The Black Aesthetic Unbound
The Black Aesthetic Unbound

Theorizing the Dilemma of Eighteenth-Century African American Literature

APRIL C. E. LANGLEY
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To plan to write a book about the way in which three different continents have impacted the literature of a people, captured, enslaved, transported, and oppressed by the very same three continents, was never my intention. The seeds of this book began at a time when I could scarcely imagine theorizing the dilemmas into which I had been born as an African American woman. Years after Langston Hughes’s “Theme for English B” freed me to express my black and beautiful self, and long before the day I stood up in my fourth-grade class and dared to give my teacher and fellow classmates a lesson in black history for which I was promptly and physically removed from class, I knew how it felt to be a problem. Literally, decades before I was first introduced to Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon, in an Introduction to Graduate Studies course, I knew firsthand the internal prison he described. The Autobiography of Malcolm X, Giovanni’s Room, If They Come in the Morning, The Spook Who Sat by the Door, and Black Boy: With few exceptions, my first experience of literature was with black United States literature written during the era of the Black Power movement—the period between the mid-1960s and late 1970s. This literature offered wisdom of the ages, as it foretold everything, knew from whence every ail sprang, and provided the curative texts to fix the world that came crushing down on me—a disenfranchised young black woman growing up in (sub)urban “ghettos” from New York City to Los Angeles.
As a result, when I later encountered Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s *Notes from the Underground*, I could not help but notice how much it reminded me of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. When I read William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*, I thought immediately of Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*. It was the way Morrison just let her characters be and how, because of what seemed to me at the time a more natural or realistic way of narrating things, her characters interconnected while separate histories unfolded, and each from a different character’s point of view. This way of inviting a reader into the lives of each character from different vantage points was the quality I thought made Faulkner’s writing seem so like Morrison’s. When I read Mark Twain’s *The Tragedy of Pudd’head Wilson*, I couldn’t help but notice that the voices of Tom, Chambers, and Roz echoed an ironic humor that seemed similar to the sentiments of a character with which I was most familiar—Langston Hughes’s Jess B. Simple. It mattered not that the white canonical texts preceded the black ones. To my mind I could only wonder in amazement at how these white writers managed to capture what I would later understand as a black aesthetic. The more I read these canonical white and black texts and the more comparisons I made between them and many others, the more I began to realize that my earliest experience of literature had not been a conventional one. Years later, an English professor would refer to this way of reading and understanding literature as backing into the canon.

Perhaps the only exceptions to my unconventional engagement with literature were two works that I had been weaned on since a small child—the Bible and key plays in the corpus of William Shakespeare. Nonetheless, I maintain that my experiencing of literature was quite traditional for black children growing up in New York City in the 1960s—during a time when everything was racial and political and nearly every text—by a white or black author—was meant to convey some underlying message about freedom from oppression. We—young black people—were in the middle of a revolution that in the words of Gil Scott Heron “would not be televised.” We had witnessed the repercussions of the deaths of two great martyrs—Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X—and had witnessed the suppression and violence against those organizations and persons who resisted being silenced and restricted. The most vivid manifestation of the Black Power era was seen in the imprisonment of Angela Davis, an image that only served to further drive home the point that to be young, gifted, and black carried with it a great responsibility—to save the race.
All this to say, that race mattered and it mattered that black people were not merely the great-grandsons and -granddaughters of slaves. It mattered that black people were a people with a history beyond the transatlantic triangular trade, beyond their enslavement, colonization, and emancipation in the United States, the British colonies, Britain, and other western European colonies and countries. For it was in this historical moment of the 1960s that I, like other black people, discovered my geographical, historical, and philosophical roots in Africa. Thus, as we metamorphosed from Negroes, Coloreds, and blacks, we were transformed into African Americans—a people with history, land, and ties to ancient cultures and civilizations, whose universal contributions to all civilizations represented a force with which to be reckoned. Romantically, I was Eulalie,¹ and years later I regretted that I did not discover Christina Ama Ata Aidoo and other African writers when I was a child—it most certainly would have mattered and in ways that might have changed my life forever.

Three decades later—as a scholar of African American literature—I continue to grapple with the same dynamic forces, this time neither looking for nor expecting full reconciliation. Consequently, I have had to admit that the only way to recover with more honesty and clarity a heritage that black people in the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, and indeed 1990s had been claiming for themselves is to directly confront (in the twentieth century) the glaring impossibility of such an undertaking. This project represents my attempt to hypothesize about how to break out of such historical impasses—located ironically in the tension between verifiable realities of slavery and colonization of people of the African Diaspora, throughout the Black Atlantic, and the attendant psychoses that have resulted in romanticized responses to post-emancipation and postcolonial conditions.

Thus, I have had to address some very personal and political questions about what it means to be African, American, and the descendant of Afro-British Americans in the United States of America. Because of my love of literature and my somewhat naïve faith in the value of all forms of literature for humanity, I wanted to begin my literary journey at the beginning and close to home—all of them real and imagined, in the United States, somewhere on the African continent, and throughout the Black Atlantic. I have made three critical assumptions: First, because the black experience literally and figuratively encompasses Africa, Europe, and America, we cannot continue to operate as though only two of these locations matter—Europe and America. The continent of Africa
matters significantly. And, to conflate Africa within a limited framework of African America, Europe, or America is to risk rendering Africa as nonexistent—and even (especially) metaphorical and abstract renderings matter. Second, although African American identity is inextricably tied to Africa, it is both dishonest and irresponsible to superficially offer Afro-America as a stand-in or representative for Africa. We must not conflate Africa with Afro-America—one is not equivalent to the other. Third, because the narrative of the black experience is laden with as much fiction as are narratives of the Western worlds’ encounters with African worlds, which translate sometimes rather loosely into the narrative of the unnamed but nonetheless white experience, we must recognize the ways in which distortions and romanticizations of truth from either direction function similarly—and we are all culpable, though to be sure, not always equally so.

This, the boundless recovery of an invented but nonetheless real Africa, is the dilemma I am willing to face, the journey I am willing to undertake, and that for which I gladly and freely plunge into the mythic and literal Atlantic to recover what is mine. This is my sojourn—I am returning—to recover Africa from African America, to return myself to myself. The call to acknowledge and deal with *The Dilemma of a Ghost* has long since been issued and addressed. This book represents a visible manifestation of an inward and ongoing response to the question . . . What is African in African American?
First, I want to thank God for giving me the strength and wisdom to know when to follow my own mind, when to take the advice of others, and when to be still and calm through the many years and the daunting process out of which this book was produced. “I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me” (Philippians 4:13).

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INTRODUCTION

Historical and Cultural Recovery

Eighteenth-Century Scholarship

and the Politics of Visibility

Black Aesthetic Unbound

*The Black Aesthetic Unbound* ("Unbound") rearticulates the early black aesthetic that operates alongside the European-American colonial literary traditions by recovering suppressed African worldviews in the earliest American literature. Two central themes unite this study. First, it draws upon the concept of *dilemma* as developed in Ghanaian playwright Christina Ama Ata Aidoo’s 1964 play, *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, which dissects the problematic relationship and historical disconnections between Africa and African America in the fictional marriage of a West African man and African American woman. Second, it invokes the notion of a *Black Aesthetic Unbound* to expose how theoretical attempts to free black texts from white envelopes have created yet another dilemma for early black texts—that of proving that the texts are representatively black enough. Rather than attempting to free the eighteenth-century black text from either its literary or literal black or white self, “Unbound” liberates additional African lenses through which Afro-British American literature in the eighteenth century might be interpreted.

During the era of the slave trade, more than twelve million Africans were brought as captives to the Americas. With them they brought memories, ideas, beliefs, and practices, which forever shaped the histories and cultures of the Americas. However, even the expanding and
introduction

exciting field of early African American literature has yet to sufficiently confront the undeniable imprints of West African culture and consciousness on this early black writing. This book offers a sustained study of the relationship between specific West African modes of thought and expression and the emergence of a black aesthetic in eighteenth-century North America. It explores how Senegalese, Igbo, and other West African traditions provide striking new lenses for reading poetry and prose by Phillis Wheatley, Olaudah Equiano, Lucy Terry, James Albert Gronniosaw, John Marrant, and Venture Smith. In so doing, this work confronts the difficult dilemma of how to use diasporic, syncretic, and vernacular theories of black culture to inductively think through the massive cultural transformations wrought by the Middle Passage.


“Unbound” traces one of the most culturally diverse historical periods of African American literature—the eighteenth century—through its triangular engagement with the languages, cultures, and experiences of Africa, Europe, and North America. It does so first by exploring the paradoxical implications of the multiple positions of Africanity in early Afro-British America, both real and imagined. Next, by drawing upon the immensely eclectic and interdisciplinary range of scholarship available—across disciplines from one side of the Black Atlantic to
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the other—I locate elements of a developing eighteenth-century black aesthetic. Finally, this book offers new ways of incorporating existing Western and Afro-Western critical tools alongside new Africanist ones to relocate Africa (both real and imagined) within African American literature.

The Black Aesthetic

Long before current scholarship could begin to forge new paths in black American literature, it often did so by bracketing, castigating, and worse yet exiling early black aesthetic critics’ African-centered scholarship to an intellectual and cultural nomad’s existence. As a result, the significant impact of the work of scholars such as Addison Gayle, Hoyt Fuller, and Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones) toward the foundation of what we now laud in progressive interdisciplinary movements has not been fully appreciated. Understandably, it is fitting to invite them back to the table, to participate in a meal they not only helped prepare, but also one for which they supplied many of the essential ingredients. Notably, texts such as Dudley Randall’s *The Black Poets*, Abraham Chapman’s *New Black Voices*, Stephen Henderson’s *Understanding the New Black Poetry: Black Speech and Black Music as Poetic References*, and Leroi Jones and Larry Neal’s *Black Fire* are representative of a range of black literary history, major themes, and conventions of black aestheticism.

These critical foundations have been defined and articulated in one of the most fundamental studies of the work of the early black aestheticians, Addison Gayle’s *The Black Aesthetic*. Drawing upon historically powerful literary antecedents from Pauline Hopkins to Richard Wright, the scholars represented in this groundbreaking collection—many political icons, some reaching near-demagogue status during the era of what has come to define black activism and nationalism, the late 1960s and 1970s—constructed a frame of reference for identifying, analyzing, and evaluating black art and culture, thus defining an aesthetic dimension of black or African identity that remains with us today. These black artists, scholars, activists, and innovators unapologetically and diligently created the contexts and carved the necessary spaces within which to name, create, and celebrate blackness. Their words announced the cultural wars between blacks and whites already centuries in progress. More important, they articulated in distinct black voices the sociopolitical and historical implications of those wars. They refused to be silenced, even
by one another, and indeed many of the early debates remain at the center of today’s discussions of black literature, aesthetics, politics, art, music, and nearly any subject or issue which impinges on the conditions, lives, and experiences of black people.

