
Part I

The Literatures of Africa, Middle
Passage, Slavery, and Freedom:
The Early and Antebellum
Periods, c.1750–1865

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Back to the Future: Eighteenth-Century Transatlantic Black Authors

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Writing a chapter for the Blackwell *Companion to African American Literature* on eighteenth-century authors who in retrospect are seen as pioneers in the development of that literature immediately poses the problems of literary authorship, national definition, and ethnic categorization. For example, how does one define “author” in this context? The term “author” here subsumes both the subject and primary source of the published account. The author may or may not also have been the *writer*. When the *subject* and *writer* differed, the *writer* was a white amanuensis, who transcribed and edited the *author’s* oral account, and published it as an as-told-to tale. Whenever a black author speaks through a white writer, separating their voices is always challenging and may be impossible. The original author may have had a very different agenda in relating his or her narrative than the writer had in publishing it. Different agendas may help account for what can strike contemporary readers familiar with post-1800 writings by authors of African descent as the surprising absence in some pre-1800 texts of commentary on the transatlantic slave trade or the institution of slavery.

The anachronistic term “African American” is not a category capacious enough to cover eighteenth-century English-speaking authors of African descent. Most of the eighteenth-century authors now considered pioneers of African American literature would have been very surprised to find themselves classified as such. How should one categorize authors of sub-Saharan African birth or descent like David George (1743?–1810) and Boston King (1760?–1802), who were born into slavery in what would become the United States, emancipated themselves by joining the British forces as black Loyalists during the American Revolution, were evacuated to Canada by the defeated British, and who chose to move from there to settle in Africa? Or George Liele (1751?–1825), who fled from Lowcountry South Carolina as a black Loyalist to Jamaica at the end of the war? Or James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw (1705?–1775), John Marrant (1755–1791), and Olaudah Equiano (1745?–1797), who, whether born in America or Africa, ultimately chose to live and die in England as African Britons?

Or Phillis Wheatley (1753?–1784), who published in London the first book by an author of African descent, decided to become an African American, and lived only the last year of her life as a subject of the United States government?

Many of the authors would have been most surprised to find themselves now considered *African American*. They fled the country that denied them full citizenship to live in Britain, where, as the case of Ignatius Sancho (1729?–1780) demonstrates, the only bar to voting rights was the same property qualification whites had to meet; or in Sierra Leone, where they were self-governing; or even in Jamaica, where the extraordinary case of Francis Williams (1697?–1762) shows that status could supersede ethnicity in a British slave society. Down the road, we might have to turn to a consistently lower-case use of “white” and “black.” Only in the last decades of the century did people forcibly removed from Africa to undergo the Middle Passage and enslavement in the New World come to accept and gradually appropriate the trans- and supra-national social and political identity of “African” initially imposed on them by Europeans who sought to deracinate them. The indigenous people of Africa did not identify themselves as “African”: they saw themselves as Ashanti, Fante, Yoruba, or any one of a number of other ethnic groups with differing cultures, languages, religions, and political systems. Victims of the Middle Passage and their descendants increasingly styled themselves “Sons of Africa,” even if they had never been there. The transatlantic slave trade during the eighteenth century in effect created an *African* identity in the Americas for the millions of enslaved people who suffered the social death of the various ethnic identities they had while living in Africa.

The eighteenth-century African diaspora was not restricted to people who were forcibly extracted from Africa by Europeans, usually by means of African entrepreneurs, and taken to the Americas. Diasporic authors of the Black Atlantic also moved from one continent to another, and back and forth in many directions as they redefined themselves several times over. For some, the Middle Passage even led back to Africa. Paradoxically, the category “African,” originally used by Europeans to erase ethnic identities, and later embraced by those upon whom it had been imposed, now enables us to discuss the range of identities available before 1800 to people of African descent. Elaborating our definitions of “African,” “transatlantic,” “diasporan,” and “American” enables us to appreciate ways that eighteenth-century texts anticipate those in the following centuries, without judging the achievements of the earlier works by the standards and expectations of later periods.

The solution to the categorical problem may lie in two fields that take us back to the future in the ways we conceive of the first generation of Black Atlantic authors. The recent expansion of the purview of African American literary studies to include English-speaking authors in the Western hemisphere beyond the territorial limits of the United States, and the development of African diasporan historical and literary studies mark a return to the eighteenth-century conceptual framework that encompassed works authored by people of sub-Saharan African descent. In both modern fields of study, authors are included by virtue of line of descent from a shared continental source, no matter how many generations removed, as well as by complexion.

