November 3, 2021

Dear Members of the UC Santa Barbara “Slavery, Captivity, and the Meaning of Freedom” Research Focus Group,

Thank you for reading this draft of “Phillis Wheatley’s Desire to Look,” which derives from my dissertation on aesthetics, race, and sexuality during the long nineteenth century.

The essay argues that Phillis Wheatley (Peters) recasts eighteenth-century aesthetic philosophy in three ekphrastic poems: “Niobe in Distress for her Children slain by Apollo, from Ovid’s Metamorphoses, Book Vi. and from a view of the Painting of Mr. Richard Wilson,” the unpublished manuscript “Ocean,” and “To S. M. a young African Painter, on seeing his Works.” Given my analysis of literature, history, and visual culture, the opportunity to present this work-in-progress to an interdisciplinary community such as this is very much appreciated. Thank you in advance!

I look forward to what promises to be a productive workshop.

Chip Badley
The Feast of Genius and the Play of Art:
Phillis Wheatley’s “Desire to Look”

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(Draft: Please do not quote or circulate without permission.)

O that I could meditate continually on this work of wonder in Deity itself. This, which Kings & Prophets have desir’d to see, & have not See[n.] This, which Angels are continually exploring, yet are not equal to the search,—Millions of Ages shall roll away, and they may try in vain to find out to perfection, the sublime mysteries of Christ’s Incarnation. Nor will this desir[e] to look into the deep things of God, cease, in the Breasts of glorified Saints & Angels. It’s [sic] duration will be coeval with Eternity. This Eternity how dreadful[,] how delightful!

Phillis Wheatley to John Thorton, December 1, 1773 (Writings 112)

By concluding “On being brought from Africa to America” with the suggestion that “Negros, black as Cain, / May be refin’d, and join th’ angelic train” (Writings 56, lines 7–8), Phillis Wheatley defines refinement in terms of racial difference.¹ When Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral was published in 1773, to become “refin’d” would entail becoming fluent in aesthetics, a discourse that involved the study of critical judgment of works of art that involved the emerging categories of taste and refinement. Coinciding with the increasing importation of luxury goods and aesthetic texts in British North America, Wheatley’s poetry reveals how people in colonial New England asserted refinement on the basis of appreciating, and even possessing, the fine arts.² By referencing “th’ angelic train” of “refin’d” individuals, Wheatley acknowledges the power and intellectual authority that refinement entails: in the case

¹ Honorée Fanonne Jeffers’ recent Twitter thread justifies referring to the poet as Phillis Wheatley Peters in order to acknowledge Peters’ conscious decision to marry John Peters in 1778. That being said, my analysis is based upon poetry published in 1773—five years before her marriage. Because contemporary audiences would read the name “Phillis Wheatley” on the collection’s title page, I refer to her by this name.

of “On Being Brought from Africa to America,” it is the “scornful eye” that views “our sable race” (line 5) with contempt. As Terry Eagleton argues, spectatorship was “a bourgeois concept . . . hatched and nurtured in the Enlightenment” that encompassed “a varied span of preoccupations: freedom and legality, spontaneity and necessity, self-determination, autonomy, particularity and universality, along with several others” (3). Yet as Simon Gikandi has recently demonstrated, the era of refinement coincided with the era of chattel slavery. As Gikandi succinctly writes, “slavery informed and haunted the project of taste” (108–09). This paradox between sensibility and slavery exposes, I would suggest, the role visual culture played in portraying and justifying racial hierarchies of the eighteenth century. Given aesthetic philosophers’ emphasis upon the mental and cognitive faculties involved in appreciating a work of art, racist attitudes regarding the intellectual capacity of people of color—especially enslaved people of African descent in British North America—established that “modern subjects were those individuals who were capable of using their faculties of reason and judgment in the conduct of human affairs” (Gikandi 4). To a large extent, Wheatley reiterates this stance in writing that “Negros, black as Cain, / May be refin’d.” Hence for Wheatley, refinement and taste are constructs rather than innate faculties that can be cultivated through the reading and writing of belles lettres.

Wheatley’s ekphrastic poems simultaneously derive and depart from Enlightenment aesthetic philosophy. Significantly, Wheatley posits refinement as something more than a source of leisure; rather, she foregrounds the pleasurable and embodied dimensions of looking, especially when it comes to beholding women (as in “Niobe in Distress for her Children slain by

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3 Since people of African descent were defined, according to Gikandi, “as nonsubjects in European discourses on art, culture, and taste, African slaves were not capable of reflection, and because they were incapable of reflection they fell short of subjeethood” (225).
Apollo, from Ovid’s Metamorphoses, Book Vi. and from a view of the Painting of Mr. Richard Wilson”; landscapes (as in the unpublished manuscript “Ocean”); and paintings (as in “To S. M. a young African Painter, on seeing his Works”). Arguably the first writer to popularize ekphrasis within eighteenth-century North American poetry, Wheatley drew upon the *ut pictura poesis* (“as is painting, so is poetry”) tradition that compares the so-called “sister arts” of painting, poetry, and sculpture.4 The three ekphrastic poems at the heart of this essay—“Niobe in Distress,” “Ocean,” and “To S. M.”—reveal Wheatley’s extensive knowledge of belletristic writing she likely studied in colonial Boston.5 One of the most popular genres of neoclassical poetry, ekphrasis dramatized spectators narrating their impressions and responses to a work of art. Ekphrasis exerted considerable influence upon eighteenth-century literature, in part because it offered authors an opportunity to assert their knowledge of the literary canon by alluding to historical events, artists, and cultural texts. As suggested by Wheatley’s three ekphrastic poems, she was well-versed in contemporary aesthetic culture. Especially when it comes to the type of observation that Immanuel Kant refers to as “disinterestedness”—a mode of impartial observation to which I will return—and the role of sympathetic witnessing, Wheatley situates visual perception as a modality rife with ethical (and thus political) potential. Yet at the same time, these poems mark a profound shift by imagining a distinctly Black female spectator based upon Wheatley herself.6 As beholders rather than people who are beheld, these poems’ personae assert refinement by narrating their aesthetic experiences.