Paradoxically, while these early black aestheticians spoke representatively in a diversity of voices, which inaugurated a context within which to celebrate as never before the language, the sensibility, the art, politics, psychology, sociology, history, and the meaning of black existence, they regrettably left effectively silenced other black voices. In so doing, they forfeited a rich cultural heritage of black aesthetics, which they dismissed as being irrelevant and steeped in white culture. If it is true, as Hoyt Fuller claims, that “the new black writers have decided that their destiny is not at the mercy of the white man” (346), it is also true that their destinies are tied to other equally oppressive dilemmas. As Fuller amply identifies, black people are burdened with negative images of themselves upon which myths about black inferiority are erected. Further, compounding this dilemma faced by these new writers as inheritors of the black aesthetic is the necessarily “vast” gap between “white and black interpretations of those values” (330) which underlie their divergent yet intersecting experiences in a racially divided world. As Larry Neal argues in “The Black Arts Movement,” the onus is on the black writer to create through her literature a new “symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconography” (257). Importantly, this new aesthetic must speak to and for the global and local issues affecting the “first” and “third” worlds inhabited by people of African descent.

This book addresses the implications of black aesthetics for eighteenth-century black writers, who at best have been tolerated and condemned to, and at worst exiled and otherwise banished from the canon of “real” or “authentic” black literature. To that end I would like to offer three extensions of a bridge from the eighteenth-century Afro-British American authors in this study and their literary and cultural descendants who consciously constructed the black aesthetic. First, the existing cultural traditions that constitute the basis of the black aesthetic are present in the diverse worldviews and ways of knowing brought forward in the earliest black literature. Second, the “desire for self-determination . . . nationhood . . . the relationship between art and politics; [and,] the art of politics” (Neal, 257) are of primary (not secondary) concern to eighteenth-century black artists. Moreover, I contend that without their deliberate attempts to craft a humanity and positively alter and affect first their own black consciousnesses through a “reordering of
Western” aesthetics, they would have been unable to effectively prick the conscience and raise the consciousness of a white slaveholding and oppressive society. Third, while there can be no doubt that it would have been impossible for these early black writers to write solely for, and speak to, black people and their concerns, as the fundamental project of the twentieth-century black aesthetic has insisted upon, we should not assume that these eighteenth-century writers were not consciously aware of the need to alter a reality—symbolically or otherwise—that did not correspond with their own experience of black humanity.

In “‘Total Life Is What We Want’: The Progressive Stages of the Black Aesthetic in Literature” Reginald Martin elaborates on the critical contexts, concepts, and historical factors impacting formations, and attempts to reformulate black aesthetics. He explains that the “elucidation of the term black aesthetic will only come with the acquisition of a clear understanding of what it meant to its originators, its progressive stages, and where the term uncomfortably rests in the world of literary thought today” (49). Part of that reformulation will also require us to relocate eighteenth-century black writers as an important (albeit uncomfortably situated) stage in the development of a black aesthetic.

The Scholarship of Visibility

The dilemma for contemporary scholarship on eighteenth-century literature by black English-speaking authors, though not unrelated to the very predicaments faced by the early black authors themselves, is not quite the same. Like them we (scholars) mourn the loss of an Africa buried under a palimpsest of European and Anglo-American ways of knowing. Further, we remain similarly moored to methods of unraveling and celebrating cultural hybridity and diversity that produce equally troubling structures and systems. However, unlike our eighteenth-century literary predecessors, we are bound in different ways, constrained and compelled through distinct historical and aesthetic moments that oblige us to disentangle the very quandaries left by these early black writers.

Significantly, as studies of the past ten years make clear and visible, the scholarship around eighteenth-century Afro-British America is caught in a web of contemporary criticism, theory, and history that undermines attempts to unconditionally recover the literature of this period from the white and black envelopes that continue to enclose it. Not surprisingly, the conditions of recovery are complicated by remnant
proscriptions from all corners. Importantly, much critical work has been done of late to uncover problems, debates, and conflicts associated with the historical, cultural, and literary knowledge that impacts Afro-British America. Consequently, such scholarship confronts predicaments—some deeply imbedded and others lingering just beneath the surface—in a way that enables us to more clearly extract meaning from hidden texts of Africa, Britain, and America present in this early black literature. This tendency in current scholarship to engage formerly bracketed impasses in the study of early Afro-British American literature has forged new and expansive paths for scholarly advances in the field. Thankfully, these significant advances and inroads in early black historical and cultural studies have made possible work such as mine. Indeed, discernable changes in early black literary studies can be marked by an unbounded approach that discloses issues that have been traditionally excepted, deferred, underanalyzed, or (un)consciously omitted.

To be sure, while not wholly representative of the field of eighteenth-century black literary studies, the work of Rafia Zafar, Katherine Clay Bassard, Joanna Brooks, David Kazanjian, Phillip Gould, and Vincent Carretta offer much to my rendering of an unbinding of the black aesthetic through a theorizing of the dilemma of self and identity in the eighteenth-century Afro-British American literature. Principally, their scholarship provides key points of entry into some of the most heavily debated issues in a relatively small but far-reaching and diverse area of study. Consequently, each of these scholars cracks interdisciplinary windows that I more fully open throughout this text. Each identifies an aesthetic, or contributes to the location of a crucial component of an existing or developing aesthetic, operating in the worlds and works of eighteenth-century Afro-British American authors. It is therefore fitting that I introduce this book, in the tradition of the literary ancestors to whom it is dedicated, by an invocation of these scholarly muses. More to the point, I want to acknowledge the critical space their work has left for my own. While I have both agreed and disagreed with them on more than a number of critical occasions, their engagement with the multivalent ghosts that haunt eighteenth-century Afro-British American literature has troubled my own theorizing about the literature. Not surprisingly, their innovative and controversial literary and cultural work—as well as the wealth of scholarship they carry forward in their work—highlights the strength of early black literary studies.

Surveying the critical paths they have laid, I attempt to map out how and what their scholarship makes visible about the impingement of intersecting forces—from Africa, England, African America, and Afro-
British America—on early black writers and their texts. Further, I reflect on diverse dilemmas each scholar confronts as she or he attempts to unearth complex nationalized historical realities alongside equally problematic racialized political strivings. While I have resisted the impulse toward any superficial categorization of this body of scholarship, I have located a common thread. Because their work necessarily exposes the irresolvable gulfs and divides created as a result of the transatlantic slave trade, like the writers they study, these scholars have all participated to some extent in an invention of Africa.

Similarly, not unlike the eighteenth-century Afro-British American writers whose works they study, these scholars find themselves in a catch-22 situation. At least two impossible scenarios present themselves: First, in exposing the very obstacles that impede complex contemporary analysis of Afro-British American literature, one risks rendering (by default) Africa invisible. Second, one’s attempt to correct the first scenario—by replacing or renaming a previously displaced Africa—risks arrival on a slippery slope toward origins, roots, and essentialism. “Unbound” offers yet another scenario, one that neither brackets nor wholly defines an African self in early black literature. Rather, I submit Africa—invented, imagined, and real—as a visible manifestation of the dilemma these writers faced and the means by which they attempted to reorder tricontinental identity. Clearly, the critical playing field is anything but neutral: visibility is a political move—intentional or not. Far more exciting and valuable than any attempt to reconcile the two scenarios—caught between the need to theorize Western ways of knowing and the desire to actualize African ones—is what we produce as a result of such critical confrontations. Notably, in their decisions to unmask black captivity, to spiritually interrogate divine interventions, to raise Lazarus from the shadowy depths of American Awakenings, to mourn what and how history remains, to aestheticize the poetics and narrative economies of commercial and cultural conversion, and to reauthenticate documents, these scholars have identified and thus contributed critical strands to the uncovering of an eighteenth-century black aesthetic.

Out of a seemingly “whitewashed” eighteenth-century black literature Zafar uncovers black aesthetic elements: masking, capture, and renaming. Specifically, black American writers donned masks as self-consciously empowering moves to inscribe and rename the terms of their humanity. Moreover, by “capturing the captivity” these early black writers “changed permanently the meanings of the genres they appropriated” (10). Equally important, Zafar’s scrutiny of how identity politics was conflated with the politics of canon formation exposes “race”
as a gatekeeping mechanism that codes blackness in such a way as to render an eighteenth-century black text white. Drawing a line between Jeffersonian politics and twentieth-century black aesthetic criticism, she exposes how DuBoisean double consciousness was misapprehended, the effects of which have been to misname and displace the earliest black American literature. Problematically, writers like Wheatley have been subsumed under the racialized, nationalized terms of one historical period (eighteenth century) and the politics (or politicized aesthetics) of another (post-1960s and 1970s Black Aesthetic, and Black Arts Movement). Behind the “contemplative girlish countenance [that] announces . . . then, as now, that Wheatley has resolved to take on the ghosts and models of European culture” (38), is a mature and equally determined poetic voice confronting “then as now” the specter and symbol of Africa.

Bassard locates Wheatley’s Africa within the discourse of African Americanism and the language of survivorship, exposing early black women’s works as viable instruments and channels through which foundational strategies for the assumption of pre-emancipation agency can be analyzed. In doing so, she unpacks a great deal of historical, theoretical, cultural, and discursive baggage as she confronts aesthetic and cultural processes that both enable and provide obstacles for early black women’s writing. In particular, Bassard’s “practice of reading black women’s intertextuality”—what she terms “spiritual interrogations”—stands prominently on the concept of divine authority as being undergirded by the interrogative rather than the imperative mood. Thus, subjectivity, agency, and racial and gendered configurations of culture are expressed as a kind of divine dialogue that produces power through a regeneration of knowledge about black women and their texts. This textual matrix contains, transforms, releases, and regenerates the very power it describes, and thus enables birth and rebirth, through poetic narrative recovery and revision. Looking out beyond her frontispiece, ready to do battle with American, European, and African ghosts, we are reminded of Wheatley’s transformation by means of spiritual interrogations—a call to spiritual and cultural conversation. Transformed by looking inward, Wheatley now has a subject in view, and that subject is her own spiritual and African self.

Brooks highlights the significance of this type of Christian conversion as that which links the spiritual and cultural self—as both a personal and communal event reinforced through personal testimony and reenacted in spiritual resurrection of an entire community, through
her attention to the prevailing “tropes of revival and resurrection . . . [in] the story of Lazarus” (10). In so doing, she points to the way that black writers like Wheatley used existing religious “formulas such as conversion, revival, and resurrection” to confront internal and external crises resulting from the “alienating and mortifying effects of slavery, colonialism and racial oppression” (9). Consequently, the “physical performances of death and rebirth” that “signified” individual, communal, and cultural transformation as manifested in the Lazarus figures provide a key to unlocking early black writers’ engagement with African and other (nonwhite) discourses. Despite claims of “literary ‘whiteface’” (14), black and Indian texts speak as much to one another, and their own respective black or Indian communities, as they do to white communities. More important, an “understanding of how race was lived and how racial identities were formed in the eighteenth century” (14) provides a clear map and a progressive strategy for theorizing the dilemmas presented by issues that define, recover, and reconstruct race.