A more capaciously defined transatlantic diasporan approach emphasizes the role that crossing the ocean played in the conception, production, distribution, and reception of eighteenth-century Anglophone literature by people of African descent, and in the ways those authors identified themselves and were identified by others.

Attempting to trace the beginning of a canon or tradition to one text is risky, but transatlantic Anglophone-African studies offers a leading candidate, a date, and a cause in Briton Hammon's spiritual autobiography, *A Narrative of the Most Uncommon Sufferings and Surprising Deliverance of Briton Hammon, a Negro Man*, published in Boston in July 1760. The transatlantic evangelical Christian movement known as the Great Awakening began in England in the 1730s and spread throughout Britain and its colonies during the following three decades. Led by John Wesley and George Whitefield, both Methodists within the Anglican Church of England, the Great Awakening provided the means, motive, and opportunity for the apparently sudden appearance of Hammon's *Narrative*. The evangelicals took religion to the people, rather than waiting for the people to come to church, and they saw all levels of society, including slaves, as having a potential share in salvation. The evangelicals actively proselytized throughout the British colonies, making little distinction between blacks and whites as potential converts, and preaching the spiritual equality of all believers. Unlike Presbyterians and non-Methodist Anglicans, evangelicals were relatively equalitarian in their assignment of leadership roles: they did not require advanced levels of literacy and education. The evangelicals approved of the emotional appeal and expression of faith, and the immediacy of the born-again experience. The emphasis by Protestant Christianity in general, and the Great Awakening in particular, on direct knowledge of the Bible was the primary motive for gaining literacy. Protestantism encouraged self-examination by the faithful, and the writing of spiritual autobiographies, both to monitor one's own spiritual development, and to serve as a model for the belief and behavior of others. Consequently, virtually all the early publications in prose by people of African descent took the form of spiritual autobiographies that trace the transition from pagan beliefs to the Christianity shared with the authors' British and colonial readers. White as well as black spiritual autobiographers commonly contrasted some form of physical captivity with spiritual freedom. Because evangelicalism was often perceived as critical of, if not hostile to, slavery, the long-standing belief that conversion to Christianity merited emancipation from slavery frequently underlies the emphasis on religion in the inspired black-authored religious narratives. The belief was so widespread that colonial statutes eventually denied its validity.

Briton Hammon's 14-page *Narrative* illustrates many of the complexities found in early Black Atlantic writing. Like many later black works, his narrative is about captivity, liberation, and restoration. And like many contemporaneous authors, at least at some point in his life he implicitly condoned the institution of slavery, albeit not for himself. Prior to 1800, slavery was usually accepted as a long-familiar part of the social and economic hierarchy. All recorded history, including the Bible, recognized the existence of slavery. Although some people called for the amelioration of

the conditions of the enslaved, very few people imagined that slavery could, or perhaps even should, be eradicated. Had Briton Hammon not been identified in the title of his *Narrative* as “a Negro,” nothing in his work would have assured us of his ethnic and social status. Presumably irrelevant to his narrative, that status is significant rhetorically solely because it demonstrates that the Gospel is designed for everyone, and that the ways of God can be justified to all people, regardless of complexion or status. Hammon’s *Narrative* is clearly intended to be exemplary for whites as well as blacks, freemen as well as slaves.

With the permission of his “master” (which could mean either owner or employer), Major-General John Winslow, Hammon sailed in 1747 from Plymouth, Massachusetts, to Jamaica and Central America to harvest logwood for making dye. He was soon captured by Caribbean Indians, and subsequently rescued from them by a Spanish captain who took him to Cuba. There, Hammon lived with the governor until he was imprisoned for more than four years for refusing to be drafted into the Spanish navy. Hammon finally escaped from Cuba by gaining passage on an English ship, whose captain refused to “deliver up any *Englishman* under *English* Colours” (emphasis in original) to the pursuing Spaniards. Hammon joined several Royal Naval vessels as a cook after he reached England. When he was discharged in London he engaged to join a slave ship sailing to Guinea, but before he was to depart for Africa he learned of a vessel bound for Boston. He quickly changed his plans and signed on the voyage to Massachusetts as a cook. Once aboard, he was providentially reunited with his former “master,” Winslow.

