Introduction

“Impatient of Oppression” in Early African American Writing in Transition

Rhondda Robinson Thomas

When we think of Phillis Wheatley, our first thoughts are often of her writings or acclaim as the first English-speaking African female to publish a poetry collection in the British colonies. Although scholars, notably Vincent Carretta in *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage*, have meticulously pieced together her life history, we are often more interested in analyzing her work than considering the political, cultural, economic, social, and personal catalysts that inspired and informed her literary production. Indeed, one might argue that a series of transitional events and experiences that occurred from her birth in Gambia around 1753 to her tour of England where she published *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* in 1773 culminated in the release of her strongest antislavery statement in her March 11, 1774, letter to Reverend Samson Occom on the eve of the American Revolution in which she declared she and enslaved Africans were “impatient of Oppression.”

The Revolution serves as the pivotal mid-turning point for volume 1 of the African American Literature in Transition, 1750–1800, which uses as its historical bookends the end of the first Great Awakening in the 1740s and Gabriel Prosser’s Rebellion in 1800, a significant year that would also mark the birth of Nat Turner in Virginia and the self-emancipation from slavery of Denmark Vesey in South Carolina through lottery winnings. Wide-ranging transitional events shaped the production of literature by Black writers during this period. One could begin an analysis of these writings with the 1746 ballad “Bars Fight,” in which enslaved African Lucy Terry Prince reflects on the killing of five white colonists and capture of one and the death of two native people in the Bars, a meadow and field near Deerfield, Massachusetts, during a raid by sixty members of a French-allied Abenaki community in Canada. The period of early writings could end with “The Petition of the People of Color, Free Men, within the City and Suburbs of Philadelphia, to the President, Senate, and House of Representatives, December 30, 1799,” which signaled a dramatic shift in
the purpose and outcome many Black authors had come to expect from their writings: a means to eradicate slavery in the young nation and elevate themselves and their communities.2

Indeed, this approximately fifty-year period was marked by revolutionary wars informed by dramatic transitions that permanently changed the geographical and physical landscape of the region through peace treaties between European countries and colonists, land treaties between Europeans and the US government and indigenous peoples, and political agreements between former colonial rivals. However, these treaties and agreements led to destruction and forced removal and/or assimilation for Native peoples. For African peoples, European exploration and colonization led to the enslavement of African captives who were subjected to forced migration and captivity long before they were subjected to the dehumanizing impact of the auction block, the Middle Passage, forced labor, sociopolitical marginalization, and a severe limitation of their rights. By 1700, slave codes were enacted throughout the colonies, including the stipulation that children would have the same legal status as their mothers and the prohibition of interracial marriages. The transition from enslavement to freedom varied greatly for Africans in Northern states where legislators abolished slavery immediately and gradually, and was virtually nonexistent in Southern states that renewed their commitment to the enslavement of African peoples as a social and economic necessity. Some enslaved Africans continued to respond to forced servitude by running away to disparate destinations, often to be reunited with family, or filing petitions for freedom with state legislators. International catalysts such as the publication of the Declaration of the Rights of Man (1789) by the French Assembly and the coalescence of the British antislavery movement inspired by the 1770 Lord Mansfield decision that prevented enslaved persons from being taken from England and sold also increased the impatience of peoples of African descent in the British colonies and young America regarding oppression, providing additional rhetorical and activist strategies for them to draw on as they intensified their demands for freedom and equality.

In order to effectively utilize the rhetorical strategies of their oppressors, enslaved and free African people needed to become skilled in their master’s tongue, primarily English in the British colonies that would become America. Although Omar Ibn Said and a few other enslaved Africans penned their narratives in their native Arabic language during the antebellum period, many of the earliest Black authors, members of the group historian Ira Berlin characterizes as the “charter generations,” learned and
utilized English for literary production in both the oral and print traditions. Africans sold into slavery in the American colonies came primarily from six regions, Senegambia, Sierra Leone, Gold Coast, Bight of Benin, Bight of Biafra, and West Central Africa, and spoke numerous languages and dialects. Upon arrival in the colonies and through much of that era, African people were often associated with their country of origin, such as Senegal or Guinea, notably in fugitive slave and slave auction advertisements. For the first half of the period covered in this volume prior to the Revolution, European colonists frequently referred to people of African descent by their country of origin or as Black or Negro in legal records, bills of sale, and titles of books. Some people of African descent described themselves as African, others as Black. Still others adapted the culture of their captors, seeing themselves more as British, though some, including Olaudah Equiano, Prince Hall, and Venture Smith, dressed in the garb of white English and Americans while characterizing themselves and their people as African or Afric even after the Revolution ended. Although the series in which this volume appears is titled African American Literature in Transition, some of the earliest writers who contributed to the development of this tradition were African people writing during the Age of Exploration and the colonial period. Others, like Wheatley, who were born in Africa and lived through the American Revolution, are often classified by contemporary scholars as African American or Black, though earlier scholars have characterized her as a Negro poet. Contributors to this volume employ varied strategies in exploring the origins and utilizing racial markers for Black authors in the Americas. Some characterize them as Black, while others describe them as African Atlantic or even Black Atlantic, evoking Paul Gilroy’s seminal work of the same name. Others ask us to consider how early Black writers like Equiano and Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, born in the colonies, relocated to England and developed a British national identity. Our engagement in this discussion of naming practices for racialized Black bodies reflects the continued evolution of terms used to describe people of African descent. These terms have included Negro, Colored, Afro-American, Black, and African American as well as an assortment of designations designed to represent the percentage of white blood in a Black body, such as mulatto, quadroon, and octoroon. Through the production of a proliferation of racial markers, people of African descent were “stamped from the beginning,” designated as other through their subjection to the oppressive and dehumanizing system of slavery.