Kazanjian argues for a reorientation of established methods of dealing with trauma, and the traumatic circumstances to which such concepts of loss are affixed. Namely, loss is viewed as an abundant social process rather than an individual pathological one (ix). Mourning is thus constructed as a political agent doing battle with an unsettling and essentializing history (2) that underscores the irresolvable nature of loss—the “mourning without end” (3). Thus, it is mourning itself, rather than the lost object, that signifies a recurrent and self-producing object to be mourned. Such a focus enables a consideration of how African writers construct imaginative realms that function as literal spaces of conflict resolution and analysis—developing corrective and survivalist strategies through which imagination can be used to provide practical solutions for changing current conditions. Considered thus, the imagination, like loss, mourning, and melancholia is seen as an equally valuable tool, but for different purposes and to different if equally important ends. Beyond merely bringing the past to history (or history to the past), one must also acknowledge that mourning not only recovers what remains but mourning also affixes itself to historical fragments and vestiges—like barnacles that adhere (are moored) to the bottom of a ship.

Affixed to antislavery writing and its aesthetic product, the commercial jeremiad is a genre that reverses the terms under which Africans were deemed savages and barbarians in comparison to the supposedly more cultured and civilized white men and women. Gould invites
dialogue about the implications of an antislavery discourse which “effectively made ‘beasts’” of slave-trading “Europeans and Americans”—whites (19). Gould’s attention to what this literature reveals about the eighteenth-century Anglo-American world and its relationship to nation, race, and commerce lays bare important secular tensions that existed on both sides of the Atlantic. Less about ending slavery than justifying commercialism, sentimental rhetoric about the barbarity and viciousness of the slave trade was to define—by negation—a more civilized commerce. Concurrently, antislavery literature projected a simple and unaffected guise for the enslaved African whose innocence was juxtaposed against callous unremorseful man stealers. In so doing, he demonstrates yet another dilemma faced by eighteenth-century Afro-British American writers, the double-edged sword made evident in their simultaneously negative and positive varnishing of dual self-images, and the subsequent questions such polishing invokes about issues of black literary agency and empowerment. As such, Gould invites a productive revisiting and expanded understanding of the way signifying languages are liberated.

Carretta’s call to contemporary scholars to confront the “powerful conflicting evidence” (xv) that the recovery of Equiano’s baptismal and naval records demand, highlights the dilemmas posed by any attempts to recover Africa in eighteenth-century Afro-British American literature. Namely, because these documents contradict Equiano’s narrative claims to an African birthplace, through their authentication of him as an American-born South Carolinian, those who privilege Equiano’s account of his pre–Middle Passage African experience must justify their continued reliance on his narrative in the face of other—officially sanctioned—forms of evidence. Further, Carretta’s claim that “the author of The Interesting Narrative was an even more profoundly self-made man than [Benjamin] Franklin if he invented an identity to suit the times” (xvii), while it reinforces and validates an African man’s claims to agency, is based primarily on the fact that he was not in fact African by birth, but rather by invention. Clearly, Carretta’s biography offers compelling evidence that must be grappled with, but the evidence, like the argument it implicitly makes about African identity, must be grappled with as well. Specifically, equally impenetrable are the codes and multiple paradoxes in which eighteenth-century black texts such as Equiano’s are enshrouded. One great paradox remains: To be a “citizen of the [African] world” (367) an African-descended person must continually engage the dilemma of a ghost.
Historical and Cultural Recovery

Without early black history and cultural studies the work I undertake would be impossible. Indeed, the historians whose work informs mine exhibit a shared interest in compiling, presenting, and analyzing a body of knowledge about the African continent as a means to enable viable connections between the slavery era of black American history and its pre–Middle Passage origins. Thus, these scholars have enabled a direct challenge to the bracketing of seemingly irresolvable cultural gulfs and divides among Africa, Europe and the West, and the North American colonies. In particular, the pioneering and trailblazing efforts of Sterling Stuckey, Mechal Sobel, Michael Gomez, and Craig Wilder have yielded viable maps for African recovery—despite the tensions inherent therein. Importantly, their unapologetic historical and cultural recovery of Africa emboldens my own efforts to interrogate what is African in Afro-British American literature. Moreover, their work, which rigorously reconstructs Africa and African ways of knowing through a variety of archival, primary, and secondary sources, is part of an ongoing project of imagining Africa through new—and necessarily African-centered—lenses.

Sterling Stuckey locates the origins of Afrocentrism in pre-emancipation slave culture by identifying the wealth of sources from which African-descended people were able to draw, the extent to which they were conscious of indigenous African practices and ways of knowing, and how early blacks used such knowledge to survive and resist their conditions under slavery. In particular, Stuckey’s sketches of African religious practices, rituals, and such cultural practices as dancing, drumming, placing of hands on the dead, singing, and shouting spirituals, burial rituals, and especially the symbolic and practical use of the circle and the ring are critical to understanding the seeds of an early black aesthetic—with both the forms and the rituals they accompany sharing equal importance. Hence, “for the slave, the retention of important features of the African cultural heritage provides a means by which the new reality [sacred and secular] could be interpreted” (24). Such an articulation of the powerful influence of African aesthetics in spiritual and secular contexts is critical to unbinding a black aesthetic that may reveal eighteenth-century black writers’ assumption of yet another level of agency and aesthetic self-sufficiency through their reconnection with Africa.

Mechal Sobel’s exploration of the independent nature of relationships between blacks and whites in American culture troubles the space
of reciprocity. In so doing, she points to one of the dilemmas faced by attempts to reconnect with African ways of knowing—the vexing problem of how to capture cultural reciprocity and interdependency while acknowledging ideological and political extensions of power that are both facilitated and restricted by models of shared cultural influences. Sobel points to such coded assemblages as time, work, place, space, death, causation, spirituality, nature, naming, family society, and ancestors as evidence of how black and white colonial America attempted to construct a coherent world in the face of such irresolvable and volatile forces as slavery. Like the transplanted Africans of different ethnicities who invented African cultural and political identities to meet this and otherworldly needs, eighteenth-century Virginians (and by extension all of the British-American colonies) created a cultural identity shaped by three continents—Africa, Europe, and North America. The question of how Africa influenced the West suggests serious implications both for how we view black intertextuality and how we interpret Afro-British American appropriation of Anglo-British-American ways of knowing.

Michael Gomez utilizes sources from anthropological archives to runaway slave notices to expose “this basic dialect—the adoption of an identity forged by antithetical forces from both without and within the slave community—[as] itself emblematic of the contradictory mechanism by which the African American identity was shaped” (12). This way of viewing identity informs an understanding of early black literature as necessarily marked by deliberate confrontation with seemingly irresolvable and incompatible African, British, and African American structures of meaning. Such a perspective has important implications for the analysis of Afro-British American literature that begins long before the critic, editor, or amanuensis enters the conversation. Namely, early black writers maintained African cultural retentions by refusing to be fully acculturated by “coercive” forces from without, by subverting dominant culture through “reinterpretation” and constructing a composite of racialized African identity based on ethnic fragments borrowed from within. Importantly, these fragmented representations of Africa contradict totalizing narratives that distort and monolithically construct Africa. Thus, Gomez unpacks discrete and invaluable elements of an eighteenth-century black aesthetic.

Recovering Afro-British-American agency in Pan-African nationalism as one of the early manifestations of collective black consciousness, Craig Wilder calls attention to African-descended people as active agents in their own history. Rather than “conflate or dissect the histories of
peoples of African descent,” his work troubles static notions of universal African “collectivism” (3). Essentialism, neither celebrated nor vilified, is constructed as an inevitable consequence of the transatlantic slave trade. Confronting the catch-22 situation of blacks as simultaneously victims and culpable agents in their own enslavement, Wilder resists engaging history as the story of “what was happening to them” (3). Instead, he presents a historical narrative of Africans in the New World from the perspective of “what they were constructing for themselves” (4). As a result, he complicates simplistic views of the connection between black oppression and unity. More importantly, Wilder compels the scholar to confront dilemmas posed by reconnecting with African ways of knowing. Early blacks had to sift through shards and remnants of Africa, not merely as signs of an irretrievable universal or particular African identity, or as a purely black reaction to white victimization. Quite the contrary, blacks acknowledged and celebrated what slavery was unable to wholly divest them of—their African cultures—however fragmented.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1: “The Dilemma of a Ghost: Early Black American Literature and Its Mournings/Moorings” analyzes the displacement of Africa in prevailing theories of African and black American literature, historicizes the dysfunctional relationship between Western- and African-centered theories, and outlines my integrative approach to reading an eighteenth-century black aesthetic back into black American literature. Drawing upon twentieth-century West African playwright Christina Ama Ata Aidoo’s *The Dilemma of a Ghost* (1964), this chapter argues that themes of loss, horror, reconciliation, restoration, and harmony are central to the literatures of the African Diaspora. Further, I explain how a syncretic blend of Senegalese poetics and an Igbo duality discourse are used as organizing structures for theorizing the dilemma of eighteenth-century Afro-British American literature.

Chapter 2: “What a Difference a ‘Way’ Makes: Wheatley’s Ways of Knowing” highlights the dilemma involved in attempting to rewrite both the spiritual and political histories upon which enslaved and nominally free African-descended people, especially African-descended women, have been constructed. Wheatley’s choice of form and subject matter reveals a complex matrix of signification and syncretization: the poet’s choice to take on—especially in the neoclassical and elegiac forms—the
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simultaneously sacred and profane suggests a very sophisticated understanding of the conventional history of the use and development of both forms, and in multiple contexts. This chapter’s reading of Wheatley’s “Niobe” poem reveals an eighteenth-century Afro-British American aesthetic steeped in spiritualization of the secular and secularization of the spiritual.

Chapter 3: “Kaleidoscopic Re-Memory in Equiano’s Interesting Narrative: Shifting the Lens to Replace the Landscapes” argues that the question of “What is ‘African’ in African American literature” emerges in the consideration of an imagined or invented Africa in the context of *The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African written by Himself.* I identify African ways of knowing that underlie Equiano’s vision and his relationship to the selves and the societies he inhabits: the concept of *chi,* its related Igbo concept of duality, *mbari,* and the complementary discursive mode of *palava.* Thus, I use the model of the Owerri Igbo *mbari* problem-solving structure as one way of theorizing the dilemmas that face Equiano’s attempts to use his life story to both reclaim an authentic Igbo heritage and recount a narrative of progress in the New World. In so doing, Equiano’s narrative defines an eighteenth-century black aesthetic that is both submerged in and emerges from the *Dilemma of a Ghost.*

Chapter 4: “Reading ‘Others’ in Eighteenth-Century Black American Literature: The Promise and Dilemma of New Ways of Reading” concludes this study by revisiting the dilemma of the unanswerability of the question of what is “African in African American.” Applying both the African and Afro-Western elements outlined in chapter 1 to brief readings of the works of Lucy Terry, James Albert Gronniosaw, John Marrant, and Venture Smith, this chapter offers conclusions about the promise and dilemma of a culturally specific reinterpretation of Africa that recovers a nonstatic and dynamic African cultural and critical presence. Thus, in the spirit of Sankofa, *The Black Aesthetic Unbound* is pleased to carry forward what remains, that which has been both glaringly present and absent, Africa.

