This document is downloaded from DR-NTU (https://dr.ntu.edu.sg)
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

The Black Radical Tradition in The Age of Phillis — The Age of Phillis (Roundtable)

Plasencia, Sam

2021

Plasencia, S. (2021). The Black Radical Tradition in The Age of Phillis — The Age of Phillis (Roundtable). Studies in Religion and the Enlightenment, 2(2), 22-26.
https://dx.doi.org/10.32655/srej.2021.2.2.8

https://hdl.handle.net/10356/148553

https://doi.org/10.32655/srej.2021.2.2.8

© 2021 Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, & the Brigham Young University Faculty Publishing Service.

Downloaded on 12 Sep 2024 17:59:46 SGT

The Black Radical Tradition in The Age of Phillis—*The Age of Phillis* (Roundtable)

SAM PLASENCIA
Colby College

Honorée Fanonne Jeffers's *The Age of Phillis* (2020) is the culmination of nearly fifteen years of research on the eighteenth-century enslaved poetess Phillis Wheatley, who was manumitted in 1773 and married John Peters, a Boston grocer, five years later. In "Looking for Miss Phillis," the essay that concludes this collection of ninety-nine individually titled poems, Jeffers explains that she wrote this book because she got tired of waiting for someone to write a biography of Wheatley that discussed her "free lineage," including the family, customs, and cosmologies that informed her life before enslavement.[1] All existing biographies, including Vincent Carretta's carefully researched *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage* (2011), begin their treatment of Wheatley "at the Boston Harbor in 1761, with her disembarking a slave ship" (174). And what of her marriage to John Peters? Jeffers asks why literary historians "have entrusted the story of Phillis Wheatley and John Peters to a white woman [Margaretta Matilda Odell] who may have made assumptions about Wheatley's husband, assumptions that might not just be wrong, but also the product of racial stereotypes" (173). What if Wheatley wasn't a "sycophant" (180)? What if John Peters wasn't a "hustler" who abused and then abandoned Wheatley (180)? The extant archives do not support these depictions of Wheatley or Peters, and the only evidence of Odell's authorial claim to being a "collateral descendant" of the white Wheatleys is her claim itself.

We literary historians have thus put a tremendous amount of trust in Odell's authority—and yet there are ample reasons to question it. Besides the obviously racist ways in which Odell interprets a Black man who aspires for more than day laboring and her oxymoronic romanticizing of Phillis's privilege while enslaved by John and Susannah Wheatley, Jeffers's painstaking investigation of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century print records suggest that Odell may not have even written the biography. Advertisements for Odell's book, printed by the publisher George W. Light in a periodical he was also responsible for publishing, listed the *Memoir* without attributing it to an author. What's more, these advertisements appeared alongside advertisements for *another* Wheatley biography—*Memoir of Phillis Wheatley*—accredited to B. B. Thatcher, a Boston lawyer who published two books on Native Americans and creative work in *Godey's Lady's Book.* Repeated advertisements for the two memoirs continued to omit Odell's name. Some forty-plus years later, an anonymous footnote to volume 7 of *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* (1877) announces Odell as the author of the memoir, represents Thatcher as having edited it, and denies the existence of a second biography. Jeffers assembles a catalog of questions and possibilities in response to this confusing archival record—indisputably demonstrating that more research is needed and that, in the meantime, "the responsible, professional course of action would be to cease using Odell as a primary source for Wheatley Peters's life" (180).

In *The Age of Phillis*, Jeffers does just that. The result is a portrait of a daughter loved by her parents, traumatized by the transatlantic slave trade, ensnared in—and aware of—the complex affective relationships bred by enslavement, committed to a lifelong friendship with

1. Honorée Fanonne Jeffers. *The Age of Phillis.* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2020), 186. All subsequent citations will be notes parenthetically.

Studies in Religion and the Enlightenment 2, no. 2 (spring 2021)
ISSN: 2661-3336 | doi: 10.32655/srej.2021.2.2.8
© Sam Plasencia

another enslaved woman, excited by the swirling discourses of liberty, enamored by John Peters, and above all, consistently determined in love and life. One of Jeffers's enduring legacies will be her insistence that we stop referring to this African poetess by her enslaver's name and instead call her Phillis Wheatley Peters, the name of her choosing.