Although Briton Hammon’s *Narrative* was probably not known by any later eighteenth-century authors of African descent, most likely because it was not published outside of Boston, it was the first of a succession of pre-1800 transatlantic spiritual autobiographies that culminated in Olaudah Equiano’s *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself* (London, 1789). Even most black-authored as-told-to criminal, or execution, narratives, such as *Sketches of the Life of Joseph Mountain, a Negro, Who Was Executed at New-Haven, on the 20th Day of October, 1790, For a Rape, Committed on the 26th Day of May Last* (New Haven, 1790), are formally spiritual autobiographies. Like Hammon, Mountain is, according to *Sketches*, a transatlantic figure who at one point served in the British Royal Navy, but unlike Hammon, Mountain is a picaro who pursues his criminal career in England and the United States. Neither Hammon’s *Narrative* nor Mountain’s *Sketches* criticizes either the transatlantic slave trade or the institution of slavery. The stories did, however, give public voices to people of African descent, even if only indirectly, and to a geographically restricted audience.

The first transatlantic African autobiographer to gain an international reputation through the transatlantic distribution of his as-told-to tale was James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw. His *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince, as Related by Himself* was initially published in Bath, England, in 1772. Dedicated to the Countess of Huntingdon, Whitefield’s patron, Gronniosaw’s *Narrative* appeared in at least ten editions in England and

America by 1800, as well as in a Welsh translation (1779) and serial publication in the *American Moral and Sentimental Magazine* in New York (1797). Although Hammon's 1760 *Narrative* was undeniably the first publication by a transatlantic black author, the 1772 publication of Gronniosaw's *Narrative* arguably marks the beginning of the Anglophone canon of autobiographies authored by former slaves of African descent.

Known to later authors, Gronniosaw's spiritual autobiography introduced to the canon the framing comments by a white amanuensis, as well as the story of the Middle Passage, from Africa to North America via Barbados in his case. Gronniosaw's text also introduced the trope of the talking book: when an enslaved author mistakenly believes that a white person observed reading a book is engaged in an actual conversation with the book, he or she appreciates the need to become literate to also be able to "talk" to books, especially the Bible. John Marrant, Quobna Ottobah Cugoano, and Olaudah Equiano later elaborated the trope as they increasingly appropriated the Bible for the Black Atlantic canon. For example, Cugoano speaks as if he is an Old Testament prophet, and Equiano emphasizes the primary generic status of his *Interesting Narrative* as a spiritual autobiography by initially introducing himself to his readers with a frontispiece in which he extends an open Bible to them.

Gronniosaw's tale is more color-conscious than Hammon's, and less color-conscious than nineteenth-century slave narratives. Gronniosaw attributes his mistreatment during the Middle Passage to his complexion. When he moves to England as a free man and marries a white woman there, however, the only objection raised is to his marrying a poor widow. Gronniosaw's primary interest is in demonstrating the trials and tribulations a true believer faced anywhere in the world. Like Hammon's *Narrative*, Gronniosaw's does not address the abolition of either the transatlantic slave trade or slavery.

More complicated in its treatment of slavery is the as-told-to *A Narrative of the Lord's Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, a Black (Now Going to Preach the Gospel in Nova-Scotia), Born in New York, in North America. Taken down from his own Relation*, first published in London in 1785. Unlike Gronniosaw's *Narrative*, Marrant's is a captivity narrative rather than a slave narrative because he was born free in New York and taken first to Spanish Florida and then South Carolina as a child. He experienced his spiritual rebirth when he heard Whitefield preach in Charleston. In response to his family's opposition to his new faith, Marrant wandered into the wilderness, depending upon God to feed and protect him. An Indian hunter brought him to a Cherokee town, where he was condemned to a painful death. His life was saved, however, by the miraculous conversion of the executioner. He tells us that during the American Revolution he was impressed into the British Royal Navy as a musician. Naval records, however, do not support his claims. Other records suggest that he may himself have been an owner of slaves in South Carolina. Following the war, he went to Britain, where he was ordained as a Methodist minister before being sent to Nova Scotia as a missionary.