Rather than presenting new cultural connections between African American and African knowledge bases, I have tried to shed more light on those cultural connections which already exist on both sides of the Atlantic. Throughout this work I try to avoid uncritical assumptions that cultural traditions which are shared in common between Africans and African Americans are a given. I hope to have avoided a reliance on one way of understanding what “black is” or “ain’t.” I have also tried
to ground my interpretations in the literary and life texts of the eighteenth-century African-born (or descended) British-American writer, and where authentication was not possible, I have identified that as an area for future research.

Finally, I have tried to resituate black intertextuality within a mode of self-talk or intratextual dialogue in order to privilege, as does Henderson, “the other [within]” (119). My understanding of “other” is neither wholly grounded in, nor dependent on, Western philosophies of other/self dichotomies, regardless of their critical strengths. Rather, I have acknowledged useful aspects of the Western and African-centered interpretive strategies I appropriate, while remaining grounded in a duality discourse that both mourns and is moored to an Africanist palava. I have shown that using intratextuality or self-talk precipitates simultaneous ongoing and continuous dialogue between women, children, men, and between the ancestors in this world and the other. It is in this way that what we have come to understand as the black aesthetic may be unbound. And, as a result, perhaps this newfound aesthetic freedom, modeled in and emerging from an Africanist palava tradition, will allow sufficient room for an imaginative space through which African, American, and Afro-British American ancestors, living and dead, might pass.
**What Is African in African American?**

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

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

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

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

Preface

1. Eulalie is a black American character in Christina Ama Ata Aidoo’s play *Dilemma of a Ghost*. This character represents one of the significant dilemmas posed by Afro-Western notions of what it means to be “African.” The subsequent marriage between this U.S.-born black woman from Harlem and Ato, an African-born man from Ghana, who meet at an American university and then move back to Africa after graduation, reveals just how entrenched such essentializing notions of Africa are in the mind of the black American. Aidoo captures the very complexity of the ways in which young black men and women of my generation—from both sides of the Atlantic—attempted to reclaim their African culture and identity.

Introduction

1. Hereafter referred to as Afro-British American writers. Although I follow the common practice of using African American and black interchangeably, Afro-British American refers to eighteenth-century blacks living in British colonies—to underscore the dilemma of self and identity during an era of nation building and race and class codification. African American will always refer to black Americans of the post-eighteenth century.

2. Throughout this study, African ways of knowing refer to various indigenously derived and syncretically constructed vernaculars, languages, utterances, and silences in African and African Diaspora cultures.

3. Hereinafter referred to as the *Interesting Narrative*. Unless otherwise noted, all references to this narrative will be from the ninth edition reprinted in *Olaudah Equiano: The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, edited with an introduction and notes by Vincent Carretta (New York: Penguin, 1995).
Chapter One

1. All references to this text are to the Macmillan edition: Christine Ama Ata Aidoo, *The Dilemma of a Ghost* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1971).

2. “African worldviews” throughout this study refers to “the epistemological [and ontological] differences inherent in both the origin and contradictions of knowledge and knowledge bases” (Kalu, “Women,” 229). Further, my use of this term is informed by an understanding of its contested nature and its attendant “traditional aesthetics.” (See Chidi Amuta, *The Theory of African Literature*, for outline of debates.)

3. One example of mourning/mooring can be seen in the link between Christian conversion and African burial. Albert Raboteau notes that “slaves customarily spoke of the period of seeking conversion as ‘mourning’ and thought of it as a time when the sinner should go apart, to a quiet place to struggle with his sins” (73). Raboteau points to examples from the Caribbean and the Sea Islands as “similar to initiation rites in Brazil, Trinidad, and West Africa.” See Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The ‘Invisible Institution’ in the Antebellum South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).


5. References to Blackamoor, Othello, and Moors are found throughout the culture and literature from at least the fourteenth century on—in fiction and nonfiction works (e.g., William Shakespeare and John Locke).


“Moor” *n.*: a marsh, an area of unenclosed, uncultivated land . . . a region of wasteland. “Moor” *v.*: to secure (a ship, boat, or other floating object) in a particular place by means of one or more chains, ropes, or cables fastened to the shore or to the anchors. Of a ship: to be made secure in a particular place, esp. by means of anchors or cables; to take up a particular position. “Moor” *n.*: originally used to denote a native or inhabitant of ancient Mauretania, a region of North Africa, it was later used to refer to a member of a Muslim people of Berber and Arab descent in inhabiting north-western Africa. In the Middle Ages, and as late as the seventeenth century, the Moors were widely supposed to be mostly black or very dark-skinned, although the existence of ‘white Moors’ was recognized. “Blackamoor” *n.*: a black-skinned African, an Ethiopian, a Negro; any very dark-skinned person. Since at least the sixteenth century . . . the term [Moor] has been used interchangeably as both neutral descriptor and as that which [denotes] derogatory traits based on skin-color and region of descent.

7. In general, “our” refers to a diverse and admittedly rather loosely constructed community of writers, critics, and readers of black American literature, as well as those literary scholars and theorists for whom issues related to language and cultural appropriation of Blackness or Africanness remain at the heart of an identification of aesthetic value.


9. As the play develops, we realize that Eulalie is equally disenchanted with her new family and the unexpected outcome of her plans for a return to her African homeland. Unlike Ato, Eulalie, whose mother is dead, has no family. Therefore, she comes to Africa not only expecting a return to a mythic Africa filled with coconut palms and drums beating jazz rhythms, but also hoping that Ato’s family will be hers. Instead, she finds herself surprisingly a stranger and an outcast in a place whose people, customs, rituals, and traditions appear as foreign to her as she does to them.

10. Esi Kom complains that she “cannot get a penny to pay the smallest debt . . . [because] Hureri must have . . . her machines” (70; Act 3). Similarly, the two village women claim that Eulalie “uses machines for doing everything” (74; Act 4)—“machines that cook and . . . machines that sweep” (75; Act 4). The machine that is most often held up to ridicule is the refrigerator. As an outsider, everyone naturally assumes that it is Eulalie who demands refrigerated beverages; however, both she and Ato make use of this machine. The village women remark that “her water must be colder than hailstone” and that “Monka’s teeth were set on edge for drinking water in her house” (73–74; Act 4).

11. The “been-to” is a character in African literature that represents the Western-educated African-born man or woman. As a result of having “been-to” these non-African places, the African who returns home no longer values African cultures and traditions and has a difficult time recovering a former African self while appreciating the value of non-African experiences. Gay Wilentz argues, Aidoo “connects the situation of the educated African ‘been to’ with the dilemma of the diaspora” (269). Vincent Odamten describes the been-to as “a paradox” symbolizing both “the possibility of surmounting the restrictions and limitations of their neocolonial reality” and “their oppression” as
one who is “envied and even despised or resented” (31). In terms of the value of highlighting the ambivalence of such a character, for understanding the dilemma of eighteenth-century self and identity, it might be helpful to think of “been-to” as embodying—being mourned/moored to—a kind of fractured consciousness struggling to dislodge dysfunctional remnants of black experiences of slavery and nominal (un)freedom in colonial Britain and the United States. Moreover, given the difficulty experienced by those characters who had not left Africa, but were determining where to place themselves in a newly independent African country (Ghana), it may also be useful to similarly consider enslaved Africans. Like formerly colonized African citizens, they exhibit and register similar anxieties about the nature of locating one’s African self.

12. “In Aidoo’s view, their eagerness to learn about and discuss the world around them transcends mere gossip . . . curiosity or voyeurism. The distinction implies a public educative function for storytelling that is made moral through the serious involvement of teller and listener, artist and audience” (Elder, 160).

13. Now, it might be objected, and rightly so, that I am attempting to draw a line of analogy between Ato Yawson and Kwame Nkrumah to argue for an understanding of Aidoo’s Dilemma as a political allegory of sorts. I am most certainly not. Admittedly, Nkrumah was a complex figure whose politics and contributions to Africa are heavily debated. However, it is relatively safe to conclude that at the time of Aidoo’s play Nkrumah symbolized (among other things) the seemingly insurmountable challenges posed by decolonization and Pan-Africanism, and what was at stake for a newly independent African country like Ghana. Consequently, I agree with Anthonia Kalu’s assessment that “significant to the situation in The Dilemma . . . is that the Ghana in question is new to all the characters. In the new dispensation, the negotiations and transitions are no longer smooth as everyone strives for harmony, full participation and recognition” (“Women,” 67–76).

14. Written, performed, and subsequently published when Aidoo was still an undergraduate student at the University of Ghana at Accra, Aidoo admits to her attempt to write a play addressing the Pan-African possibilities playing themselves out at the historical moment in the sixties when leader Nkrumah was attempting to build bridges between diasporic African communities. Historically and politically timely, this play’s first unearthing of the historical and cultural divides that complicate dialogue among Africans of the Diaspora remains relevant in the more than forty years since it was first performed (1964, Ghana).

15. More certainty than possibility, once a splintered black consciousness enters, passes through, and recovers from such a reconstructed portal it will—as a necessary consequence—return differently and unrecognizably fragmented, on a quest to self-identify with new newly identified cultural shards.

16. My use of “rise” is meant to signify on the “bewildering combination of forces” to which Julian Mayfield refers in his description of Margaret Walker’s poetry (qtd. in Gayle, 27). Specifically, I point here to black literature’s historical engagement with the dilemma of transcendent and insurgent rising—the dilemma of responding to competing calls to both rise above and rise
up. Spanning an aesthetic continuum from the eighteenth to the twentieth century, from Lucy Terry and Phillis Wheatley to Walker, Maya Angelou, and beyond, African American history has been imagined within what John Charles Shields termed—in his description of Wheatley’s poetry—a “poetics of ascent.” Thus, to rise is to invoke an aesthetic continuum that builds bridges and sustains links between “a past rooted in pain” (Angelou) and a new life and a new vision of life that springs forth—unbounded, free, and continuously renewing. The early black writers in this book provide the seeds from which this type of aesthetic develops—in the space of active and ongoing engagement with the dilemma of rising up and rising above.

17. Diana Fuss points to productive uses and deliberate “abuses” of essentialism.

18. Equiano and other eighteenth-century Africans, as well as many other writers, have pointed out examples of such violations against African societies which include murder and adultery.

19. See also Gauthier’s *Morals by Agreement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986) for a further analysis of social dilemmas as explored with regard to the limitations of American social contract and dilemma theory as models for exploration of dilemma within the context of this book.