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4 On the history of “ut pictura poesis” from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries, see Lee. The Reverend Mather Byles’ *Poems on Various Occasions* (1744) exerted considerable influence upon Wheatley, especially “To Pictorio, on the Sight of His Pictures,” which is considered the first known ekphrastic poem published in North America. See Distel; Hill 38–41; Slauder (2013) 99.

5 Wheatley had access to three of the largest libraries in New England: the Reverend Mather Byles’, the governor Thomas Hutchinson’s, and the clergyman Thomas Prince’s (Shields 1980 99).

6 Despite the significant autobiographical overtones of *Poems*, I refer to the speakers of these three poems as lyric personae rather than Wheatley herself.
For Wheatley to imagine a gaze that departs from the implicitly white and male perspective associated with Enlightenment aesthetics speaks to her desire to forge what the decolonial theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff refers to as “the right to look.” As defined by Mirzoeff, the right to look rests upon “the claim to a subjectivity that has the autonomy to arrange the relations of the visible and the sayable” (1). Crucially, Mirzoeff argues that the right to look originates in the North American plantation complex (ca. 1660–1860), since it rests upon the ability to surveil and police bodies in a fundamentally asymmetrical dynamic.\(^7\) For Mirzoeff, the figure of the plantation overseer metonymically embodies the right to look, as the overseer enforces power by observing and disciplining bodies (48–76). By contrast, Wheatley’s poetry develops what she calls, in this essay’s epigraph, her “desir[e] to look into the deep things of God, cease, in the Breasts of glorified Saints & Angels.” By employing “look” in a figurative sense as a metaphor for understanding rather than the literal act of watching, Wheatley’s phrasing reveals the extent to which sight and knowledge are entwined in the Western philosophical tradition.\(^8\) This conjunction between visual and cognitive perception speaks to, I would argue, the urgency with which she explores “the right to look” as a form of countervisuality that can behold the beauty of art as well as the world at large. In this regard, Wheatley’s ekphrastic poems lay claim to a poetic sensibility seldom afforded to people of African descent localized in terms of ekphrastic description.

This essay intervenes in recent scholarship concerning the relation between visual culture and racial hierarchies in American literature. As art historians and literary critics have persuasively argued, visual media has played a foundational role in shaping and perpetuating

\(^{7}\) In this regard, Mirzoeff anticipates Simone Browne’s work, which examines “blackness as a key site through which surveillance is practiced, narrated, and enacted” (9).

\(^{8}\) See Crary, Rorty. On the rise of aesthetic philosophy in the eighteenth century, see Kristeller.
rational logics of appearance and identity. In part derived from physiognomy and phrenology, visual culture encouraged audiences to scrutinize bodies for signs of identity in ways that anticipate what Christopher Lukasik calls the “racialized viewing” (449) practices of the nineteenth century. Especially after the invention of the daguerreotype in 1839, audiences and artists regarded commercial photography as a theoretically objective medium that could reflect subjects as they were and was soon coopted in order to perpetuate racist stereotypes under the auspices of scientific photography. Yet despite this considerable discussion regarding the daguerreotype and photograph, comparatively little has been written regarding the origins of racialized visual culture to be found in eighteenth-century painting and portraiture. Wheatley’s ekphrastic poetry helps us see how aesthetic philosophy forged whiteness in terms of the ability to look without being seen—a racialized form of spectatorship that inflects picturesque paintings that romanticize the plantation as well as portraits of white enslavers that exoticize and fetishize people of African descent. Similarly, this also appears in the rise of the so-called “fugitive slave advertisement” genre, which often relied upon stock imagery and literally stereotypical woodcut illustrations to render specific people into an interchangeable, often androgynous, slave.

Wheatley’s poetry marks a crucial transition between neoclassical and Romantic theories of the imagination. As Eric Slauter argues, Wheatley’s poems reflect a broader shift from imitative theories of adaptation to an investment in originality and subjective perception. Whereas Mirzoeff’s “right to look” signals a belief in the ability to surveil bodies for signs of

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9 See Cutter, Lukasik, Smith.
10 See Fox-Amato, Wallis.
11 On visual culture and representations of slavery in the eighteenth century, see Gikandi, Kriz, Lacey, Tobin, Wood 27–70.
12 On the iconography of fugitive slave advertisements, see Blackwood 48–78, Block, Lacey.
13 Slauter (2009) 176–79. On the history of this transition, see Abrams.
inner character, Wheatley’s “desire to look” acknowledges the limits of what can be observed. Her fictionalized spectators grapple with disorienting impressions that problematize the notion that the world and other people can be scrutinized by visual perception alone. Rather, the subjects of these poems—Niobe, the ocean, a painter—fascinate lyric personae because they remain enigmatic and complex. Wheatley’s ekphrastic poetry thus envisions, however tentatively, a different type of visual perception that can accommodate ineffable or opaque sentiment. In this regard, Wheatley resists critical disinterestedness by portraying spectators who take an active interest in what they behold. These poems venture beyond the racial and gendered hierarchies associated with visuality in the eighteenth century by staging nonverbal exchanges that poetry, rather than painting, can convey. In these poems, Wheatley foregrounds her embodied presence as an enslaved woman of African descent who, at the time of her collection’s publication, was unlikely to be included or considered in the sensus communis of belles lettres.14 By dramatizing a “desire to look” upon art and the world, Wheatley conceives of visual perception as a willed activity—a “desire” that possesses an implicitly embodied, even sexualized, tint.

