The Black Aesthetic Unbound

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CONCLUDING REMARKS

What Is African in African American?

I am.
Because I am African, I can
Because I am African American, I will
For those who cannot, for those who can but won’t
For those whose struggle brought them to the grave
For them I’ll be brave,
For all the memories and shards and tears I can’t recover
For every mother, son, sister, papa, brother,
I’ve got to be, I’ve got to embrace forever and live within this eternity
For what I want to be but can’t I’ll be what I must
For those who don’t know love or trust, for those who have lost all hope
I will love and trust, and forget my fears just long enough to be who I am
Because I am African, I can
Because I am African American, I will
I will, I will, I will, I will, I will, I will
Be all that Phillis and Olaudah and Broteer Furro and Malcolm and Martin
and Angela and Assata and Lula and Ollie Brown put in me
For all they gave to me in my blood that’s thicker than a thousand oceans Atlantic wider
than any tears they cried,
Because I’ve no choice but to be beautiful and black and the woman my mother raised me to be
Because of those who died and bequeathed their legacy
For my loved ones who served in every war, every battle, every struggle
For those I could not or would not stand for or with,
For every breath that God has given me for everything and one I’ll ever be
And for every child that’s kin to me—and the village can’t be numbered with the sands of time
I remain African, I stand African and American against the violators of the rights of those who made America at the expense of Africa and everything it should have been—and Africa will be AGAIN because WE Africans will, we will, we will, we will, we will, we will, we will, we will
With worn bodies and torn lives, like our ancestors who administered broke but not broken, sick and tired but not too sick to fight, we will because we refuse to fail
Because I am African I must,
Because I am African American I will
For every land their peoples underdeveloped I will develop
I will mix my hand in dirt and sand and smell the water filled with blood and tears
And create with mud of time and ancestry and future destiny out of all that’s left inside of me
A world where—nothing’s wrong and everything is Right with being Black and Beautiful
and claiming all it means within and without
Because every African American’s soul cries out joyfully through the Middle Passage,
“We have returned, they said we wouldn’t, but we’ve survived
despite every chain, and
whip, and rope,
Despite the anger, and the hatred, and fear pressed upon us
Despite the blows we gave each other,
Despite the lost fathers and mothers and sisters and brothers,
Despite the maladies, starvation, hunger,
We will always be Africans together, we will stand and we will refuse
those who say
We are not African, We are not American,
We are not anything but the slaves and peasants of the Universe”
For we know better, we think harder, we work longer, we get
stronger
We will not forget whose we are, and we continue to steal ourselves
back
As one goes out the front door two come in the back
As two go out the back, four come through the front
We are more than just a memory, a song, a drum, a solitary voice
crying out
We are more than thousands gone, we are millions returned and
Because we are Africans,
Because we are African Americans
we will, We will, we Will, We will, we Will, We will, we Will

I want to contextualize this poem by way of capturing several intertextual moments that link Katherine Clay Bassard, Phillis Wheatley, and Maria Stewart with “Unbound.” This poem, which returns to the question with which I began in the prefatory remarks of this book, refers to my own experiences in the summer of 2001 upon visiting—making a pilgrimage, really—Gorée Island in Senegal West Africa. Unlike Bassard, I was absolutely looking for a “positivistic search for ‘roots’” (4). Moreover, I was looking for Wheatley’s roots—I haven’t found them yet (hers or mine). Nonetheless, Bassard’s initial reactions to her 1994 visit to the Cape Coast Castle in Ghana ring uncannily familiar. Beyond echoing Bassard’s expression of the sense of being suspended between Black Atlantic worlds, I would like to share something else about this experience. I found that the Atlantic Ocean from the African side of the Atlantic is so captivating—literally it takes your breath away—that once the sight of this water had impressed itself upon my memory, I could
remember little else for a long time. Indeed, even when I reflect upon it for longer than a few moments I am magically carried back to Dakar. Thus, my experience of the water in Senegal provides yet another intertextual link—to a memory of Wheatley’s own mother pouring water each morning.

“A Song for Senegal” was penned on the occasion of my home-going back to Africa. I went to Dakar in Senegal West Africa looking for Phillis and found a piece of myself I had been mourning all my life. Having just returned from one of several visits to Gorée Island, I began reflecting on Wheatley’s “On Being Brought from Africa to America.” Standing at the entrance to the smallest space in which captured children were collected before being boarded onto ships to take the horrible journey of the Middle Passage, I began to wonder how Wheatley must have felt, frail, frightened, and just a small child in a dark, damp enclosure. This space seemed to me unbearable for even one adult to endure for more than perhaps an hour or two, at best, let alone several small children for an extended period. The dark space has little light except for the small crevices that permit a hint of sun. Yet, even this small relief of light was probably not there during the slavery era. Instead, it appears the result of hundreds of years of wear and weather eroding the surfaces enough to create even the small hole in the wall. I stood in dread and awe of what had happened, of what young Wheatley and millions of others—my ancestors—had endured. Mere feet away I approached the door of no return. I stopped there to proclaim a victory, to announce to my ancestors that I had returned with the blood of our captors in my veins to pay homage and respect. Even now I am reminded of the cautions given to African Americans who make the pilgrimage to slave forts. They say you shouldn’t go alone—not at least the first time.

Thus, this occasional, elegiac myth of sufficiency is meant to honor Phillis Wheatley—whose creative urging prompted a search for her roots that uncovered shards of my own. I want to end with a final moment of unconscious intertextuality. When I was in Senegal writing this poem, I had not remembered Maria Stewart’s nineteenth-century call of racial uplift for black people to turn the “I cans” into “I wills.” Thus, what intertextually links (consciously or unconsciously) Bassard, Wheatley, Stewart, and myself are our diverse responses to a “spiritual interrogation.” For my part, as an African and an American I celebrate the enduring will and creative imagination of eighteenth-century African-descended writers like Wheatley who survived the Middle Passage and
lived to tell about it. “Unbound” honors their imaginative and combative spirit, and extends their willingness to do battle with things seen and unseen to—to confront the dilemma of a ghost. I end with this poetic reflection and contextualization where I began—suspended between Black Atlantic worlds still looking for Phillis.