In, through, and around the retelling of Phillis Wheatley Peters's life, Jeffers weaves the stories, people, and philosophies of the late eighteenth century. The resulting collection portrays an intercontinental age, stitched together by the trades in Black bodies and racialized discourses (scientific, political, and religious). By positioning Wheatley Peters at the center of this epoch, Jeffers draws seemingly disparate worlds and spheres into the same orbit: Gambia and Boston, Yemoja and Christianity, the illustration of the British slave ship *Brookes* and letters from the Indigenous Christian missionary Samson Occum, Ona Judge (enslaved by Martha Washington) and the "Portrait of Dido Elizabeth Belle Lindsay," African prayers and the eighteenth-century sugar trade, the door of no return and descriptions of ravenous wolves in the tower of London, and Jeffersonian race science and the Kantian sublime. In these ways *The Age of Phillis* assembles the sights, sounds, tastes, smells, and touches of the Black diaspora as African-descended persons mingled with eighteenth-century art, philosophy, trade, tourism, families, and more.

What follows are some insights that emerged from a group of scholars engaging in a semester-long slow read of Jeffers's work. We were inspired by an online teach-in on "Race, Whiteness, and Pedagogy in the Long 18th Century" held in August 2020 and by the Society of Early Americanists' (SEA's) announcement of a Common Reading Initiative on *The Age of Phillis*, organized by Tara Bynum, Patrick Erben, Brigitte Fielder, Michelle Bachelor Robinson, and Cassander L. Smith. At every stage of our reading, we were enthralled and challenged by this poignant work, and in lieu of a more traditional book review, we share with you here some of our observations on method, structure, and content.

Critical Fabulation

We were struck by Jeffers's method, her beautiful weaving of historical fact and speculation, which reflects the kind of creative and scholarly blending that Saidiya Hartman has termed "critical fabulation." For Hartman, this form of narrativizing enables the researcher of enslaved persons to "tell an impossible story and to amplify the impossibility of its telling."[2] In Jeffers's work, critical fabulation takes a plethora of forms. One particularly striking and recurring form is the lost letter. *The Age of Phillis* contains twenty-five "lost letters"—imagined correspondences based on extant letters between Phillis Wheatley Peters and Susannah Wheatley, Samson Occom, Obour Tanner, and John Peters. In these poetic renditions of interpersonal exchanges, Jeffers typographically represents the epistle's text in standard type and intersperses the writer's thoughts in italics. In these italics, we hear Susannah Wheatley vitriolically insult Samson Occom as a "drunk painted creature" (55), Nathaniel Wheatley dismiss his mother's desire to manumit Wheatley Peters in light of the money that "white men would pay to hear and touch" her (113), Wheatley Peters articulate the pain of missing her family (57) and admit that she *does* "know" her African name but lies and says she doesn't (77). In these affective vignettes, readers encounter the performative niceties of a traditionally private form (letters) punctuated by uncouth, or unsafe, truths (thoughts). The melding destabilizes the presumption that letters express true thoughts and thus reminds us of "what cannot be known," even when archival records survive.[3] These lost letters are thus both speculative ventures into the mind of eighteenth-century figures and critical disruptions of historicist presumptions about knowability.

2. Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe*, 26, Vol. 12, No. 2, (June 2008): 1-14, 11.
3. Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 4