20. Similarly, in his essay “Princes and Powers” in *Nobody Knows My Name*, Baldwin confronts the dilemma of simultaneously assuming and losing one’s cultural identity. In response to Leopold Senghor’s reading of Richard Wright’s *Black Boy* as a text that would “undoubtedly reveal the African heritage to which it owed its existence” (Senghor, qtd. in Baldwin, *Collected Essays*, 154), Baldwin cautions that in “presenting Wright with his African heritage,” Senghor risks at the same time “taking away his [American] identity” (154). While Baldwin concedes that “there was undoubtedly something African in *Black Boy*, as there was undoubtedly something African in all American Negroes, the great question of what this was and how it had survived, remained wide open” (154).

21. For example, in “Letter III” of *Letters from an American Farmer*, J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur asks and attempts to answer the question: “What is an American?” Similarly, in “Heritage,” poet Countee Cullen complicates Crevecoeur’s unearthing of the “American Adam” by asking, and with less certainty about his position within the Crevecoeur’s American melting pot theory, “What is Africa to me?” Between the white European-American Frenchman and the African American, Wheatley, an “Ethiop,” and Equiano, an “Igbo,” embrace the dilemma of becoming Afro-British American.

22. Although this issue of how much of Josiah Henson’s life Stowe actually used as source material for *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is uncertain, the literary and cultural model of a docile black man remains. Henson’s own words chillingly confirm this: “[Miss Stowe] referred to my published life-story, as an exemplification of the truth of the character of her Uncle Tom. From that time to the present, I have been called ‘Uncle Tom.’”

23. Both black and white history have been misleading/misled in this regard. It is to this simultaneous call from the Thomas Jeffersons and the Redding Saunders, that this book in part responds.

24. See also Cerroni-Long, “Benign Neglect? Anthropology and the Study

25. Herskovitz shares this concern as he notes that “accounting for the presence or absence of cultural survivals” must include “assessing the intensity” and “discovering how they have changed their form or . . . assumed new meaning” (*Myth*, 14). Similarly, David Evans argues that “Africanism . . . places the emphasis entirely on the African component of the cultural trait and fails to describe the process” (380).


27. My invocation of the structural value of dilemma as a rhetorical and grammatical “tool” of empowerment and action rather than the converse, primarily because of its negative connotations and its pejorative valuation, is not (structurally) unlike reformulations of “dysfunctional” deconstructive “margin to center” theories such as those advanced by bell hooks, which provide highly instructive theoretical models. Rather than merely constituting the margin as a place from which to move to the center, the margin is constructed as place of power. Dilemma is similarly valuable. Much like the traditional Western view of African dilemma tales—as understood by William Bascom (and others) as having their primary (didactic) value in the realm of the ethical; for example, to teach societal values and mores though the application of judgment to the tale (story) presented—the significance of the tales’ resistance to any simplistic aesthetic value is arguably what gives it value. The “riddle” stimulates not only the mind, but the soul as well. The beauty of its transcendent value, the ability to remove one from one’s self as in traditional forms of poetry, suggest an aesthetic which has yet to fully be articulated, even as it subsumed under “didactic” as though this term—much like dilemma—always already disclaimed any value. The very premises upon which African dilemma tales are valued—for their ability to “tap into” and otherwise engage a reader’s intellectual and moral power—are in fact what give them their aesthetic value and assign them to ethereal realms as well. See William R. Bascom, *African Dilemma Tales* (Paris: Mouton, 1975), for a fuller explanation of this genre.

28. Katherine Bassard reveals early black women writers’ strategies for creating spaces of self-recovery through the use of “spirituals matrix [that] proceeds from the deconstruction of oppositions of sacred/secular, political/religious, social/spiritual that plague much thinking around spirituals even as it disrupts the binaries of African/Euramerican, functional/aesthetic” (*Spiritual Interrogations*, 27).

29. See Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Random House, 1993). Morrison discourages “those totalizing approaches to African-American scholarship which have no drive other than the exchange of dominations—dominant Eurocentric scholarship replaced by dominant Afro-centric scholarship” (8). Engaging the dilemma of what Morrison terms “American Africanism,” she exposes the imagery of Africanness in
white American literature. Such a concept is a large part of the dilemma that eighteenth-century black writers confronted.

30. Paul Gilroy has most recently coined this term in his 1993 text, The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness. However, Isodore Okpewho notes that “the phrase itself may be traced to Robert Farris Thompson . . . and the series of courses he taught at Yale University in the ’70s on the subject of Black Atlantic civilizations” (The African Diaspora, xxi).


32. African scholars such as Chinua Achebe, Michael Echeruo, Ngugi wa’ Thiongo, and numerous others have rigorously investigated issues of African “authenticity” as they relate to language and literature.

33. Even as I suggest the critical need for “unpacking,” I recognize an equally important—perhaps more pressing—need in some circumstances (on social, political, economic levels, for example) to judiciously and responsibly “dispense” the contents of this very real “baggage,” however metaphorically we as literary critics might abstract the powerful knowledge(s) it produces and reproduces.

34. Fox-Genovese points to the predicament of black women writers, who are caught between re-presentation and representation. “Is the black woman writer first a self, a solitary statue? Or is she first a woman and if so, in relation to whom? No dilemma could more clearly expose the condition of any self as hostage to society, politics, and language” (199–200).

35. In the American Adamic myth of New World origins, Adam is not African. Joanna Brooks interrogates this myth in American Lazarus. Further complicating this flawed ordering is the attempt to “refit” a continent into a country.

36. It should be noted here that the work of literary critics Houston A. Baker Jr. and Henry Louis Gates Jr., rather than reflect a use of a “system of conceptual thought generated [wholly or significantly] from the African deep structure . . . the African worldview” (Peters, 36), highlights the way in which Western epistemologies are reoriented through connection to indigenous and syncretized African worldviews to create hybridized African ways of knowing. For, even as their work is heavily laden with the discourse of European theory, it simultaneously engages in a *palava* with the hegemonic discourse in ways that reproduce Afro/Western critical structures of meaning of value for African-centered readings of literature. Indeed, it is the transformative power implied in such syncretized forms that is most valuable in these tools of analysis.
37. Such interpretive strategies and modes of analysis, whose underlying artistic and philosophical principles are grounded in progressive engagement with Africanisms, are sometimes referred to as Africentric. “Africentric” is a term that refers to a “foundational designation, bearing definite and precise grounding in indigenous African thought and customs . . . refer[ring] specifically to African cultural attributes, ontologies, epistemologies, and axiologies with respect to their purposeful, illuminative, and regenerative agency for Africa and the African Diaspora. A related term which describes similar methods of African recovery is Afrocentrism.” “Afrocentric” is defined as a term that “designates[s] matters peculiar to the enslaved Africans and their descendants in the Americas, issues peculiar to the African American racial self and its manifold predicaments” (Peters, 35). This term has been both decried as a totalizing approach to designating Africa and applauded as a tool of empowerment. In “Afrocentricity: Problems of Logic, Method, and Nomenclature,” the late Dr. Erskine Peters sheds light on regressive and progressive elements of these two African-centered methods—Afrocentric and Africentric.

38. Vincent Carretta suggests that a diverse “choice of identities [such as Afro-Briton and African American] was possible because both British and American identities were recent political constructions invented in the eighteenth century” (7).

39. Abiola Irele’s work is an example of the type of self-conscious scholarly work to which I am referring. Notably, he adopts a self-interrogative posture when he questions the motives and position of a critic’s overwhelming and overarching need to define Africa. In his questioning of the motives and position of the literary critic (qua investigator), he suggests that “however gratifying it may be . . . to arrive at a precise definition of African literature, the effort [misses] the point [of] plac[ing] the focus . . . the essential force of African literature—[on] its reference to the historical and experiential” (The African Experience in Literature and Ideology, 11). This type of critical force which has positively influenced literary scholarship since 1981 remains relevant to my integrative approach.

40. I refer here to those scholars mentioned in my introduction and the scholarship their work brings forward.

41. Wole Soyinka complicates and universalizes this notion of “complementarity” when he asserts that “the African world, like any other ‘world’ is [both] unique [and] possesses . . . in common with other cultures, the virtues of complementarity” (Myth, Literature and the African World, xii).

42. “African origins of the American self” signifies the conflicting worldviews operating within Wheatley’s consciousness. For example, the “Puritan psychology [that] lies in contrast between personal responsibility and individualism” that Sacvan Berkovitch describes in Puritan Origins of the American Self stands in opposition to African ontologies that understand a less contentious relationship between personal and collective responsibility. In many African societies the “gift” rather than the “burden” of the assumption of responsibility is celebrated by means of initiation ceremonies. See also Mailidoma Patrice Some’s Of Water and the Spirit. The community grants this gift because personal responsibility represents an investment in the development of the community,
even as it celebrates its understanding and respect for a particular person’s gifts (talents) within a community. This particular African way of knowing has neither been wholly ruptured nor lost over time. Nor has it been maintained without significant mediation from Western resources. Culture and literature continue to contend with what DuBois has described as “double consciousness” (see W. E. B. DuBois’s *Souls of Black Folk*).

43. An excellent example of this dilemma faced by the critical attempt to voice gender analysis within African-centered contexts is the way in which Holloway reads the difference between black women and white women’s revision of the metaphors of childbirth and literary creation. “Creativity was a compromise of childbirth in the literature of the West. . . . For black women, babies were often neither realistic nor a matter of choice, and black women writers have reconstructed the issue into the figurative dimensions of their literary texts. In their works childbirth is often framed as a threat to survival rather than the (comparatively) benign worry that pregnancy will ‘sabotage their creative drive’” (171). Hence, if feminist paradigms displaced the mother with the Father, and if Afrocentric paradigms displaced the black or African mother with the African Father, then the “depth of memory that black women’s textual strategies are designed to acknowledge” permit a critical step toward a recovery—in Holloway’s terms a (re)membrance—of African Mother/Father (Wo/Man) as central to dislodging dysfunctional Western paradigms. Indeed, Holloway’s work is critical to understanding the depth of narratives that emerge from a text like Wheatley’s “Niobe.”

44. My reference to this African motif is directly related to early African American literature’s simultaneous yearning for and objectification of literacy and orality as demonstrated in the “talking book” trope, as described earlier. It is important to note that the focus on literacy as an aesthetic value and therefore central theme occupying early black texts does not necessarily preclude a very practical understanding by the authors under study in this book that literacy was not synonymous with freedom—a type of freedom perhaps. Indeed, if anything, literacy, once acquired, gave these writers the tools with which to critique the underlying visions and implications of states and types of (un)freedom. John Saillant makes a compelling argument for this way of situating “freedom” in the context of the new republic and the narratives of nominally free men such as John Jea. See “Traveling in Old and New Worlds with John Jea, the African Preacher, 1773–1816,” *Journal of American Studies* 33, no. 3 (1999): 471–90.

45. “Palava”, as Ogunyemi describes it (a gendered mode of conversation that invites disagreement), is used to explore women’s transgression and enactment of radical politics of gender, class, and culture conflicts while they simultaneously build a bridge between males and females in an attempt to rebuild African communities at various levels—familial, local, village, urban, and country.

46. Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, for example, appropriates biblical concepts and scriptural language to shed light on black women’s inter- and intratextuality in her theory of “Speaking in Tongues.”

47. Gabrielle Foreman’s “histotextuality” offers important considerations of
“the multiple strands at work in” nineteenth-century “African-American women’s literary tradition” (331).

48. See note 41, above.

49. For example, while Patricia Hill Collins’s revised black feminist theory parallels the type of structure that Ogunyemi’s more global context suggests, Ogunyemi uses definable African motifs and tropes that are grounded in an identifiable worldview. Her use of African-centered knowledge bases and her appropriation of European language into African contexts support an expanded vision of African women’s thought conceived of in the *palava*. In her reworking of the concept of black feminist thought, Collins presents a complex analysis of empowerment such that the terms that define it no longer foreground her discussion. Rather, Collins’s more inclusive “emphasi[s] [on the] particular dimensions that characterize it, but that are not unique to it” allow her to make connections to the African Diaspora in ways that abstractly explore both the similarities and differences. Her retaining of the “main ideas” of Afrocentrism without using the “loaded” term parallel Peters’s use of the term. However, Peters’s analysis and critique neither renders the “term” useless nor, in Collins’s terms, “discredits” it.

50. See Kalu’s conclusion concerning just such a need for “a systematic rearticulation of the female principle, whose agenda for continued advancement and progress is unequivocally mapped on Africa’s cultural landscapes” (“Women and the Social Construction,” 287). Platonic models—as illustrated, for example, in Gorgias—utilize similar European-centered, purposeful dialectic-dialogic discourse methods.

51. Sources for references to *mbari* are from Cole (*Mbari*) and Achebe (“African Literature”).

**Chapter Two**


3. Michael Gomez uses this term to refer to “related yet distinguishable life-styles” (9) that differentiate between mere “synthesis of . . . European and African cultural forms” and the actual lifestyles African Americans maintained in the face of “culture[s] of coercion and . . . volition” (10). Thus, polycultural refers to both “forms of expression [and] the intent and meaning behind the slave’s participation” (10).

4. E.g., “On Being Brought from Africa to America,” “To the University of Cambridge, in New England,” and “To the Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth.”

5. “Nation” refers to a group of persons related by common language,
descent (or origin) and history, country, as well as “a particular class, kind, or race of persons” (*OED* s.v.). Between the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the community of colonial subjects gradually metamorphosed from a group of displaced English men and women with a common language and history into a race of white, male, propertied rational humans with a natural right to independence and ascendency over those who were of other nations (race and gender). The evolution of the term by which colonists described themselves, from “Christian” to “free” to “white,” illustrates this metamorphosis (Reich, 124).

6. My conceptualization of this term parallels Paul Gilroy’s invention of “Africa” within the “rhizomorphic, fractal structure of the transcultural, international formation” (4) he calls the Black Atlantic.

7. See Glenn Hendler’s work in the area of nineteenth-century sentimentality, gender, and the public sphere for additional insights into this phenomenon (see *Public Sentiments: Structures of Feeling in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001]).

8. The Great Commission commands Christians to “go ye therefore, and teach all nations . . . to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19–20a). The understanding that Wheatley, as a devout Christian, could not have missed was “and lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world” (Matthew 28:20b). This passage clearly links the Christian ethereal with the transient world. Finally, the word “life” (Greek: *zoe*; Hebrew: *nephesh*) in John 10:10 denotes that “abundant living” is promised both on earth and in heaven.

9. I describe Wheatley’s work as a kind of marketplace because its synthesis of diverse Western and African ways of knowing creates a space of positive creative exchange and dialogue. Further, the role of the marketplace for African women as a center for cultural, commercial, and personal exchanges signifies on a feminized market space that does not exclude, but rather supports the entire community in West African cultures. According to Ogunyemi, “the marketplace [is] the site where . . . [many] purveyors thrive, each [with] a niche. The market combines, into one gigantic whole, what, in the Western world, has been compartmentalized and masculinized [or feminized] under capitalism into the departmental store, the bookstore, the grocery store, the hairdressing salon . . . ” (*African Wo/Man Palava*, 49).

10. David Grimsted argues that “death is tied imagistically to slavery. To die in Christ is to be ‘from bondage freed,’ though death himself ‘reigns tyrant o’er this mortal shore,’ exercises his ‘dire dominion,’ and represents ‘all destroying Power,’ which vainly tries to ‘chain us to hell, and bar the gates of light.’ Wheatley addressed the ‘grim monarch’ in terms that should have touched the human slave drivers: ‘Dost thou go on incessant to destroy, / Our griefs to double, and lay waste our joy?’” (“Anglo-American Racism and Phillis Wheatley’s . . . ,” 357).

11. As a result, I will not find it necessary, for example, to identify Wheatley’s employment of a bird trope. Nor will I make any claims about Wheatley’s specific geographic origins on the continent of Africa. I have selected Senegal as a focal point of departure for African aesthetic influences in her work.
because much of the historical evidence presented thus far suggests it is reasonable to do so.

12. See Luke 14:27–29 (King James Version): “And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple / For which of you, intending to build a tower, sitteth not down first, and counteth the cost, whether he have sufficient to finish it? / Lest haply, after he hath laid the foundation, and is not able to finish it, all that behold it begin to mock him.”

13. See Antonio T. Bly, “Wheatley’s ‘To the University of Cambridge, in New-England,’” *Explicator* 55, no. 4 (Summer 1997): 205–9, for a less gendered reading of Wheatley’s tactical employment of such religious themes to subvert dominant negative racial subscriptions and assert her own race pride.

14. Likewise, as critics we attempt to recover Wheatley from the fragment-eds remains of African, Western, and Afro-Western cultural and historical remains.

15. I am deeply indebted to Lucy Hayden’s work (following John Shields), one of the first and still few scholars to suggest that Wheatley was “possibly drawing subliminally on the story-telling tradition of her African past when she wrote ‘Goliath of Gath’ as well as when she faced the challenge of recreating Ovid’s passionate story of Niobe” (436). Necessarily, she acknowledges Shields’s contribution—thinking along these lines—as I do here and elsewhere in this book. Importantly, however, she turns to Wheatley’s Christian traditions for answers to the critical question she poses: “But why Book VI of The Metamorphoses and not another possibly one of those translated by Pope?” (436). See “Classical Tidings from the Afric Muse: Phillis Wheatley’s Use of Mythology,” *CLA* 34, no. 4 (June 1992): 432–47.

16. As of the Virginia Act of 1658, children followed the condition of their mother, thereby “demean[ing] the black mother because of her race and set[ting] her apart from white women” (Ashcraft-Eason, 70). This represents one of colonial America’s earliest and most critical links between the naturalness of motherhood and the naturalness of slavery.

17. George Sandys’s translation of the description of Niobe’s children strikes an interpretive balance between Wheatley and Ovid: “Seuen beauteous daughters, and as many boyes. All these by marriage to be multiply’d.” See Sandys’s *Ovid’s Metamorphoses Englished*.

18. “Seven” is “used symbolically, often denoting completion or perfection” (*OED* s.v.). Niobe’s children and Zeus are both the children of Titans. Zeus is the son of Chronos and Niobe is the daughter of Tantalus (Smith, *Dictionary of Classical Reference in English Poetry*, 39–167). Niobe’s and Latona’s relative positions to divinity have to do with Zeus’s usurping of his father’s throne.

19. Like Bassard, I, too, “read Wheatley’s memory of her mother’s morning libations as [what Holloway terms] a ‘(cultural) mooring’ that initiates a series of African American female ‘(spiritual) metaphors’” (37 passim). See also Holloway (passim). The version of Wheatley’s memory I cite here (from Richmond) is actually an embellishment by her biographer. The embellished version appears on the page after this original version: “One circumstance alone, it might have been said, she remembered; and that was, her mother’s custom of pouring out water before the sun at rising.” See B. B. Thatcher,
20. Robert Ferguson’s elaboration of the significance of “metaphors of light” to “early republican problems of perception” is instructive. His work suggests yet another perspective from which discrete elements of eighteenth-century black aesthetics can be interpreted. If “to see is to know in eighteenth-century thought” and if sight—in its American Enlightenment context—is constructed within a “secular frame of reference” (28), then Wheatley’s appropriation of the conventional use of metaphor of light creates a subtle but radical upheaval. Specifically, the black female poet dares to affirm her physical powers of observation alongside her mental and spiritual ones. Rising above the “sons of science,” Wheatley ascends through her use of metaphors of light to “clarify” and redefine that which is simultaneously known and unknown—motherhood and nation. In so doing, she subtly and symbolically unveils and exposes the dilemma of a nation blinded and enslaved by its own view of freedom. As I elaborate on a bit more fully later, Wheatley’s relationship to sight, seeing, and associated metaphors also links her to West African traditions of Sankofa and the Wayside Bird.

21. “Chi,” according to Ogunyemi’s interpretation, is “the quidditas inside the human body, the part that cannot be detected but that we know is there. It is essence, innateness, instincts, genetics, luck, endowment, destiny, empowerment; it is the caretaker and giver installed within” (36). She also points to the centrality of motherhood in the myth of Osun, who is the mother of Esu, the intermediary between the divine and human realm and one of the most important Yoruban deities.

22. Boubacar Barry notes that between 1681 and 1810 an estimated 304,330 to 500,000 slaves were exported from the Senegambia region alone. Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 61–80.

23. Wheatley, not unlike her contemporary Abigail Adams, is concerned about improved conditions for women in the newly imagined postcolonial society. More importantly, though, the poet understands that “all men [and women] would be tyrants if they could” (Adams qtd. in Adeola James, In Their Own Voices, 68).

24. Recent works such as David Goldenberg’s The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), and Newell G. Bringham and Darron T. Smith’s Black and Mormon (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004) offer important insights on this topic. Of course, Werner Sollors’s numerous works on ethnicity and mixed-race literature and culture and Winthrop Jordan’s White over Black remain key texts for further study on this tradition.

25. Comparisons as well between Isaac and Ishmael were well known during this period with many eighteenth-century religious texts using Sarah and Hagar as examples of the “Two Covenants” Law and Grace, respectively.

26. The alternate spelling of Sarah’s earlier name as Sarai is meant to signify on the drastically different biblical metamorphoses (cultural and spiritual conversions) that these two women experience. More important, the Genesis
narratives of name changing have important implications for reading national
and natural identity in Wheatley. Specifically, from Genesis 16 to 17, there is
a significant renaming of both Sarai and Abram. Abram becomes “Abraham,
father of many nations” and Sarai becomes “Sarah, mother of many nations.”
Three chapters later after the promised birth of their son Isaac, the child
through whom the covenant with God and lineage of the nation of Israel will
be fulfilled, Hagar experiences a metamorphosis without name change. Sar-
ah’s complete transformation to natural versus stepmother sparks a monstrous
transformation for Hagar, whose movement from bondswoman of the house of
Abraham, and mother of a son of Abraham who is heir to his household and
inheritor of a proud lineage, becomes “Hagar the Egyptian” outcast mother
to Ishmael the wild man, who would become the ruler of an “other” kind of
nation.