At stake in these ekphrastic poems is the notion of who possesses the right to look. This essay explores the contradictions between spectatorship and enslavement, since Wheatley’s assertion of her “right” or “desire” to look acknowledges, I would argue, the tensions between the intellectual freedom her lyric personae possess and their author’s quite literal captivity at the time of these poems’ composition. This essay thus concludes by analyzing the frontispiece portrait that accompanied the first edition of *Poems* published in 1773. Although she was manumitted sometime between September-October 1773—virtually simultaneously with the

14 Kant defines the “sensus communis” as a sense of community borne of shared critical faculties and judgments (173–76).
publication of *Poems*—the frontispiece’s caption identifies Wheatley as a “Negro Servant” rather than as an author, effectively reversing the ekphrastic poems. By rendering Wheatley as a spectacle rather than a spectator, the frontispiece and its caption claims Wheatley as one who has partaken in “the feast of Genius.” The mark of this “Genius” is what she calls “the play of Art” (“Ocean,” *Writings*, line 2): the pleasures of aesthetic experience that are felt rather than seen. Such intricacies help us better see how visuality shaped race and gender—not to mention the emergence of a modern sexuality—established by the visibility, or lack thereof, of bodies. Wheatley’s poetry reveals how ekphrasis provided a means for articulating, and even declaring, attachments that would otherwise go unclaimed by observers.

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“Niobe in Distress” recasts the gendered tradition of ekphrasis to depict a female beholder gazing upon another woman. As W. J. T. Mitchell and James A. W. Heffernan (6–7) claim, the historical tradition of ekphrasis typically foregrounds a male spectator’s perspective gazing upon a painted or sculpted woman. Indeed, Wheatley is one of the earliest female writers who represents same-sex beholding between women. “Niobe in Distress” draws upon Wheatley’s formative trip to London in 1773, when she first saw William Woollett’s 1761 engraving (fig. 1) of Richard Wilson’s painting, *Destruction of the Children of Niobe* (1760). To describe “What *Wilson* painted, and what *Ovid* wrote” (line 6), Wheatley turns to her knowledge of the gendered domains of classical mythology, neoclassical poetics, and London’s flourishing art world focalized in the Royal Academy of Arts (founded by Sir Joshua Reynolds in 1768). Embarking

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15 When Wheatley arrived in London in 1773, Wilson’s painting was privately displayed at the Duke of Cumberland’s estate. See Carretta 105; DuBois Shaw 35; Slauter (2009) 200.
upon an artistic pilgrimage similar to those of the North American painters Benjamin West and John Singleton Copley (who traveled to London in 1763 and 1774 respectively), Wheatley asserts her cosmopolitan status by providing an ekphrastic account of Wilson’s painting using belles-lettristic terminology and conventions. But although the lyric persona watches Niobe’s downfall from the perspective of a sympathetic viewer, she acknowledges that Niobe too possesses a desire to look. After she “turns around her lofty eyes” (line 61) to gaze upon her children, the queen couches her maternal pride in terms of the sight of her children, remarking that “Wher’er I turn my eyes vast wealth I find” (line 73). However, Niobe’s “indignant eyes” (line 163) shift from adoration to “anger and surprize” (line 164) as she reaches her inevitable conclusion. The poem crystallizes Niobe’s tragedy as a succinct image that returns back to her eyes: “She weeps” (line 176). But in exploring the sentiment behind Niobe’s “streaming eyes” (line 181), Wheatley stages Niobe as something more than a static image.

That Wheatley’s “wondéring sight” beholds a woman twice described as “beautiful in woe” (lines 10 and 175) suggests the implicitly and prototypically queer valence of the desire to look. The speaker describes the “Phrygian queen” (line 10) in richly evocative tones:

Her Phrygian garments of delightful hue,
Inwove with gold, refulgent to the view
Beyond description beautiful she moves
Like heav’nly Venus, ’midst her smiles and loves (lines 55–58)

By describing Niobe’s body and movement, the speaker presents her subject as a living force that moves “beyond description beautiful.” Under the auspices of neoclassical convention, the poem imagines same-sex intimacy in terms of visual pleasure rather than sexual desire, as the narrator spends considerable time contemplating her desire to look upon Niobe. But whereas Tom O. McCulley proposes that Wheatley’s relation to queer literature lies in her “power to create new and fluid identities outside of the normative restrictions placed on an ‘othered’ body” (205), I
would suggest that her ekphrastic poetry offers a more capacious understanding of gender and sexuality. By inhabiting the traditionally male perspective associated with her poetic predecessors, Wheatley narrates the visual pleasure associated with beholding beautiful women.

We might consider the length of “Niobe in Distress,” then, as foundational to the poem’s meandering exploration of visual perception. As the poem details the spectator’s shifting perception of the queen, Niobe plays a variety of theatrical roles: tragic heroine, object of pity, and beautiful muse. Anticipating the interracial romantic friendships in James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) and Catharine Maria Sedgwick’s *Hope Leslie* (1827), “Niobe” stages same-sex relations in tandem with racial difference.

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16 According to McCulley, Wheatley “mirrored [the] nation’s expressed desire for freedom for all its people back onto itself in ways that directly speak to the attempts by lesbians and gay men to do the same today” (199).
In depicting the lyric persona’s sustained engagement with the figure and story of Niobe, Wheatley recasts the impartial disinterestedness that Kant develops in *Critique of Judgment*. Kant defines this synthesis as “disinterested” spectatorship (107–08), which relies upon the boundary between aesthetic and ordinary experience. Disinterested spectators approach the aesthetic realm as a domain apart from daily life, one in which a disinterested spectator can gaze upon, but ultimately remain autonomous from, a work of art. Although capable of being moved by the beautiful or the sublime, the disinterested spectator, according to Kant, judges “an object . . . through a satisfaction or dissatisfaction without any interest” (96). Aesthetic pleasure thus
derives from a spectator’s impression of a work of art rather than the formal qualities of a work of art. Thus understood, refinement and taste signaled a form of impartial observation that could feel, but ultimately transcend, sentiment as defined by the relationship between spectator and art. By cultivating a sense of impartial detachment that privileges a spectator’s internal representation of a work of art as opposed to the work itself, Kant lays the groundwork for considering the relation between disinterestedness and the right to look, in that white spectatorship rests upon perceiving people of color as objects rather than subjects. Thus understood, belles lettres gradually aligned spectatorship with whiteness by establishing the enslaved and people of African descent as spectacles to be seen.