At other times, Jeffers's critical fabulation is more cautious, as in the poem "Phillis Wheatley Peruses Volumes of the Classics Belonging to Her Neighbor the Reverend Mather Byles." From the outset, the narrative voice conjectures through conditional statements: "I hope that the days Phillis walked / across the street or around the corner / to explore the reverend's library, / she was escorted by Mary or Susannah" (47). Other lines describe how the "reverend might" have quizzed her (47), and they again express "hope" that if Wheatley Peters was left alone with the reverend, "there was no danger" and he "was a gentleman" (48). In such poems the unnamed speaker assumes the position of questioning researcher, grappling with what's left of the historical record to understand archival omissions. At times, this grappling comes in the form of conditional verbs. At other times, it comes through questions that may never be answered, such as when the speaker of "Fathering #2" asks: "Or was it the husband who purchased / the little girl? I've thought on this for many / years: how might a wife, a respectable, / white lady, go down to the docks / and complete a fleshy transaction?" (43). In these poems, Jeffers makes use of conditionals to imagine behaviors, events, and even spaces—like in the poem "Desk of Mary Wheatley, Where She Might Have Taught the Child (Re)named Phillis to Read." This method enables Jeffers to move seamlessly between the scales of personal and political, letter and epic journeys, all while undermining these distinctions both formally and thematically.

The work Jeffers does here with and through critical fabulation is reminiscent of Hartman's most recent work, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls and Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals* (2020), which was published less than two months before Jeffers's *The Age of Phillis.* Though Hartman writes in prose and Jeffers in verse, both thinkers make powerful use of speculation to represent Black women whose intimate histories have been lost, expunged, or were never recorded. Informed by rigorous archival research, these texts hover between historicism and creative writing, disrupting the disciplinary boundaries that began coagulating in the late eighteenth century and that have since aided and abetted the institutionalized erasure of Black lives and voices.

Black Joy

As someone who routinely teaches early African American literature to undergraduates, I am perpetually frustrated by how easy it is for students to talk about Black death when they are, as I have learned, virtually silent on matters related to Black life. Questions about Black pleasure, survival tactics, mutual aid, and family seem to fall on deaf ears while there is always a queue waiting to speak on the travesty of enslavement and the breaking of families. Put differently, students can see and recognize how Black persons in the long eighteenth century were socially dead whether they were enslaved or free: powerless, generally dishonored, and alienated from birth.[4] But they cannot, to borrow Jared Sexton's formulation, see the social life of social death or the ways through which peoples of the Black diaspora have made a way out of no way.[5]

What makes Jeffers's text so powerful is that she deploys critical fabulation to portray the social life of social death. Take for example the speculative "Free Negro Courtship #1" and "Free Negro Courtship #2," in which the first-person speaker tells us how they imagine the courtship between Phillis Wheatley and John Peters unfolding. Nestled into the "Book: Love," amidst lost letters in which Susannah Wheatley urges Wheatley Peters "never to marry or bear / children" these poems offer the excitement of budding love (121). "I like to dream," begins the narrator in the first of the two poems, "that Phillis and John stepped / in a time that didn't pay mind / to the sounds of Boston" (125). In the imaginative space of the

---

4. Orlando Paterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982.

5. Jared, Sexon, "The Social Life of Social Death," *Tensions Journal* 5 (Fall/Winter 2011): 1–47.

poem and the literal page on which it is printed, Black sociality, desire, and pleasure are given precedence: the lovers' discourse is represented as a "sanctuary," John Peters's is "impatient . . . to touch the kinks beneath her cap," "a sister" may have been "sought out" to intercede on his behalf and pass along a letter, and this same sister may have given "John a sign that Phillis / was allowing him to court her" (125). Although the specter of enslavement looms in the background, such as when John Peters "wished in vain for gold to give her, / the bride price to press his suit, / as he might have across the water," the focal point is Black love and courtship (125). The focus on social death is again refused in "Free Negro Courtship #2," when the narrator states, "I'm unafraid of watered memories, / but this is a poem in which tragedy / can't be invoked" (127). The reader is then taken to "the side alley off Queen Street" where, for "the first time, a careful kiss / between two sets of black lips" took place (127). In this space "Phillis and John" stood, "breathing together" (125). These are moments of stolen life, which Fred Moten has recently described as acts that fugitivity cut through the fabric of anti-blackness.[6] These poems remind us that Wheatley Peters laughed, loved, desired, and felt pleasure, excitement, and hope—before, during, and after enslavement.