27. I conclude with a reference to displaced African fathers to signify the
critical attention that remains to be paid to the multiple codings and balanced
rendering of “gender” in Wheatley’s works.

Chapter Three

1. Interpretations offered in this chapter on issues regarding Afro-West-
ern recovery of African identities and worldview—especially within the context
of the heavily contested site of Equiano’s Igbo-American-British-West Indian
identity—support my thesis: Afro-European American literature of the eight-
teenth century is situated squarely within the dilemma of a ghost—a dilemma
I argue ought to be embraced by confronting head-on the question of “What
is ‘African’ in African American literature?” Rather than simply locating or
identifying African identity, it is more productive to complicate issues further
by theorizing and unraveling the very dilemma itself that identity poses. In this
way, we both reveal the richness of this literature and complicate any simple
view of the construction of African identities in eighteenth-century Afro-British
America.

2. African and African American literary scholarship (cited above) has
been actively engaged in landscaping and remapping the critical terrain of
African spaces within African American culture and literature. Their work has
built upon African-centered scholarship outside the field of literary studies by
such prominent figures as John Henrik Clarke, Yosef ben-Jochannan, Cheikh
Anta Diop, Molefe Asante, Jacob Caruthers, and Ivan Van Sertima.

and Civility in Early Eighteenth-Century Narratives,” in *Read-
ing Travel Writing*, ed. James Duncan and Derek Gregory (New York: Routledge,

The ordinary range of knowledge about Africa and Africans in
the early eighteenth century was a combination of doubt and
conviction, fact and fantasy. Although geographies were common
in the libraries of the educated, it was through travel writing that
most Britons gained their ideas about Africans and Africa. Indeed, in England, travel literature was second only to theological texts in popularity during the eighteenth century, and although Africa was one of the least known places, it figured prominently in the many compendiums of travel published during the eighteenth century. In fact almost four times as many books about Africa appeared in the first half of the eighteenth century as all of the previous century. . . . Revisionist scholarship, such as Anthony Barker’s history of the African image, has convincingly argued about this literature that “this period before about 1769 was a fruitful one, yielding the most influential descriptions of Negro society of any in the eighteenth century” (15).


6. Quoted from Isaiah 12:2–4

7. Asante expresses the full import of nommo and the vital function it fulfills in its capacity to drive African structures of meaning, being, and analysis. This “word force” is an indispensable aspect of a society that understands the interconnectedness between the utilitarian or functional and the seemingly abstract nature of art (The Afrocentric Idea, 17). “Thus the African [artist] sees [his or her] discourse [or rhetoric] as the creative manifestation of what is called to be. That which is called to be . . . becomes the created thing; and the artist, or speaker, satisfies the demands of society by calling into being that which is functional” (75; emphasis in original).

8. Also, it is worth noting that the biblical recording of “the generations of Jacob” (Genesis 37:2) resonates in interesting ways as it relates to lost birthright (Abraham, Essau, and Jacob), slavery (Joseph as favored son of Jacob is sold into slavery by his brothers), and the legacy of Jesus, which comes through the legacy of Abraham.

9. I am grateful for Angelo Costanzo’s clarification of a subtle but significant difference between at least two different ways of reading Equiano’s use of Vassa. Whereas Carretta emphasizes Equiano’s use of Vassa to also support his assertion that Equiano was born in South Carolina and not in Africa, it is equally plausible that Equiano’s use of Vassa is a matter of necessary convenience—purely for legal and practical purposes.
10. Along similar lines, Irele has argued “that African letters in European languages were called into being in the first place primarily by a sense of historical grievance, and . . . sustained . . . by our continuing need to situate our collective existence—our very being as Africans” (*The African Imagination*, 46).

11. Elizabeth Alexander is an award-winning poet, essayist, and professor of African American studies at Yale University. The work I cite in this study is from her book of critical essays *The Black Interior*—an important contribution to contemporary black aesthetic theories.

12. Originally a title conferred upon Native Americans, eighteenth-century black writers such as James Albert Gronniosaw (1770), Venture Smith (1798), and Olaudah Equiano (1789) often appropriated the concept of the noble savage in an African context to assert their human rights vis-à-vis a noble and often royal African lineage.


Sense of “country” was very narrow in precolonial Igboland, so narrow that it would at times be limited to the village group. With a young boy who had never traveled out of his village before and had not attended any of the large inter-group markets or fairs where speakers of many different Igbo dialects met, this narrowness of outlook would be even more pronounced. This would then explain why what must have been dialects of the same language were described by him as different tongues and how the young Equiano who was being hustled down the coast to be sold, could learn “two or three different tongues” within a space of about six months even though no special efforts would have been made by his masters to teach him these tongues.” (150)

14. Equiano’s attention to the importance of his being “understood” with an Afro-Igbo context is relevant to his narrative act of African cultural reclamtion. Specifically, the importance of community and conversation to an Igbo cannot be overstated, and the fact that he cloaks this replacement or African fragment within the context of eighteenth-century knowledge about language is especially clever—demonstrating his adroitness at maneuvering both Western letters and sentiments. See also Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina, *Black London: Life before Emancipation* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995) and Emmanuel M. P. Edeh, *Towards an Igbo Metaphysic* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1985).

15. While Carl Linnaeus’s scientific scheme (*Systema Naturae*, 1735) classified man according to certain human racial characteristics, Georges Buffon’s “anthropocentric” scheme (*Histoire Naturelle*, 1749) positioned man within the animal hierarchy dependent upon how near or far he was situated to the lower animals. Africans were placed at the bottom of both systems of classifications. The biologically based racism—vis-à-vis physical anthropology and environmentalism—of Virey, Rousseau, Blumenback, and other biological
determinists, anthropologists, and natural scientists—consciously and unconsciously—participated in developing such biocultural landscapes.

16. I offer a brief and contracted reading of this description in terms of Equiano’s signifying in chapter 2. Also, Carretta has fittingly noted the significance of Equiano’s reference to the “history of neither a saint, a hero, nor a tyrant” (31) with regard to traditional literary conventions of the period. First, such a reference “was increasingly seen in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as the proper subject for autobiography, biography, and the novel.” Second, Equiano’s “decision to use the name of Gustavus Vassa, the Swedish patriot king who overthrew a tyrannical usurper, certainly gives him an heroic cast” (xx).

17. Faction is a “form of literature that treats real people or events as if they were fictional or uses real people or events as essential elements in an otherwise fictional rendition . . . a mix of fact and fiction.” American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (4th ed., 2000). While I prefer “faction,” other scholars consider “first novel by a person of African descent” to be more representative of “the path-breaking nature of Equiano’s efforts” (Reader’s Report on “Unbound”).

18. Helena Woodard, African-British Writings in the Eighteenth Century: The Politics of Race and Reason (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1999). Her analysis of the works of Defoe and Swift as two of the more prominent writers “that we can look back to find the African as an indelible fixture in English writings” explores the complexities of literature which offers “a popular culture symbol of human depravity [which] serves a polite readership and a cultivated intellectual establishment more purposefully when turned to didactic ends.” Namely, such work “still leaves intact the problematical emblematic representation of depravity,” which in the case of Swift was “black, female, and African” (110). James Baldwin, in Notes of a Native Son, explores similar risks with regard to the problematic nature of “black representativeness” as seen most prominently in the work of Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin and Richard Wright’s Native Son.

19. Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, Africa Wo/man Palava: The Nigerian Novel by Women (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). Ogunyemi recuperates the homophone and feminine version of “palaver” as “palava,” which means “trouble” or “quarrel.” This critical linguistic move recenters the African wo/man and child (African woman, man, child) through mutable transformative dialogue known as palava. “Palava” is used to explore women’s transgression and enactment of radical politics of gender, class, and culture conflicts while they simultaneously build a bridge between males and females in an attempt to rebuild African communities at various levels—familial, local, village, urban, and country. Thus, palava refers to “interpretation, both as textual analysis and as translation from one language to another . . . [and] misinterpretation through misreading or misunderstanding [that] generates palava or quarrel. The [role of the] critic as interpreter [is to] attempt to set the record straight, to resolve disputes through illumination to make a text more easily understood, especially as most are written in the language of the colonizer” (96). In palava a consensus is often achieved in the space of disagreement or difference. Having a conversation with an eighteenth-century slave narrative, for example, means
that the critic attempts to address questions the narrative poses by repeatedly questioning the multiple and diverse vistas from which the author speaks. I argue that Equiano uses his narrative to engage in just such dialogue as that implied by my use of the term.

20. While the extensive scholarship on Equiano’s narrative repositioning of subjectivity and agency is too numerous to mention, Woodard’s reading is representative. “Acting as a foreign observer of English culture . . . Equiano . . . both vilifies and esteems the European, ultimately challenging readers to view themselves as the objectified Other” (195). See also Winthrop Jordan, White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro 1550–1812 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968). This historian’s seminal and still relevant (though somewhat dated) argument provides one of the most cogent and rigorously defended analyses of what he terms “definition by negation.”

21. Andrew Varney, Eighteenth-Century Writers in Their World: A Mighty Maze (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999). Varney argues that the “tension generated between the contesting principles of familiarity and otherness, or of recognition and perplexity . . . is inscribed in early eighteenth-century writing cultures on alien cultures, irrespective of whether they are real or imaginary” (4). Further, “in terms of the very many narratives of the early part of the eighteenth century which record real or invented histories of—or voyages to—remote places, this opposition manifests itself in on the one hand discovering outlandish wonders in such places, and on the other in finding that they are in fact very like home” (4). Certainly, Equiano’s critical analysis of “home” in his narrative suggests an attempt to explore familiarity and foreignness as coexisting cultural arenas.

22. Universal symbols include the serpent in the Garden of Eden who represents the Devil, a symbol of regeneration and immortality, and two references to Moses’ use of the snake as a symbol of healing—when God told Moses to put snakes on a pole to cure snakebite and when God turned Moses’ rod into a snake and then changed it back to demonstrate his power. Benjamin Franklin’s image of the disjointed snake in his 1751 cartoon became the symbol of American unity, as well as classical images of Hermes’ intertwined snakes with the staff of the healer Asclepius. Further, there are intertextual moments to be noticed between Equiano’s references and Harriet Jacobs’s Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl and Frederick Douglass’s Narrative. Douglass remarks that “such was his [Master Covey’s] cunning, that we used to call him, among ourselves, ‘the snake’” (61). This description of Covey lurking in the grass is indicative of his deceitful character and similarity to the serpent—devil—in the Genesis myth. Jacobs, like Equiano, recounts her tale of fleeing from her masters to a space of wilderness where the fear of snakes becomes equally menacing and analogously related to the fear of being recaptured.

