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# The Age of Phillis and Collage —*The Age of Phillis* (Roundtable)

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As I told our group at one of the first meetings, I was approaching Jeffers's poems as someone who had taught Wheatley Peters to undergraduates, but without much success. Wheatley Peters seemed to cause (I seemed to cause) a mix of discomfort and strained, dutiful attention in my "diverse" classes featuring mostly white authors. Students sometimes expressed frustration, too, at the disconnect between the tragedies, losses, and displacements summarized in the biographies and the formal constructions and tone of the poetry. My attempts to provide context also fell flat. The parallels to Pope and the bare biographical summaries did not help. Introducing responses to her from poets like Amiri Baraka and the Black Arts Movement made things even less comfortable, because I had not made any connections between those poets, their situations, and their poetics in our class.

Reading, teaching, then reflecting on and discussing Jeffers's *The Age of Phillis* has helped me understand how much I was shortchanging Wheatley Peters's poetry, and it gave me a better grasp of Jeffers's own poetics: the first step was trying to understand the earlier poet's biography, as partial and fragmented as it is, in its fullest social implications. Jeffers's research and commentaries reconstructed the earlier poet's life and experiences as an active member of Boston's Black community, free and enslaved; as a person who lost one family, lived with another, and then attempted to create her own family with the husband whose name she chose to assume; and as a kind of public curiosity but also correspondent with both public figures (e.g., George Washington and Samson Occom) and members of her own local and religious networks. Seeing her operating within and between these networks made an enormous difference in the way the earlier poems could be read and then interwoven with Jeffers's own poetic reconstruction of her life and work. This interweaving is how the "critical fabulation" theorized by Hartman begins to supply the missing connections of Wheatley Peters's fragmentary documentary record. Jeffers takes Wheatley Peters's life seriously enough to imagine the child's existence prior to her abduction and the fully grown woman who survived enslavement and found attachment and perhaps even romantic love amidst a precarious freedom. Biography does not solve all interpretive problems, but the problem of regarding her perpetually as a dependent young girl certainly limits our view of her entire poetic career.

Reading Jeffers's poems reminded me of how some poets and poems really blossom under our attention when isolated and placed in anthologies, and others are ill served. *The Age of Phillis* really demonstrates how inadequate those anthology-based readings have been for a subtle, understated poet like Wheatley Peters.

Instead of the flat, compartmentalized narration of a life and context, and a dutiful chronological march through the most familiar poems, in *The Age of Phillis*, we plunge in media res into an invocation of the "Mother/Muse," who is conjured up in her "Prologue" via an epigraph from Langston Hughes: "This is a song of the genius child / Sing it softly, for the song is wild" (2).<sup>1</sup> Then, we are transported to a scene of an African mother and daughter in a

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1. Jeffers's "Prologue" takes its epigraph from Hughes's poem, "Genius Child," in *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, ed. Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel (Knopf, 1994), 198.

poem whose title, “An Issue of Mercy #1” hangs on the most notorious line of Wheatley Peters’s best known and least comforting religious poem, “On Being Brought from Africa to America”: “‘Twas mercy that brought me from my *Pagan* land.”<sup>2</sup>

Jeffers’s point of entry, in her opening poem “An Issue of Mercy #1,” gives us a newly imagined view of that “*Pagan* land,” as seen through the eyes of the child rather than the young poet:

*Mercy, girl,*

What the mother might have said, pointing

at the sun rising, what makes life possible.

Then, dripped the bowl of water,

Reverent, into oblivious earth.

Was this prayer for her?

Respect for the dead or disappeared?

An act to please *a genius child?* (3).

In a scene that hinges on the hardest, least intelligible word in an eighteenth-century poem that confidently asserts a “fortunate fall,” *mercy* in Jeffers’s “Issue” becomes the exclamation of an exasperated African mother, whose rituals and ceremonies are registered but only partially understood by the young girl. Nonetheless, this young girl, “*a genius child*,” will soon enough be regarded as “dead or disappeared.” Was the mother’s prayer for her? The young girl will never find out.

*Mercy*, what the child called Phillis

Would claim after that sea journey.

*Journey.*

Let’s call it that.

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2. Phillis Wheatley, “On Being Brought From Africa to America,” in *Complete Writings*, ed. Vincent Carretta (New York: Penguin Classics, 2001), 13.

Let's lie to each other. (3)

Jeffers's narratorial voice takes command here and makes *mercy* the term that the earlier poet "would *claim* after that sea journey" (my emphasis). Jeffers's stress on the poet's "claim" upon our moral judgment transforms our understanding of the term "mercy" in Wheatley Peters's poem, so that it sheds its appearance of servility or compliance. Instead, Jeffers helps us view Wheatley Peters's assertion that "mercy" had brought her to America is an act of mature reflection of the older toward the younger self. It is an act of self-forgiveness, from someone old enough to understand how she has been stolen from and lied to. To produce this alternative reading of *mercy*, however, Jeffers suggests how profoundly the earlier poet's story had been truncated from its first moments of circulation and publication.

Jeffers's poetics goes beyond quotation and rises to the level of collage, which I think of as an antianthology. Elements of Wheatley Peters's history, her conflicting strands of biography, the key words and phrases of her poems and letters can be detached from a sometimes lying historical context and muddled historical record and remade and reconfigured to show something of the epic journey of "*a genius child*" who grew up to sing her own soft but wild song.