The longest poem in the collection at 224 lines, “Niobe in Distress” models a form of sympathetic spectatorship that unfolds in the shifting vicissitudes of thought rather than in a static glance. The poem instructs its readers to look upon scenes with an intimacy that keeps us proximate to the painting. The speaker insists that we look at what she sees, such as when she prompts her reader to “See in [Niobe’s] hand the regal sceptre shine” (line 13). We accompany the narrator as she roams the image, even venturing so far as to imagine for ourselves what she envisions when placing herself in Niobe’s perspective, such as when Niobe basks in the pleasure of thinking about her “fair offspring” (line 32), whose “charms exceed Aurora’s teint” (line 33) and which “No words could tell” and “no pencil paint” (line 34). In this regard, “Niobe” considers spectatorship as an activity in which spectators become lost in thought. Just as Niobe gazes upon her children, the spectator looks upon Niobe and attempts to understand her perspective. “Wherever, Niobe, thou turn’st thine eyes,” she remarks, “New beauties kindle, and new joys arise!” (lines 29–30). The length of “Niobe” offers the chance to experience a variety of sensations and impressions that evolve as the narrative progresses so that visual perception
involves multiple, intersecting impressions. Significantly, these “new beauties” and “new joys” are characterized by sensual, rather than intellectual, pleasure:

The rich perfumes ascend in waving spires,
And altars blaze with consecrated fires;
The fair assembly moves with graceful air,
And leaves of laurel bind the flowing hair. (lines 49–52)

The longer the lyric persona observes the image, the more she foregrounds her partial, tangible perspective. If disinterested spectatorship “involves a radical decentering of the subject, subduing its self-regard to a community of sensibility with others” (Eagleton 39), Wheatley claims proximity as foundational to perception. Visuality hence constitutes the basis of relationality rather than the ability to look away.17

Yet despite the temporal and sensual complexity of these earlier passages, the poem’s final stanza presents Niobe as a static, idealized sculpture that underscores, by contrast, the lyric persona’s imaginative range and mobility. As a footnote in the published collection informs us, “This Verse to the End is the Work of another Hand.” This “Hand” writes about Niobe as a statuesque image in the final stanza, which reads:

“The queen of all her family bereft,
“Without or husband, son, or daughter left,
“Grew stupid at the shock. The passing air
“Made no impression of her stiff’ning hair.
“The blood forsook her face: amidst the flood
“Pour’d from her cheeks, quite fix’d her eye-balls stood.
“Her tongue, her palate both obdurate grew,
“Her curdled veins no longer motion knew;
“The use of neck, and arms, and feet was gone,
“And ev’n her bowls hard’n’d into stone:
“A marble statue now the queen appears,
“But from the marble steal the silent tears.” (lines 213–24)

17 In this regard, the lyric persona apprehends Niobe as a fellow member of sensus communis, as the speaker believes that she can feel Niobe’s pain.
Still and lifeless, she is deprived of the energy that animates her earlier appearance in the poem. Now, her body becomes stagnant as a silent object having grown “stupid at the shock” (line 215) with “curdled veins” (line 220). Her “fix’d . . . eye-balls” (line 218) render her more a spectacle than a spectator. With “the use of neck, and arms, and feet . . . gone” (line 219), she inhabits a distinctly passive position reminiscent of classical sculpture. The ghostwritten stanza effectively reverses the poem’s first 212 lines by preserving Niobe as an idealized abstraction rather than a dynamic character, thus establishing her as the object, rather than the subject, of the gaze. By juxtaposing the inert Niobe with the vibrant, sympathetic observer, the concluding stanza elevates poetry above painting as a form that can represent dynamic, progressive events rather than a singular or frozen image.

Wheatley continues to explore the limits of visual perception in “Ocean,” an unpublished manuscript that depicts a lyric persona gazing upon the vastness of a sublime ocean. Dated September 1773, “Ocean” was likely composed as Wheatley sailed back to North America from England, where she wrote “Niobe in Distress.” The poem begins with the lyric persona invoking the muses to assist her in the act of beholding:

Now muse divine, thy heav’nly aid impart,  
The feast of Genius, and the play of Art.  
From high Parnassus’ radiant top repair,  
Celestial Nine! propitious to my pray’r.  
In vain my Eyes explore the wat’ry reign,  
By you unaided with the flowing strain. (lines 1–6)

The opening of the poem acknowledges the labor of authorship as well as spectatorship. That the speaker requires the aid of nine muses to tell her story speaks to the difficulty of the task at hand: to “explore the wat’ry reign” that, “unaided” by the muses, proceeds “in vain.” Here the imagery of the sublime affirms both the grandeur of Wheatley’s vision as well as the inscrutability therein. On the one hand, John C. Shields (1982) has shown how Wheatley
invokes the sublime to illustrate religious power using Christian iconography. On the other hand, the unnamed ocean possesses a considerably secular sublimity that, when considered in light of Wheatley’s own forced crossing of the Atlantic Ocean on the *Phillis* in 1761, possesses a considerably more sinister bent. The seemingly limitless expanse of “waves on waves devolving without End” (line 26) overpowers the lyric persona who, without the assistance of the muses, cannot remain disinterested.

Just as “Niobe in Distress” portrays a spectator reassessing her impressions of a painting, “Ocean” renders a spectator confronting the limits of her capacity to apprehend the scene at hand. In keeping with Edmund Burke’s theorization of the sublime outlined in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), “Ocean” rejects the order associated with the picturesque. An aesthetic category associated with the rustic landscape tradition, the picturesque frequently involves idyllic, if not bucolic, landscapes that invite spectators to linger in the relaxing atmosphere. In “Ocean,” the sublime overwhelms the spectator who struggles to look to the bottom of the “the wat’ry reign.” Yet after invoking the muses to aid in telling her tale, the lyric persona offers a creation myth of how Neptune tamed the unruly sea:

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When first old Chaos of tyrannic soul
Wav’d his dread Sceptre o’er the boundless whole,
Confusion reign’d till the divine Command
On floating azure fix’d the Solid Land,
Till first he call’d the latent seeds of light,
And gave dominion o’er the eternal Night. (lines 7–12)
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By juxtaposing “the eternal Night” with “the latent seeds of light,” this origin story of the ocean invites readers to consider poetic authority as analogous to mythological power. That is to say, just as Neptune calms “the boundless whole” into “floating azure,” the poet steadies her vision using literary and stylistic devices, such as meter and rhyme, that provide a sense of order and harmony. Unsurprisingly, Wheatley portrays the contrast between sea and land, or chaos and
order, in visual terms that resonate with the Enlightenment’s conflation of visual with intellectual
perception. “Latent seeds of light” drive out “the eternal Night” by illuminating the vision so
that the terror or awe associated with the “confusion” of the “boundless whole” is eventually
driven out. Having defeated the “deepest glooms” (line 13) by light and force, Neptune triumphs
over the darkness associated with the sublime.