At least in the fourth edition (1785), the "Preface" by his amanuensis/editor, Reverend William Aldridge, and a concluding affidavit from Marrant's English landlord

attesting to his character and Christianity frame the *Narrative* proper. Only the fourth edition claims to have been “PRINTED FOR THE AUTHOR.” Absent the phrase “a Black” in the title in all editions, and a reference only in the fourth edition to Marrant as “the free Carpenter,” nothing in Aldridge’s “Preface” or the *Narrative* itself – as in Hammon’s *Narrative* – indicates that Marrant was of African descent. Not surprisingly, then, we find his ethnicity explicitly referred to within the *Narrative* only in the edition Marrant claims to have published himself. The fourth edition is also the only one that portrays Marrant interacting with slaves. He gives them religious instruction despite the objections of their owners, one of whom is the prototype of the excessively cruel white female slave owner who frequently reappears in subsequent slave narratives. Every edition of Marrant’s *Narrative* carefully avoids making an emancipationist attack on the institution of slavery, perhaps because the text was mediated by an amanuensis, and ultimately patronized by the Countess of Huntingdon, who owned slaves in Georgia. Indeed, the ameliorationist message of the two paragraphs added to the fourth edition argues that Christianity will render slaves more docile and obedient. Marrant’s actions and writings after the publication of his *Narrative* expressed a more hostile attitude toward slavery, and a more active resistance toward oppressive whites only after he moved from South Carolina to England following the American Revolution, and only when his words were published without the mediation of a white amanuensis. Publication of the narratives of Gronniosaw and Marrant marked the beginning of the tradition of Black Atlantic authorship, in which later authors were aware of their predecessors. For example, Cugoana acknowledges the works of “Ukawsaw Groniosaw [*sic*], an African prince,” and “A. Marrant [*sic*] in America” in his polemical prose work *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* (London, 1787).

Marrant was the first of several black Loyalists to produce transatlantic spiritual autobiographies by evangelical preachers. George Liele and David George each saw his own as-told-to “Account” published in *The Baptist Annual Register, for 1790, 1791, 1792, and Part of 1793* in London in 1793, and distributed simultaneously in New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Richmond, Savannah, and Charleston. “The Memoirs of the Life of Boston King, a Black Preacher. Written by Himself” was published in *The Methodist Magazine* (London, 1798). George and King, both former slaves, were evacuated by the British to Nova Scotia at the end of the American Revolution. They subsequently accepted a British offer to be brought to Sierra Leone to resettle in Africa. Liele was evacuated to Jamaica at the end of the Revolution. Although the ethnicity Liele and George share is foregrounded in their narratives far more prominently than in earlier Black Atlantic authors, the transatlantic slave trade goes unmentioned, and slavery is treated from an ameliorationist perspective. Their “Accounts” could be distributed in the slave societies of the Deep South because they explicitly reassure readers that Christianity poses no threat to the culture of slavery. Converted slaves, we are told, will be more productive, not freer, workers. King, on the other hand, exerting far more agency in the autobiography “Written by Himself,” condemns, albeit only briefly, both the transatlantic slave trade and slavery.

Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, the African. Written by Himself* (London, 1789) is far more complex than the works of Hammon, Gronniosaw, Marrant, Liele, and George. A remarkable achievement, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to classify in terms of its genre. Among other things, it is a spiritual autobiography, captivity narrative, travel book, adventure tale, rags-to-riches saga, economic treatise, apologia, testimony, and slave narrative. If Equiano was born in South Carolina, as his baptismal and naval records say, rather than in Africa, as he claims, *The Interesting Narrative* is also, in part, historical fiction. Equiano's control over the writing, production, and distribution of his autobiography throughout Britain probably helps account for why he was able and willing to address the issues of abolition of the slave trade and the institution of slavery more forthrightly than many of his predecessors and contemporaries. Equiano's pre-publication advertisements for the book and supervision of the publication and distribution of his autobiography make him an important figure in the history of book publishing. *The Interesting Narrative* was an international bestseller during Equiano's lifetime, with editions and translations published without his permission in Holland (1790), New York (1791), Germany (1792), and Russia (1794), in addition to the nine English, Irish, and Scottish editions, whose publication he supervised between 1789 and 1794. Explicitly an attack on the transatlantic slave trade, *The Interesting Narrative* is also implicitly an assault on slavery. Equiano constructs his argument so as to compel his readers to conclude that slavery must be ended. At various times in *The Interesting Narrative*, Equiano comes very close to crossing the line between amelioration and emancipation. For example, as he closes his account of his life as a slave in Georgia, South Carolina, and the West Indies, he likens himself to Moses, and quotes Beelzebub from John Milton's *Paradise Lost* positively. He leads his readers to conclude that slave rebellions are unavoidable and justified, only to step back rhetorically to promote an ameliorationist solution: "By changing your conduct, and treating your slaves as men, every cause of fear would be banished. They would be faithful, honest, intelligent and vigorous; and peace, prosperity, and happiness would attend you." In 1788, Equiano published in newspapers his overtly emancipationist positions in reviews of pro-slavery books, and an argument in favor of interracial marriage.