23. While other aspects of Catherine Acholonu’s The Igbo Roots of Equiano have been called into question—her cultural readings about snake lore in Igbo culture are useful. She argues that it is quite natural that an Isseke Igbo would use a parable involving a snake to illustrate something as significant as one’s destiny in this world, as “the snake is the Igbo symbol of spirituality” (83). Thus, whether Elder Egwuatu Onwuezike is old enough to have first- or secondhand verifiable knowledge of Equiano’s having lived in his village, as an Igbo elder
his knowledge of Igbo culture and ways of knowing are not questioned. Onwuzezi confirms that “the python was beloved among our people. We did worship it as other villages did and we welcomed it. We lived with it, and its arrival is always seen as a good omen” (qtd. in Acholonu, 64).

24. Acholonu adds that Equiano was a “member of the Eseke ruling kindred,” and his uncle “was the chief judge of the village and therefore the ruler.” Moreover, “his father, Ekwealuo, was one of Isseke’s great judges and titled men” (35).

25. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, one of the primary distinguishing factors in the hierarchy of divinity, humanity, and other subhuman forms of life is the ability to name. God first calls atmospheric conditions such as light and earth into existence from matter that is void and without substance through the act of naming. God said “let there be light” and so forth. His creation of man requires a bit more interconnection than mere name—the breathing of life into human form. However, immediately following the creation of man—named Adam—is humanity’s naming of animals. Thus, the power to name, in a Judeo-Christian “Western” theology, connotes “dominance” over as supported by scriptural doctrine. It is the divinity—God—who calls into existence, through an act of naming, and humanity who is then given the authority of naming that which he has dominion over. From a Western perspective, an enslaved African’s assertion of such “naming” power, through his connotative reference to the names of things already in existence, is tantamount to signifying a similar form of humanity, if not agency (as that of his white masters). From an Igbo or African perspective, nommo, or naming, is analogous—through coterminous identification and description—to bring into existence a particular type of energy—to the very act of creation itself. The boundaries between divinity and humanity are not quite as delineated as in the Western traditions. Therefore, the value Equiano places on names and naming is quite significant to his narrative of progress and to his assertion of African humanity—from multiple vistas.

26. “Conventional eighteenth-century narratives by white travelers described the land, people, culture, and the experience of engaging such ‘foreign’ experiences, even if, as was often the case, the ‘other’ was within. Moreover, in order to fulfill their fundamental purpose of naming, defining, and describing ‘others,’ traditional travel narratives by whites employ such descriptive techniques as: (a) observations, which refer to ‘specific descriptions of what [the traveler] saw’; and (b) reflections, which refer to ‘the philosophical, aesthetic, moral, or political thoughts’ these sights occasioned” (Langley, “Interesting Exchanges,” 49–58).

27. Angelo Costanzo’s Surprising Narrative provides an excellent analysis of Equiano’s use of biblical types such as Joseph and others.

28. William Andrews’s To Tell a Free Story, in particular chapters 1 and 2 on the first fifty years, provides comprehensive analysis of the distinction between eighteenth-century slave narrative conventions.

29. I refer here to the multiple names: Olaudah (birth name in Africa), Michael (on board the African Snow on the way to the West Indies), Jacob (in Virginia), and Gustavus (on board the Industrious Bee on the way to England).
30. Equiano refers to these two different types of snakes and the multiple meanings they connote and denote.

31. Signifying is also relevant to resituation of the British antislavery debate within an African context.

32. Biblical exegesis that privileges figurative over purely literal has historically been—cogently and convincingly—argued by biblical scholars as the predominant characteristic and language especially as interpretations are applied to books of the Old Testament. Paradoxically—when applied to “others”—figurative and literal scriptural interpretations are liberally and flexibly applied, for the most part, as needed to support social, economic, and political aims.

33. Alexander argues that “[b]lack life is so consciously about presentation. Whether that image presented is church lady or thug, the sense that we are always being evaluated has everything to do with how we comport [or present] ourselves” (13). Notably, “if any one aphorism can characterize the experience of black people in this country, it might be that the white authored national narrative deliberately contradicts the histories our bodies know. There have always been narratives to justify the barbaric practices of slavery and lynching. African Americans have always existed in a counter-citizen relationship to the law; how else to contend with knowing oneself as a whole human being when the constitution defines you as ‘three fifths’?” (179). Further, she refers directly to the “realistic [black] narrative” from which “the real world and the made world—made and imagined as art—flow” (14).

34. Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro 1550–1812*. In this seminal text Jordan argues that “for Englishmen, then, the heathenism of Negroes was at once a counter-image of their own religion and a summons to eradicate an important distinction between two people” (21). Further, “as with skin color, English reporting of African customs constituted an exercise in self-inspection by means of comparison” (Jordan, 25; my emphasis). Woodard, 100–101.

Like Gronniosaw, Sancho, and Cugoano before, Equiano had to reconstitute himself on the Great Chain of Being, though always against hierarchical structures of dominance that is consistently European; further, he had to assert an identity independently of an ideological Chain. Equiano’s position on the hierarchical Chain threatens to compromise his credibility as an author in a European literary marketplace. In other words, before he could authorize his commentary to (re)shape readers’ conceptions about Africans, he first had to establish self-authorization. . . . In order to alter white perceptions about blacks and slave, Equiano thus contests those prevailing representations of Africans as Other which accompany a long history of European travel writings. (Woodard, 100–101)

35. See note 11 above.
Chapter Four

1. The speaker in Hughes’s poem is a twenty-two-year-old “colored” college student from Winston-Salem, North Carolina, attending an all-white English class in Harlem. Through the young student’s voice, Hughes considers whether being a black writer is synonymous with writing “black.” “Will my page be colored that I write? . . . Being me, it will not be white” (ll.27–28).

2. This epigraph is taken from Robert Stepto’s preface to the second edition of From Behind the Veil, his seminal text in the study of African American slave narratives and narrative form.

3. In this quotation taken from Vincent Carretta’s noteworthy anthology of black British-American writers, Unchained Voices, he argues that “eighteenth-century authors of African birth or descent . . . continu[ed] to identify themselves as Afro-Britons rather than embracing the new political identity of African Americans.” Carretta suggests that this choice between British and American identities has to do with the fact that “all [these authors] were subjects of the British monarch before the American Revolution” (1). I problematize Carretta’s analysis of “national” primarily because even as he historicizes the fluidity of Western “national” and “cultural” identity, he denies (or excludes) such specificity with regard to African “cultural” and “national” identities. Here, he moves fluidly between the terms “Creoles,” “Africans,” and “blacks” without any contextualization or historicization. Hence, I argue, he names their African cultural identities while he simultaneously posits the choices possible for their Western “national” identities. Further, that this naming occurs—rather unconsciously—at the level of the sentence speaks directly to the dilemma of locating an always already essentialized “Africa” within Western systems of identification (the needle in the haystack to which Stepto refers).

4. In “Tracing Igbo into the African Diaspora,” Douglas B. Chambers argues that the earliest attempts at cultural reconnection through “diasporic ethnogenesis, or the creation of new African derived ethnic identities outside the continent, seems to have been the first step in the historical creolization of these forcibly displaced populations” (55). Necessarily this type of reorientation suggests the possibility of sociohistorical and anthropological reconstructions of meaning and knowledge—in this case, as I suggest—within literature. For example, in the absence of their former African communities (known or unknown), early African authors such as Wheatley and Equiano begin to imagine (or remember) an African community.

5. At some level perhaps Gilroy might be seen to be a bit limited or restrictive in his failure to fully draw out the value of such early nationalist movements. Basically, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Africans in America who consciously decide to construct their communities on the basis of “race” or “national” identity—which they name African—provide at least one viable model of productive essentialism. However, I fundamentally agree with a great many assertions in Gilroy’s approach; perhaps the concept of Black Atlantic as it applies to the eighteenth century needs to be expanded across time as well as geographically—with a loosening of the “boundaries” of the Enlightenment.
6. Patricia Liggins Hill contends that “filled with rather comic irony, the poem must be recognized as the first symbolic portrayal portending race relations in the United States for the next two centuries: a battle between Native Americans and Euro-Americans as witnessed and recorded by an African American” (90). Erlene Stetson argues that “black women poets in the United States . . . driven into a compelling quest for [person and collective integration of] identity” used “subterfuge and ambivalence” as strategies of survival and expression based on “a [subconscious and subversive] perception of reality as unified and dialectic” (xvii).

7. Deerfield historian George Sheldon notes that the record of the death of “Robert Tigo, Negro Serv’t to Mr. Jn Williams died yr 11th day of May 1695” is the “earliest evidence of negro servitude in Deerfield” (50). Ironically, in 1706 a prominent Deerfield citizen, Rev. John Williams, published what was up until then one of the most well-known captivity narratives in Deerfield, The Redeemed Captive Returning to Zion, A Faithful History of Remarkable Occurrences, in the Captivity and the Deliverance of Mr. John Williams in 1706. His narrative tells of the capture of “his family, and his neighborhood unto Canada,” during which his wife, two of his five infant children, his two negro servants, and many other white settlers were killed. Rosalie Murphy Baum notes that Williams’s narrative “is one of the New England Puritan accounts that is considered an example of the archetypal form” (“John Williams’s Captivity Narrative: A Consideration of Normative Ethnicity,” 61).

8. Descriptions of Terry’s poetic form vary from Proper’s doggerel to Sidney and Emma Kaplan’s “rough-hewn verse” to Nellie McKay’s “ballad” of “rhymed tetrameter couplets” designed to be sung. Such a diverse range of meter and style of her poem emphasizes the unique richness of the poet’s inspiration and indicates the complexity of translating from oral to written form.

9. All references to “The Bars Fight” are quoted from David Proper’s biography Lucy Terry Prince, Singer of History (Deerfield, MA: Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association, 1997).

10. Mechal Sobel notes that because “blacks kept family history, made it their own, and returned it to the next generation . . . [they] played a very important role in preserving, magnifying, and disseminating family history . . . their own ideas of kin and kinship responsibility permeated this heritage” (The World They Made Together, 133–34).

11. It is worth considering Terry’s representation of Native/Anglo conflict in relation to Rev. John Williams’s captivity narrative written twenty-six years earlier. Although Williams uses the phrase “fight in meadow” to describe an English/French encounter in which a French ensign is killed, Williams’s framing of his captivity within the context of “an incursion of the French and Indians” highlights his position as an innocent victim of the unwarranted circumstances of his captivity.

Concluding Remarks

1. America’s first black female public speaker, Maria Stewart, calls for black self-uplift. She begins by acknowledging white society’s failure to “promote the cause” of African Americans, the “benighted sons and daughters of Africa, who have enriched the soils of America with their tears and blood.” After which, on the basis of observing the “many able and talented ones among us,” Stewart deduces the following: “‘I can’t,’ is a great barrier in the way, I hope it will soon be removed, and ‘I will’ resume its place” (from Religion and The Pure Principles of Morality, The Sure Foundation on Which We Must Build [1831]).


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