But despite the threat the sublime poses to spectators’ ability to comprehend what they
see, Wheatley insists that the imagination allows one to contemplate the indecipherable. As
suggested by the poem “On Imagination,” a spectator is perhaps most free when she roams the
mind’s eye: “From star to star the mental optics rove, / Measure the skies, and range the realms
above” (lines 19–20). In painful contrast to Wheatley’s enslavement, the mobility she portrays
in these ekphrastic poems calls upon what Immanuel Kant calls the “free play of the faculties of
cognition” (103) in *The Critique of Judgment.* Aesthetic experience hence provides a creative
freedom that allows lyric personae to reflect the world—as if poetry were a mirror that reflected
its subject—while imagining and creating new visions from fancy. As Phillip Richards writes,
“Wheatley’s voice . . . is a signifier for a license of day-dreaming reverie, play, satire, and wit
made possible by privileged association with the central powers of her world” (206). Hence not
only do Wheatley’s scrupulous references (to Homer, Ovid, and Alexander Pope, among others)
affirm her proficiency in classical and neoclassical literature; they also place her in the company
of visionaries who conjure new worlds from words. As the poem’s lyric persona glides her eye

18 In this regard, the “free play of the faculties of cognition” can be understood as an expansion of the so-called
“play drive” that Friedrich Schiller develops in *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters* (1794).
19 On Wheatley’s knowledge of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century theories of the imagination, see Shields (2011).
20 Reports of her education and literary vary, but most biographers concur that Wheatley learnt how to read and
write (in English and Latin) by John and Susanna Wheatley’s daughter, Mary, and became familiar with Classical
texts (in Greek and Latin) through sermons, lectures, and translations (Caretta 39–44; Gates 18–19, Odell 10–11).
across the ocean and narrates its creation, she transitions between sight and fancy. In passages like this, she leaps from tangible reality to more speculative heights:

Again with recent wonder I survey
The finny sov’reign bask in hideous play
(So fancy sees) he makes a tempest rise
And intercept the azure vaulted skies
Such is his sport: – but if his anger glow
What kindling vengeance boils the deep below! (lines 35–40)

Freely roaming between “azure vaulted skies” and “the deep below,” the lyric persona can “survey” both the known and unknown. Recalling the spectator of “Niobe in Distress,” the lyric persona of “Ocean” can differentiate between what she sees “with recent wonder” and what “fancy sees.”

Wheatley’s exploration of the Romantic imagination inflects the unsigned frontispiece portrait (fig. 2) that appears in Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral. Arguably one of the most familiar portraits in American literature, the image establishes Wheatley’s “print persona” (Wilcox 9) in terms of literary authority. As the first known portrait of a North American woman writer, the image depicts her in terms other than enslavement or labor. In this regard, the portrait grants Wheatley an autonomy seldom offered to people of African descent in contemporary painting, which tended to present Black bodies as subordinate props designed to accompany white sitters. As Gwendolyn Du Bois Shaw observes, “Wheatley is pictured as totally self-possessed as well as fully clothed, unlike other representations of enslaved and commodified African women during the late eighteenth century, which show them as objects of sexual desire or painful humiliation” (32). Instead, Wheatley appears in the act of poetic inspiration. At a time when many books did not include the image of their author, the

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21 Though as Megan Walsh notes, the portrait was only included in the first edition of Poems, and then was reprinted starting with the 1834 edition onward (69–70).
frontispiece portrait would have signified an elevated form of literary prestige (Rezek 23–33, Walsh 63–67). The portrait hence foregrounds Wheatley’s creative invention in writing and crafting the collection’s poems. To a certain extent, then, the frontispiece invites audiences to conflate Poems with its author by foregrounding Wheatley’s physical presence and labor as inextricable from the poems, so that to purchase the collection would entail laying claim to its author’s likeness.

![Figure 2: Frontispiece Portrait to Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral](Library of Congress Rare Book and Special Collections Division)

Significantly, the portrait stages authorship as a matter of Romantic inspiration in which Wheatley’s gestural expression suggests the intricacies of her feeling. As Rochelle Raineri Zuck
argues, the portrait construes Wheatley as a prototypically Romantic writer rather than a neoclassical poet. Invoking the iconography of theatrical body language, the portrait establishes Wheatley’s creative labor through her arms, hands, and face that are at work on a new composition. Seated at a Sheraton desk with her left hand raised to her face as if lost in thought, Wheatley performs the role of poet in strikingly dramatic ways that recall the Boston painter John Singleton Copley, whose portraits similarly express character through a sitter’s prop or costume. In his famous portrait of Paul Revere (1768; fig. 3), Copley presents Revere with his hand to his face as if to suggest a sense of unguarded intimacy (in which Revere does not realize he is being observed). Although her bonnet and shawl suggest feminized domesticity, Wheatley’s facial expression signals her identification as a visionary poet. Gazing straight ahead as if looking beyond the frame, she is staged in a pensive pose that aligns writing with spectatorship. With her left index finger raised to her check, she contemplates what she sees by transcribing her impressions with the quill in her right hand.
Yet despite Wheatley’s theatrical pose, the portrait obscures part of her face as she sits in side profile. Although Eric Slauter characterizes Wheatley’s pose as a form of “preoccupation” (2013: 107) with her subject matter in ways that suggest Copley’s influence upon 1770s New England portraiture, we might also situate her stance in terms of what the art historian Michael Fried calls the “absorption” associated with eighteenth-century French painting. For Fried, neoclassical French painting often depicts sitters fixated on what they see, wholly oblivious to the presence of the audience (and thus unaware of their status as a painted subject in a work of art). Absorbed figures offer the pretense of unguarded psychological interiority because they
seem ignorant of the fact that they are, in fact, painted figures. In similar terms, the 1773 frontispiece portrait presents Wheatley as if she were unconscious of her status of being displayed. Rather, she remains intent on looking out of frame at what she alone sees and what the viewer must imagine. Thus understood, the image affirms audiences’ right to look upon Wheatley by equating that right with Wheatley’s own.