According to his autobiography, Equiano was born in 1745 in what is now South-eastern Nigeria. There, he says, he was enslaved at the age of 11, and sold to English slave traders who took him on the Middle Passage to the West Indies. He tells us that within a few days he was taken to Virginia and sold to a local planter. After about a month in Virginia he was bought by Michael Henry Pascal, an officer in the British Royal Navy. Pascal renamed him Gustavus Vassa. Equiano saw military action with Pascal during the Seven Years War. Pascal shocked Equiano by refusing to free him at the end of the conflict in 1762. Instead he sold him into the horrors of West Indian slavery. A clever businessman, Equiano managed to save enough money to buy his own freedom in 1766. Once free, Equiano set off on voyages of commerce and adventure to North America, the Mediterranean, the West Indies, and the North Pole. In Central America he helped purchase and supervise slaves on a plantation. Returning

to London in 1777, he became concerned with spiritual and social reform. He converted to Methodism and later became an outspoken opponent of the slave trade, first in his letters to newspapers and then in his autobiography. Equiano became increasingly involved with efforts to help his fellow blacks in London, with the drive to abolish the transatlantic African slave trade, and with the project to resettle the black poor in Sierra Leone. Unfortunately, he was fired from his administrative position in the Sierra Leone settlement project just before his trip to Africa. One of the reasons he published his autobiography was to show that his behavior was ultimately vindicated. In 1792, Equiano married an Englishwoman, with whom he had two daughters. Thanks largely to profits from his publications, when Equiano died on March 31, 1797 he was probably the wealthiest, and certainly the most famous, person of African descent in the English-speaking world. He had achieved the economic and social status he sought throughout his life.

The Interesting Narrative is universally accepted as the fundamental text in the genre of the slave narrative. Equiano offered his own life as a model for others to follow. Equiano's personal conversions and transformations from enslaved to free, pagan to Christian, and pro-slavery to abolitionist, anticipated the changes he hoped to make in his readers, as well as the transformation he called for in the relationship between Britain and Africa. *The Interesting Narrative* was immediately recognized as a remarkable achievement, earning the praise of Mary Wollstonecraft and other reviewers. Part of the book's great popularity can be attributed to the timing of its initial publication at the height of the movement in Britain to abolish the slave trade. *The Interesting Narrative* offered the first account from the victim's point of view of slavery in Africa, the West Indies, North America, and Britain, as well as of the Middle Passage. His first reviewers quickly acknowledged the significance of the first-hand perspective of *The Interesting Narrative*, which greatly influenced the development of the nineteenth-century African American slave narrative.

Equiano was arguably the quintessential transatlantic African. He was ideally positioned to construct an identity for himself. He defined himself as much by movement as by place. Indeed, he spent as much of his life on water as in any place on land. Even while he was enslaved, the education and skills he acquired with the Royal Navy rendered him too valuable to his owners to be used for the dangerous and back-breaking labor most slaves endured. Service at sea on royal naval and commercial vessels gave him an extraordinary vantage point from which to observe the world around him. His social and geographical mobility exposed him to all kinds of people and levels of Atlantic society. Although the convincing account of Africa Equiano offers to his readers may have been derived from the experiences of others he tells us he listened to during his many travels in the Caribbean, North America, and Britain, his genius lies in his ability to have created and marketed a voice that for over two centuries has spoken for millions of his fellow diasporan Africans. Fittingly, Equiano was the first Black Atlantic author to call himself "the African."

By the end of the eighteenth century a tradition of accounts by authors of African descent had been sufficiently established to enable subsequent authors to subvert it.