Jeffers thus intertwines representations of trauma with the social life of social death. We're invited to bear witness to Wheatley Peters's baptism and her friendship with Obour Tanner (whom she addresses as "Sister of My Nation"). We learn about the muses who may have inspired her and undoubtedly inspired Jeffers. We watch her walk the streets of London and visit "that place of curiosity / in the Tower" of London (107). In "Book: Liberty," we read of her marriage to John Peters and their physical enjoyment of each other. In "Catalogue: Revolution," we read "Fragment #3: First Draft of an Extant Letter" from Wheatley Peters to George Washington, in which her italicized and crossed-out thoughts express her inalienable freedom and censure him for vacillating between tyrant and gentleman "~~*depending on his moods or his money*~~" (139). And we bear witness to love letters between Phillis and John, who was imprisoned for debt—he didn't abandon her. In poetically rendering the fullness of Wheatley Peters's life, especially with John Peters, Jeffers challenges, simultaneously, the homogeneously tragic renditions of enslaved women and the Odellian tale of a privileged servant destroyed by a bad marriage.

Jeffers also focalizes Black merriment, love, and companionship in ways that extend beyond Wheatley Peters. For example, she writes a poem on the "Portrait of Dido Elizabeth Belle Lindsay, Free Mulatto, and Her White Cousin, the Lady Elizabeth Murray, Great-Nieces of William Murray, First Earl of Mansfield," wherein "the lowest are taller" and Dido is "full of girlhood" (66–67). In another poem, "Illustration: A Mungo Macaroni / A Black Englishman of Sartorial Splendor," Jeffers celebrates a man who, within the white archival record, remains only as satire: "I confess," he says, "I am vainglorious. / I snatch after life / as I please, bespoke / or nothing else— / thrills loosed / from silver collars" (109). "Silver collars" refers to the decorative, dog-like collars wealthy English women and men forced their enslaved persons to wear. This man, loosening pleasure from the aesthetic technologies of antiblackness, paradigmatically exemplifies Moten's notion of "stolen life." Though no extant letters from Obour Tanner to Wheatley Peters exist, Jeffers imagines them back into being and with them the comfort only one enslaved woman could offer another. "My Dearest Sister," Tanner writes, "Spell me how you wish, for you have saved me. / Before your letter, no one gave a care for my name" (78). Tanner tells of the day she met Wheatley Peters, on the pier, as "naked, shivering brethren" were marched off ships. Triggered, she "dropped [her] basket of dinner fish" but found comfort in Wheatley Peters, whose "breath / calmed and we stood with no explanation" (78). In another letter, Tanner reminisces of "the gold my mother wore / around her neck and in her ears" (153). This friendship is a refuge, a space of

6. Fred Moten, *Stolen Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

safety, comfort, and shared history. And while much of that shared history is traumatic, the act of sharing it is relieving, a space of social life carved through the fabric of social death.

The Age of Phillis is a body of work born of the Black Radical Tradition and is thus itself a testament to and manifestation of Black life. The text is rife with intertextual references to a long tradition of Black artists and activists. At one register are all the Black writers of Wheatley Peters's age whose lives, unrecorded thoughts, and printed words are woven across the book: Phillis Wheatley Peters, Obour Tanner, Anton Wilhelm Amo, Lemuel Haynes, Belinda Sutton (who petitioned the courts for old age pension), Felix (an unidentified Black man who petitioned the Massachusetts General Court for freedom), Crispus Attucks (a Black and Indigenous man killed during the Boston Massacre), Salem Poor (who fought in the Revolutionary War), and Harry Washington (a fugitive from enslavement who escaped to Novia Scotia). Then there are all the Black artists cited by way of epigraphs: Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Robert Hayden, Lucille Clifton, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Margaret Walker, and Marcus Rediker. There are also intertextual homages made to Black artists whose work thematically and structurally marks *The Age of Phillis*: Dionne Brand, M. NourbeSe Philip, Robert Coste Lewis, and Tyehimba Jess, to name just a few. To these literary, political, theological, and philosophical thinkers could be added the names of countless others whose existences inflect the text—stretching it backwards to precolonial Africa and forward to today. I've just scratched the surface of what this book has to offer scholars and instructors. But in all the ways I have described, and so many more I have yet to learn, *The Age of Phillis* is a love letter to African traditions, diasporic histories, and Blackness.