By emphasizing Wheatley’s vision and creativity, the frontispiece portrait presents the poet as a “genius” to be scrutinized. Throughout the eighteenth century, natural history and science established race as a matter of mutable identity largely influenced by climate and environment. Yet as the historian Sharon Block argues, environmental theories of race started to shift between 1750–75, as complexion and skin color came to signify racial identity as a matter of fixed, visible appearance. Unlike earlier theories’ insistence upon the gradations of a malleable racial identity, late-eighteenth-century theories of race insisted upon the rigidity and permanence of phenotype. This belief in physical appearance complemented—and arguably fueled—the rise of aesthetics by encouraging spectators to regard visual perception as the epistemological basis for determining a person’s racial identity. As David Bindman and Irene Tucker have demonstrated, visual culture trained audiences to decipher physical appearance for clues as to a person’s race. Wheatley is posed as a respectable, dignified writer who embodies what the literary critic Ezra Tawil has termed “racial sentiment” associated with the early nineteenth century. In her capacity to both experience and offer an account of racial sentiment, she anticipates what Tawil describes as “the gradual reconceptualization of human difference from a matter of outward surfaces and somatic textures to an interior property, hidden within the body and revealed through its actions” (10). As Tawil writes, racial sentiment promulgated “the

22 On eighteenth-century environmental theories of race, see Bindman 79–150; Chiles 6–22; Dain 1–39; Tawil 26–68; Tucker 15–74.
notion that members of different races both feel different things, and feel differently” (2). Yet in conveying her conflicted status as both enslaved and a refined poet, the image registers the ambivalence associated with her published accounts of racial sentiment that perpetuate the implicit whiteness that undergirds the cult of sensibility. Her “genius”—a word that publishers and critics often bandied about when referring to Wheatley—hence affirmed her anomalous position with regard to contemporary poetry.

Because ekphrasis dramatizes a spectator’s response to a work of art, Wheatley’s poems threatened the racial hierarchies associated with the Enlightenment. By insisting that Wheatley’s personae possess the same intellectual and imaginative capacities as their white counterparts, these poems lay claim to a sentiment that transcends racial categories. When Thomas Jefferson lambasts Wheatley in his commentary in Notes on the State of Virginia (1787), he defines racial sentiment in terms of a lack of psychological depth and capacity to reason. Referring to people of African descent, Jefferson writes that “Love seems with them to be more an eager desire, than a tender delicate mixture of sentiment and sensation. Their griefs are transient. Those numberless afflictions, which render it doubtful whether heaven has given life to us in mercy or in wrath, are less felt, and sooner forgotten with them. In general, their existence appears to participate more of sensation than reflection. . . . in imagination, they are dull, tasteless, and anomalous” (139). By declaring that “Their love is ardent, but it kindles the senses only, not the imagination” (140), Jefferson distinguishes between bodily feeling and refined sentiment.

23 Although Jupiter Hammon is the first known published poet of African descent, Wheatley’s status as a teenage “genius” fueled public interest in her work. She is estimated to have started writing poetry by 1765, roughly at the age of eleven, and published her first poem in 1767. Advertisements for the 1773 collection invoke the terminology of “genius” to promote her work; the “Proposal for Printing by Subscription” refers to “PHILLIS, a Negro Girl, from the strength of her own Genius” (quoted in Carretta 188) who was “a very uncommon Genius, at present a Slave” (quoted in Carretta 189). A similar attitude inflects the first advertisement of the Poems, which appeared in the London Chronicle and promises that the collection “displays perhaps one the greatest instances of pure, unassisted genius, that the world ever produced” (quoted in Carretta 98).
Jefferson’s distinction is an early iteration of what the literary critic Kyla Schuller has termed “impressibility,” or “how a living body is acted on by the animate and inanimate objects of its environment” (6). As Schuller argues, impressibility played a foundational role in scientific and sentimental cultures of the nineteenth century, which demarcated the increasingly biopolitical categories of race and gender in terms of which bodies were believed to be overly responsive to their environment. In impressibility, one finds the lingering influence of environmental theories of race from the eighteenth century, in that racial and feminized impressibility—or to invoke Jefferson’s phrase, “more . . . sensation than reflection”—resonates with the scientific logics that believed that climate determined racial identity. Avowing that Wheatley’s “compositions . . . are below the dignity of criticism” (140), Jefferson regards Wheatley’s impressibility as a liability that estranges her from the white realm of a disinterested sensus communis.