As the wording of its title implies, *A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture Smith, a Native of Africa: But Resident above Sixty Years in the United States of America. Related by Himself* (New London, CT, 1798) seems clearly indebted to the slave narrative tradition established before 1798. But in the work itself, the author appears to acknowledge that tradition by intentionally deviating from it. For example, Smith's *Narrative* is not an "abolitionist" text in either the pre-1808 or post-1808 sense. It apparently was not designed to participate in the international campaign to abolish the transatlantic slave trade, accomplished in both Britain and the United States in 1808. Nor does it seem to have anticipated later texts aimed at the abolition of the institution of slavery. On the other hand, Venture's willingness to resist slavery physically, his refusal to wait for emancipation in the afterlife, and his skepticism about Christianity anticipate significant aspects of nineteenth-century slave narratives exemplified by Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave. Written by Himself* (Boston, 1845).

One third of Smith's *Narrative* is devoted to his early life in Africa; another to his difficult life as a slave in Connecticut; and the last third to his economic success against great odds as a free black in New York and Connecticut. Smith's *Narrative* virtually erases his experience on the Middle Passage aboard the slave ship that brought him from Africa to the Americas, an absence particularly telling in the last decade of the eighteenth century, when opposition to the horrific conditions of the transatlantic slave trade received tremendous attention in the press on both sides of the Atlantic. Less than ten years after the reception of Equiano's *Narrative* demonstrated the market for, and the rhetorical power of, a first-hand victim's account of the Middle Passage, Venture recalled his transatlantic voyage as simply "an ordinary passage, except great mortality by the small pox." The author of Venture Smith's *Narrative* apparently intentionally avoided engaging in the international debate over the transatlantic slave trade. Nor is Smith represented as objecting to slavery as an institution. Unlike Cugoana, King, and Equiano, Smith appears to see slavery as bad for individuals, especially himself and members of his family, without attacking the system of slavery directly in his *Narrative*.

Unlike earlier narratives, Venture Smith's life in Africa and America is remarkably religion-free. His only reference to his African religion is to an implicitly monotheistic "Almighty protector," but unlike other contemporaneous authors of African descent he draws neither parallels nor contrasts between his original African faith and Christianity. Venture's explicit references to religion in America undermine his editor's prefatory characterization of the United States as "this Christian country." For Gronniosaw, alienated from his family and society in his African homeland by his intimations of monotheism, once he reaches America, European religious values quickly supersede those of benighted Africa. For Equiano, who devotes nearly one sixth of his *Interesting Narrative* to an account of life in Africa, many African cultural, political, and religious values prefigure the superior ones he finds in the European-American world. For Smith, however, African ethical values retain their superiority to American. Whereas Gronniosaw and Equiano contrast true Christianity with the hypocritical

versions that most whites embrace, Smith apparently discovers all professed Christians to be hypocrites. Unlike the accounts of Gronniosaw, Marrant, Liele, George, and King, or those by Cugoano and Equiano, Smith's is pointedly not a providential conversion narrative. In effect, Venture Smith's unspiritual autobiography subverts the tradition to which it is indebted.

Paralleling the development of Black Atlantic autobiographies was the development of a transatlantic belletristic African canon represented by Francis Williams, Ignatius Sancho, and Phillis Wheatley. Williams was born to free black parents in Jamaica at the end of the seventeenth century. His father, a wealthy merchant and plantation owner, sent him in 1721 to London to be trained in the law. Three years later he was back in Jamaica, having inherited his father's estate and slaves. Williams' wealth and power were so great that in Jamaica he had the legal status of a free white man: no black could legally testify against him; he could sue whites; he could legally physically defend himself against whites; and he was the only free black who had the right to wear a sword. He died in 1762, leaving a greatly reduced estate, which included 15 slaves. His sole surviving poem is a Latin ode.

According to the biography that prefaces his posthumously published *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, an African* (London, 1782), Sancho was born on the Middle Passage from Africa to the Spanish West Indies. At the age of two he was brought to England and given to three unmarried sisters. They renamed him Sancho because they thought he resembled the fictional Don Quixote's pudgy squire. He fortunately came to the attention of the Duke of Montagu, who was so impressed by his intelligence that he contributed books to his education. When the duke died, Sancho fled from his owners to the duke's widow, who took him into her employ as her butler. Her heir helped Sancho establish himself as a grocer. Sancho's financial independence as a male householder in Westminster qualified him to become the only eighteenth-century person of African descent known to have voted in Parliamentary elections in 1774 and 1780. Many of his letters discuss public affairs, and he published newspaper essays, serious and comic, under both his own name and the pseudonym "Africanus," in which he expresses his allegiance to the monarchy and his support for the British in the war against the rebellious Americans led by "General Washington" (November 5, 1777). Sancho's constant concern for his friends and his country enabled him to keep his own problems in perspective. He uses humor to avoid sounding self-indulgent even when talking of discrimination, illness, political disappointment, and death. Sancho gained widespread celebrity when one of his letters appeared in the posthumously published *Letters* (London, 1775) of Laurence Sterne. Sancho had initiated a correspondence with Sterne on July 21, 1766 when he encouraged him to continue writing to alleviate the oppression of Sancho's fellow Africans. The first African to be given an obituary in the British press, Sancho died on December 14, 1780 from complications associated with the gout.

