (Boston, 1834), 192.

50. Cheng, 10.

51. Odell, 23.

52. Cheng, xi.

53. Odell, 14–15.
54. Odell, 15, 10.
55. Odell, 12.
56. Melish, 26.
57. Odell, 21.
58. Odell, 16, 12.
59. Odell, 23.
60. Wheatley, Letter to Obour Tanner, March 21, 1774, *Complete Writings*, ed. Carretta (New York, 2001), 153.
61. Odell, 21.
62. Wheatley, "A Farewell to America. To Mrs. S. W.," 63.
63. Max Cavitch, *American Elegy: The Poetry of Mourning from the Puritans to Whitman* (Minneapolis, 2007), 191.
64. On Susanna Wheatley's shrewd placement of poems likely to incite interest in *Poems on Various Subjects* in London, and her attempted orchestration of a London publicity campaign, see Kirstin Wilcox, "The Body into Print: Marketing Phillis Wheatley," *American Literature* 71 (March 1999): 1–29.
65. Wheatley, "A Farewell to America," 62.
66. Wheatley, "A Farewell to America," 62.
67. Wheatley, "A Farewell to America," 63.
68. Wheatley, "A Farewell to America," 63.
69. Carretta, xxvii.
70. There are thirty-nine poems in *Poems on Various Subjects*, but I have not counted "A Rebus. By I. B." because it was not written by Wheatley. I have counted "To a Gentleman and Lady on the Death of the Lady's Brother and Sister, and a Child of Name Avis, aged one Year" twice, as both an elegy to adult siblings and to a child.
71. Cheng, 12.
72. Cheng, 12.
73. Robinson, 20.
74. "To a Clergyman on the Death of his Lady" amends this opening only slightly: "Where heav'nly music makes the arches ring" (Wheatley, 30).
75. Wheatley, "To the Rev. Mr. Pitkin on the Death of his Lady," 123.
76. "Pleasing to the mind or senses; agreeable; acceptable; welcome." The examples of usage cited by the *OED* include Alexander Pope's 1725 *Odyssey* ("In grateful sleep") and Charles Churchill's 1761 "Night" ("Then in Oblivion's grateful cup I drown The galling sneer").
77. Wheatley, "Pitkin," 123.
78. Wheatley, "Pitkin," 123..
79. Cheng, 178.
80. Wheatley, "Pitkin," 124.
81. Wheatley, "Pitkin," 124.
82. Wheatley, "Pitkin," 124.
83. Wheatley, "To a Clergyman," 32.
84. Annie Finch, "Phillis Wheatley and the Sentimental Tradition," in "The Transatlantic Poetess," ed. Laura Mandell, special issue, *Romanticism on the Net* 29–30 (February–May 2003), <http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/007723ar>, para. 13, para. 9.
85. Finch, para. 8.
86. Cavitch, 190.
87. Wheatley, "Pitkin," 124.
88. Melish, 26.
89. Wheatley, "To a Lady and her Children on the Death of Her Son and their Brother," 44.
90. Wheatley, "To a Lady," 44.
91. Wheatley, "To a Lady," 44.

92. Wheatley, "To a Lady," 44.

93. Wheatley, "To a Lady," 44.

94. Wheatley, "To a Lady," 44.

95. Carretta notes that proposals identify "the Lady" to whom the poem is addressed as Mrs. Boylston (179). Considering the question of Wheatley's own possible grief in response to the losses documented by her elegies, it is important to remember that many of Wheatley's elegies were written about people that Wheatley did not personally know, in response to requests from Boston worthies or by the command of Susanna Wheatley.

96. This inattention to gender is widely evident even in very astute recent criticism. To cite two small but telling examples: Daniel Cottom focuses closely on the "posture of submission" evident in Wheatley's "humbling submi[ssion]" of her poetry to the public, noting the similarity of this signature to that George Washington used when he replied to her letter to him of October 1775. Cottom notes that when Washington "subscribed himself her 'obedient and humble servant,' his words were of a different kind than hers when she so subscribed herself, even though in this instance the racial difference was bound to be formally unmarked," an assertion that is astounding in its inattention to gender (*Ravishing Tradition: Cultural Forces and Literary History* [Ithaca, 1996], 94). Similarly, Russell Reising's nuanced account of Wheatley's detractors and defenders repeats, without comment, Genovese's association of "dehumanization, emasculation, and self-hatred" in his praise of Genovese's early insight, in *Roll, Jordan, Roll* that accommodation need not exclude resistance. Reising writes, "the 'dehumanization, emasculation, and self-hatred' that Genovese demonstrates were avoided by slave-cultural discourses and practices tended to be those traits attacked by critics who perceive an accommodationist Wheatley"—wording that implies both the normative masculinity of freedom (or perhaps the normative freedom of men) and the inhumanity of submission (*Loose Ends: Closure and Crisis in the American Social Text* [Durham, 1997], 82).

Considering Wheatley's relation to eighteenth-century laboring-class women's poetry, Donna Landry notes the ways that versions of "biographical knowledge" about Wheatley has shaped readings of her work, making Wheatley an "extrem[e] case of contextual criticism: one whose work may at first sight seem totally conventional, and this perception changes (if it does change) only in the light of . . . the knowledge that the poet was a black, female slave" (*The Muses of Resistance: Laboring-Class Women's Poetry in Britain, 1739–1796* [New York, 1990], 252). Landry found "gender . . . less at stake than race and class in the poet's precarious 'soft captivity,'" a view that is underattentive of the anti-reproductivity of Northern slavery (253). Thus Landry finds irony in the circumstances of Wheatley's early death in the face of "those exigencies of gender which her writing tends to ignore": "Freed and married to the freedman John Peters at the age of 25, she was dead at 31, worn out by poverty, illness, and childbearing" (253). Certainly, childbirth for slaves, as for freewomen, in late eighteenth-century Boston was risky and potentially damaging to life or health. But Landry assumes too quickly here that being young and female imposed a trans-racial duty to reproduce: to be gendered female in the eighteenth century, her remark implies, is to face the likelihood of early death from childbearing, a view that is underattentive to the anti-reproductivity of Northern slavery tout court. That is, locating gender in the burden of child-bearing makes Wheatley's non-reproductivity as a slave seem both healthier and more conducive to writing poetry, a view that potentially naturalizes, even valorizes, the conditions of her life as a slave.

97. Jones, 336.

98. Cheng, xi.

99. Cavitch, 191.