Wheatley insists that artists and audiences of African descent are no more impressible than their white counterparts in poems such as “To S. M.” Most critics believe “S. M.” to refer to Scipio Moorhead, a Boston-based artist of African descent whom many regard as the unsigned artist behind the 1773 frontispiece portrait. Notably, the poem juxtaposes a fictional spectator’s ekphrastic account of seeing S. M.’s art with a personal engagement with the artist himself. Interested in the affinities between “the painter’s and the poet’s fire” (line 9), the poem explores the symbiotic relation between painting and poetry, as well as between S. M. and the spectator:

\begin{verbatim}
TO show the lab’ring bosom’s deep intent,
And thought in living characters to paint,
When first thy pencil did these beauties give,
\end{verbatim}

\footnote{An anonymous handwritten note on a first edition printing of Poems identifies “S. M.” as “Scipio Moorhead—Negro Servent [sic] to the Revd Mr. Moorhead of Boston, whose Genius inclined him that way” (Writings 195). However, Eric Slaute (2013) makes the compelling case that “any attribution is provisional at best” (101), since the note is not in Wheatley’s handwriting and “no contemporary testimony links the image of Wheatley to Scipio Moorhead” (101).}
And breathing figures learnt from thee to live;  
How did those prospects give my soul delight,  
A new creation rushing on my sight? (lines 1–6)

Appreciating S. M.’s painted “beauties,” the lyric persona reserves her praise for his portrayal of embodied (“the lab’ring bosom”) and psychological (“thought in living characters”) states. Because the figures “learnt . . . to live” from S.M., the spectator likens the artist’s power to divine creation that transfigures penciled sketches into “breathing figures.” In presenting a deep rapport between audience and artist (not to mention between poetry and painting), the opening couplets conjure aesthetic experience as something other than disinterested. As the second-person perspective suggests, we inhabit the artist’s position and are thus implicit in, if not responsible for, the spectator’s pleasure. Yet this pleasure involves more than the appreciation of the fine arts: instead, the spectator likens her beholding to an act of procreation in which, with “the new creation rushing on my sight,” audiences are inspired to create their own beauty.

This intimate rapport resurfaces in a variant version of “To S. M.” published in the London-based *Arminian Magazine* in 1784. Given that the variant appeared the year that Wheatley died, it is unlikely that Wheatley was involved with the revisions. Regardless of who revised the poem, the 1784 variant recasts the opening lines of the 1773 poem:

1773 edition:

TO show the lab’ring bosom’s deep intent,  
And thought in living characters to paint,  
When first thy pencil did these beauties give,  
And breathing figures learnt from thee to live;  
How did those prospects give my soul delight,  
A new creation rushing on my sight?  
(*Writings*, lines 1–6)

1784 variant:

WHEN first they pencil did these beauties give,  
And breathing figures learned from thee to live;
A new creation met my wondering sight,
And filléd my ravished bosom with delight.
(“To S. M.,” lines 1–4)

The revisions foreground the sensual aspects of looking. In the 1784 variant, the spectator now possesses a “wondering sight” that actively roams among the “breathing figures” in ways that enliven what the 1773 edition sparsely refers to as her “sight.” Further, the 1784 variant attributes the “bosom” to the spectator’s own “ravished bosom” unlike the “lab’ring bosom” associated with S. M.’s painted figures in the 1773 edition. By situating spectatorship as a physical activity rather than a mental exercise, the 1784 variant locates aesthetic pleasure squarely in the body. Whereas the spectator’s “delight” occurs in her “soul” in the 1773 edition, the 1784 variant locates the delight in her “filléd . . . ravished bosom.” Suggesting an involuntary or passive state rather than an active one, ravishment here connotes a sense of being overcome by art rather than “lab’ring” to create it. Such imagery likens aesthetic delight to sensual pleasure, effectively depicting the spectator as someone who responds to the human figures in the paintings as if they were people as opposed to representations. The longer she beholds the S. M.’s works, the more she appears as a corporeal presence whose body responds to beautiful art.

The “wondering sight” of the 1784 variant suggests one of poetry’s advantages over painting: the ability to narrate the unfolding of dynamic time. Published six years before Wheatley’s collection of poems, Gotthold Lessing’s aesthetic treatise Laocöon (1767) distinguishes between painting and poetry in terms of temporality. For Lessing, time and visibility go hand in hand, especially when it comes to Homer, “that greatest of all word painters” (71). 25 Lessing writes, “Homer treats of two different classes of beings and actions,—

25 Homer’s ekphrastic account of the shield of Achilles in the Iliad inspired a variety of neoclassical poets, especially after Alexander Pope’s 1715 translation popularized the classical epic for English-reading audiences.
the visible and the invisible. This distinction cannot be made on canvas, where every thing is visible, and visible in precisely the same way.” “This invisibility,” Lessing speculates, “leaves the imagination free play to enlarge the scene at will, and picture the gods and their movements on a scale far grander than the measure of common humanity. But painting must accept a visible theatre, whose various fixed parts become a scale of measurement for the persons acting upon it” (77–78). Whereas painting relates “visible stationary action,” poetry limns “visible progressive action, the various parts of which follow one another in time” (90). Lessing’s distinction between the visible, static nature of painting and the invisible, dynamic scope of poetry helps us better comprehend the fictional spectator’s interest in “Damon’s tender sighs” (line 29) and the “rising radiance of Aurora’s eyes” (line 30). Although the lyric persona appreciates the artist’s “breathing figures” (line 4), she acknowledges that poetry may be better suited to convey spectator’s impressions as they unfold over time. “To S. M.” concludes by claiming that poetry offers a “purer language” and “nobler strain” than painting. The poem ends:

But when these shades of time are chas’d away,
And darkness ends in everlasting day,
On what seraphic pinions shall we move,
And view the landscapes in the realms above?
There shall thy tongue in heav’nly murmurs flow,
And there my muse with heav’nly transport glow:
No more to tell of Damon’s tender sighs,
Or rising radiance of Aurora’s eyes,
For nobler themes demand a nobler strain,
And purer language on th’ ethereal plain.
Cease, gentle muse! the solemn gloom of night
Now seals the fair creation from my sight. (lines 23–34)