Destined to become the first published woman of African descent, as well as the first black transatlantic international celebrity, Phillis Wheatley was born around 1753 in West Africa, probably between present-day Gambia and Ghana. She was

brought to Boston as a slave in 1761. Encouraged by her mistress, who used her as a domestic servant, Phillis quickly became literate and began writing poetry that soon found its way into Boston newspapers. She gained transatlantic recognition with her 1770 funeral elegy on the death of Whitefield, addressed to his English patron, the Countess of Huntingdon. It was published in both Boston and London in 1771. Phillis had written enough poems by 1772 to enable her to try to capitalize on her growing reputation by producing a book of previously published and new works. Unable to find a publisher in Boston, her mistress successfully sought a London publisher and Huntingdon's patronage. Phillis spent several weeks in London with her owner's son in 1773. She returned to Boston before the publication of her book, *Poems on Various Subjects: Religious and Moral*, to nurse her ailing mistress, probably in exchange for a promise of manumission if she agreed to do so. Once there, she was soon freed, "at the desire of my friends in England." Wheatley's last years were marked by personal and financial loss. In 1778 she married John Peters, a free black who subsequently changed occupations frequently and was often in debt. They reportedly had three children, who all died young. Phillis failed to find a publisher for her proposed second volume of poetry, which was to include some of her transatlantic correspondence. Phillis Wheatley Peters died in poverty in Boston on December 5, 1784, and was reportedly buried with her youngest child in an unmarked grave three days later.

Poems on Various Subjects: Religious and Moral amply demonstrates her talents in various forms of verse, such as hymns, elegies, translations, philosophical poems, tales, and epyllions (short epics). Perhaps in part because of Huntingdon's patronage and protection, Wheatley's *Poems* was widely and generally favorably reviewed in British literary magazines, many of which included examples from the collection. Wheatley benefited from the growing transatlantic interest during the later eighteenth century in temporally, geographically, socially, and ethnically exotic sources of sentiment and literature. For example, after reproducing the text of "To Maecenas," the anonymous writer in the British *Critical Review* (September 1773) remarks, "[t]here are several lines in this piece, which would be no discredit to an English poet. The whole is indeed extraordinary, considered as the production of a young Negro, who was, but a few years since, an illiterate barbarian." The American Benjamin Rush praises Wheatley's achievements as a woman and a person of African descent in *An Address to the Inhabitants of the British Settlement in America, upon Slave-Keeping* (Boston, 1773), although he mistakes her status and how long she had been in America: "[t]here is now in the town of Boston a Free Negro Girl, about 18 years of age, who has been but 9 [*sic*] years in the country, whose singular genius and accomplishments are such as not only do honor to her sex, but to human nature. Several of her poems have been printed, and read with pleasure by the public." In France, a 1774 letter from Voltaire to Baron Constant de Rebecque states that Wheatley's very fine English verse disproves Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle's contention that no black poets exist. Political considerations also affected literary judgments. Several British commentators shared the opinion expressed anonymously in the *Monthly Review* (December 1773): "[w]e are much concerned to find that this ingenious young woman is yet a slave. The people

of Boston boast themselves chiefly on their principles of liberty. One such act as the purchase of her freedom, would, in our opinion, have done them more honour than hanging a thousand trees with ribbons and emblems.”

Sancho considered Wheatley’s return to Boston as a slave a tragic move. He never met her, even though some of the places she visited while in London were within blocks of his home, and he never learned of her manumission. Establishing himself as the first Black Atlantic critic, Sancho wrote on January 27, 1778 to the Quaker Jabez Fisher of Philadelphia to thank him for the gift of a copy of Wheatley’s *Poems*:

Phyllis’s poems do credit to nature – and put art – merely as art – to the blush. – It reflects nothing either to the glory or generosity of her master – if she is still his slave – except he glories in the *low vanity* of having in his wanton power a mind animated by Heaven – a genius superior to himself – the list of splendid – titled – learned names, in confirmation of her being the real authoress. – alas! shews how very poor the acquisition of wealth and knowledge are – without generosity – feeling – and humanity. – These good great folks – all know – and perhaps admired – nay, praised Genius in bondage – and then, like the Priests and the Levites in sacred writ, passed by – not one good Samaritan amongst them.