Wheatley’s appraisal of the sister arts rests upon “But when.” By imagining a time other than the present tense of the paintings, the poem expands in scale and duration. To convey “tender sighs” or eyes’ “rising radiance” through ekphrastic description is to approach Lessing’s notion of the invisibility that S. M.’s canvasses suggest and Wheatley’s poetry roams.
Recalling the closing image of the frozen Niobe, Wheatley’s frontispiece portrait uncannily reflects the history of transatlantic antislavery media that frequently portrayed people of African descent as objects to be gazed upon. As Samantha Pinto has recently argued, the frontispiece portrait established Wheatley as “the first black celebrity in the modern construction of blackness as a question about the relationship between race, rights, and the human” (34). In similar terms, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has demonstrated how Wheatley’s celebrity derived from the dramatic imagery associated with what he calls her “trials,” or the circumstances surrounding the signing of the attestation letter by eighteen prominent Boston citizens. Referring to her as both “the Toni Morrison of her time” (22) and “the Oprah Winfrey of her time” (33), Gates underscores Wheatley’s prominence at a time when few writers, let alone women or authors of African descent, had their likeness featured in publications. Even if Gates’ analogies might overstate her popularity in 1773, they help us understand how visual media conferred literary authority and celebrity in often equal measure. The frontispiece distills Wheatley and her writing into a single image that could circulate across a variety of contexts. Hence when the portrait resurfaced on the title page of Bickerstaff’s Boston Almanack of 1782 (fig. 4) nearly a decade after the collection was first published, the reprinted image would have signified not only Wheatley’s prestige associated with New England print culture but also an abolitionist commitment that would resonate with audiences beyond the region. Just as the image’s medium shifted from an engraving to a woodcut illustration, the image’s genre transformed, I argue, from a portrait to a piece of anti-slavery memorabilia. In other words, the image’s portability is inextricable from its
generic instability that could represent both individual sitters (i.e., Wheatley) as well as allegorical abstractions (i.e., “the slave”\(^\text{26}\)).

![Figure 4: Bickerstaff’s Boston Almanack, for the Year of Our Redemption, 1782](New York Public Library, Rare Book Division)

By rendering a person of African descent for presumably white audiences, the 1773 portrait and the 1782 woodcut reprint anticipate the perhaps most recognizable piece of antislavery memorabilia, Josiah Wedgwood’s 1787 ceramic medallion (fig. 5). Created for the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, Wedgwood’s medallion conjures a white audience

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\(^\text{26}\) By using the word “slave” rather than “person who was enslaved,” I aim to call attention to the literally stereotypical nature of antislavery iconography. In this article, I use “slave” to refer to the representation of an enslaved person. For a helpful guide to this terminology, see Foreman et al.
on the basis of its sympathetic caption, “Am I Not a Man and a Brother?” In this manner, the Wedgwood medallion echoes Wheatley’s portrait, the caption of which reasserts her legal status as “Phillis Wheatley, Negro Servant to Mr. John Wheatley, of Boston.” (Because she had been manumitted in 1773, the caption was omitted from the 1782 woodcut illustration.) But whereas Wheatley is poised to write in her portrait, the anonymous, kneeling slave on Wedgwood’s medallion appears in a static theatrical pose. Instead, the ventriloquized caption speaks on his behalf as if it were a piece of dialogue delivered to the audience. The Wedgwood medallion’s image proliferated across transatlantic media, in part, because of the slave’s nondescript—and indeed even androgynous—silhouette that lent itself to both feminine and masculine representation. Beginning in the 1830s, illustrators and engravers refashioned Wedgwood’s icon in order to depict enslaved women, often by adjusting and slimming down the original icon’s musculature. For instance, the African-American illustrator Patrick Henry Reason’s redesign (fig. 6 and 7) reveals the gendered logic of racialization—and hence the racial logic of gender—associated with the antebellum era. Unlike Wheatley’s conventional attire associated with womanhood and domesticity in the 1773 portrait, Wedgwood’s 1787 medallion and Reason’s 1835 engraving displace bodies outside the white domestic sphere, a domain that localized gender and sexuality in visible terms. The versatility of Wedgwood’s icon suggests how antislavery media thrived upon, somewhat paradoxically, the interchangeable nature of visual representations of enslaved people that lent themselves to easily repurposed physical appearance.

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27 That being said, Cynthia S. Hamilton finds, in the figure’s flexed toes, the notion that the man is preparing to move (638–40).
28 As Aston Gonzalez persuasively argues, illustrators could refashion lithography more easily and cheaply than painting or daguerreotypes, hence the frequent appropriation of images such as Wedgwood’s medallion during the antebellum abolition movement (24–26; 81; 103).
At a time when critics and philosophers valorized disinterested spectatorship, Wheatley’s poems lay claim to aesthetic experience for people of African descent by foregrounding the embodied and creative dimensions of looking. Ekphrastic poems such as “Niobe in Distress,”
“Ocean,” and “To S. M.” stage Wheatley’s desire to look in encounters between fictionalized spectators and artists or works of art that counteract the rise of racial surveillance premised white audiences’ right to look upon Black bodies. In 1834, fifty years after the poet’s death, John and Susanna Wheatley’s great-grandniece, Margareta Matilda Odell, published a biographical account of Phillis Wheatley Peters. Odell recalls the frontispiece portrait, which she praises as “a striking representation of the original.” She remarks that the engraving remained in the Wheatley household long after Wheatley’s manumission and marriage to John Peters in 1778. “During the absence of Phillis,” we read, “a grand niece of Mrs. Wheatley’s . . . called upon her relative, who immediately directed her attention to a picture over the fire-place, exclaiming—‘See! look at my Phillis! does she not seem as though she would speak to me!’” (18). Odell’s anecdote throws into relief the racial politics that animate the “right” or “desire” to look by acknowledging how white viewers often regarded people of African descent as spectacles to observe. Wheatley’s poetry emerges from the space between the grand niece’s calling out to “my Phillis” and the engraved portrait that bears a striking resemblance to—and embodies—the absent, mute poet. Imagining a psychological interiority seldom ascribed to people of African descent at the time, Wheatley claims spectatorship and ekphrastic writing as requisite for those who can, and do, look back.
Works Cited


@BlkLibraryGirl [Honorée Fanonne Jeffers]. “For those of you who wonder why I insist on calling the first Black woman to publish a book in North America Phillis Wheatley Peters, instead of Phillis Wheatley—and why I politely (I hope) remind people of the ‘Peters’ here are the reasons: Thread. 1/10.” Twitter, 28 September 2020, 7:17pm, twitter.com/BlkLibraryGirl/status/1310765506840932352.


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