Neither the anonymous writer in the *Monthly Review* nor Sancho knew that Wheatley’s trip to London had not only transformed her literary identity, but also offered her the opportunity to transform her legal, social, and political identities.

Williams, Sancho, and Wheatley posthumously became major figures in the transatlantic debate over slavery during the last quarter of the eighteenth century because both sides in the debate agreed that only equally human authors were capable of producing imaginative literature. For Thomas Jefferson and his pro-slavery contemporaries, African heritage subsumed any national or ethnic claims of identity. Jefferson could not conceive of people of African descent as being American or British. They were always and everywhere African because of their complexion. To justify slavery in the face of mounting transatlantic opposition, Jefferson felt compelled in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (London, 1787) to reject claims for the literary achievements of anyone of African descent on either side of the Atlantic. In doing so Jefferson ironically acknowledged the existence of a canon of Black Atlantic authors:

Religion indeed has produced a Phyllis Whately [*sic*]; but it could not produce a poet. The compositions published under her name are beneath the dignity of criticism ... Ignatius Sancho has approached nearer to merit in composition; yet his letters do more honour to the heart than to the head. They breathe the purest effusions of friendship and general philanthropy, and show how great a degree of the latter may be compounded with strong religious zeal. He is often happy in the turn of his compliments, and his stile is easy and familiar ... But his imagination is wild and extravagant, escapes incessantly from every restraint of reason and taste, and, in the course of its vagaries, leaves

a tract of thought as incoherent and eccentric, as is the course of a meteor through the sky. His subjects should often have led him to a process of sober reasoning: yet we find him always substituting sentiment for demonstration. Upon the whole, though we admit him to the first place among those of his own colour who have presented themselves to the public judgment, yet when we compare him with the writers of the race among whom he lived, and particularly with the epistolary class, in which he has taken his own stand, we are compelled to enroll him at the bottom of the column.

Defenders of the humanity of people of African descent were quick to respond. In *The Capacity of Negroes for Religious and Moral Improvement Considered* (London, 1789), Richard Nisbet notes, “The Letters of Ignatius Sancho; the Latin compositions of Francis Williams; and the more natural and ingenious productions of Phillis Wheatley ... each of these has already furnished a publick and ample testimony of, at least, as considerable a portion of mental ability, as falls to the lot of mankind in general.” And William Dickson challenges their detractors in *Letters on Slavery* (London, 1789): “To the Latin Ode of Francis Williams ... , poetical pieces of Phillis Wheatley, and the letters of Ignatius Sancho, we appeal for specimens of *African literature*. – Have their calumniators obliged the literary world with any such specimens?”

Protest literature was not restricted to white opponents of the transatlantic slave trade and slavery, as the works of Cugoano, Equiano, and King demonstrate. Significantly, they all wrote as free men exercising their agency in the composition of their texts unmediated by white editors. Freedom also allowed women to speak more freely. Wheatley’s antislavery stance became more overt in her poetry and correspondence after she was manumitted. For example, in the poem “On the Death of General Wooster,” included in a July 15, 1778 letter to Wooster’s widow, Mary, Wheatley exclaims,

But how, presumptuous shall we hope to find
Divine acceptance with th’ Almighty mind –
While yet (O deed ungenerous!) they disgrace
And hold in bondage Afric’s blameless race?

Similarly, in the as-told-to “Petition of an African Slave to the Legislature of Massachusetts,” published in *The American Museum* (Philadelphia, 1787), Belinda briefly recounts her kidnapping from an idyllic Africa into North American slavery before appealing for compensation from the seized estate of her former Loyalist owner to enable her to enjoy “that freedom, which the Almighty Father intended for all the human race.”

Whether it is Wheatley identifying herself with “Afric’s blameless race,” Belinda and Cugoano considering themselves “Africans,” or Equiano proclaiming himself “the African,” eighteenth-century authors of African descent saw their identities as transatlantic in ways that anticipate more recent transnational approaches to the writings of the Black Atlantic.

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