Despite the array of terms used to describe people of African descent and efforts to strip them of their identities, in the colonies and in the early
American republic, African people devised means to maintain and create cultural traditions in their mother tongue and through the use of languages they developed, such as Creole in Africa and the Delta and Gullah in coastal South Carolina. From ballads and folktales to early forms of hymns and spirituals, African people preserved their history, celebrated their lives, responded to new experiences, and articulated their desires for freedom and equality in their own languages and their enslaver’s tongue. This cultural production and political activism have continued, manifested in celebrations such as Juneteenth and Kwanzaa and social justice initiatives like the global #BlackLivesMatter movement in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Prince’s ballad, which has been characterized as the first poem composed by “an African American woman,” reflects this transition from Africa to the Americas through its embrace of rhetorical strategies found in both West African folktales and English ballads. Like Wheatley, Prince was captured in Africa and endured the Middle Passage. She was purchased by a white family in the British colonies, and she attained literacy. In Mr. and Mrs. Prince: How an Extraordinary Eighteenth-Century Family Moved Out of Slavery and into Legend, Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina notes that “another ballad, ‘Springfield Mountain,’ composed a few years later about an event in that nearby town, uses nearly the same rhythm and structure, showing how much the music and poetry of the time followed the English tradition and how much Lucy now was imbued with that culture.”

By the time twenty-one-year-old Prince composed “Bars Fight,” she had earned a reputation as an engaging storyteller, though “Bars Fight” is the only extant poem by Prince that scholars have recovered to date. Although the poem was not published for over a century after its composition, Prince’s impact on the New England community in which she lived and labored was reflected in the preservation of her ballad.

In the Americas, people of African descent utilized orality as a primary means of artistic expression, drawing on vernacular traditions that African peoples in America would continue to employ in the development of their literary practices. The majority were initially confined by systems of enslavement that legally forbade access to literacy, and those who could read and write had little time for artistic pursuits. Unknown and known bards like Prince created spirituals, ballads, and work songs that would figure large in both the vernacular and written literary traditions of African American writers well into the contemporary era. Was Prince simply commemorating a historic event? Was she expressing sympathy for white settlers who were subjected to a raid similar to what she may have been...
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subjected to in Africa? Was she penning an early critique of white colonists’ “lamentations about Indian captivity,” as Sharon Harris argues?9

Black men’s petitions have similar deep literary roots as both Wheatley and Prince’s work, continuing the cultural practices of African peoples in the Americas during periods of European exploration, colonization, and slave trading from the fifteenth century onward. Although African people often are referenced in European historical accounts or depicted in paintings about European exploration, traces of their voices and agency can also be found in the petitions or agreements they or others penned or negotiated on their behalf to their owners or to European monarchs demanding access to the rights, privileges, and/or rewards associated with service to the Crown as conquistadors or members of colonial communities.10 Indeed, Chima J. Korieh argues that African peoples, both individuals and groups, utilized these forms of legal entreaties throughout the colonial period “as a means to seek remedy for grievance for a number of types of actions, ranging from taxation, court cases and a variety of other issues.”11 Africans like Juan Valiente and Juan Garrido were enslaved by Portuguese traders and taken to the Americas. Valiente entered into an agreement with his owner, Alonso Valiente, to fight as a conquistador in present-day Mexico for four years, “providing that he keep an account of [his earnings] and bring it all back to me [his owner].”12 Garrido petitioned the king of Spain to reward him for thirty years of service to the Crown; he also worked as the pregomero, the town crier who made public announcements for Mexico City residents.13 Additionally, enslaved and free Africans submitted petitions in British settlements in the Americas for freedom and equality, as well as to demand access to opportunities such as education for their children.

By the end of the eighteenth century, transitional events including revolutions in the British colonies, France, and Haiti; the development of Black churches, fraternal organizations, and benevolent societies; as well as the Age of Enlightenment and America’s Constitutional Convention stoked African people’s desires for freedom and equality. Throughout this period, however, a series of transitions were sparked by a diverse array of voices uttering increasingly demanding declarations for the right to fully experience life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Furthermore, indigenous peoples were decimated in conflicts with colonists ranging from the Cherokees’ battles in South Carolina during the American Revolution to the Battle of Fallen Timbers in Ohio, transforming many of their communities into desolate wastelands. Colonists despaired of taxation without representation and waged a successful revolution that established a new
democratic republic that sanctioned slavery. People of African descent continually sought ways to create culture and community and continued their fight for a transition from slavery to freedom and equality through an increased use and adaptation of literary traditions. On the eve of the nineteenth century, seventy-three Black Philadelphians joined Reverend Absalom Jones in petitioning the federal government then located in their hometown to not only protect their lives and liberty but to emancipate their brethren who were still enslaved. Gradual emancipation in the North and continued enslavement in the South, which both would last until the Civil War, as well as the enactment of the three-fifths compromise and legislation mandating the eventual outlawing of the transatlantic slave trade in 1807, were contradictions of freedom. The steady stream of petitions written by Black people demanding liberty and justice for all served as a persistent reminder that the new country was not fully living up to its founding principles.

For all of the aforementioned writers, the transatlantic slave trade—a brutal system of displacement, dehumanization, commodification, and enslavement of African people that dramatically shifted the trajectory of world history—directly impacted their literary production throughout the diaspora. In her 1774 letter to Occom in the days leading up to the start of the American Revolution, recently emancipated Wheatley reflected on this shift, asserting that “in every human breast, God has implanted a Principle, which we call Love of Freedom; it is impatient of Oppression and pants for Deliverance” (emphasis mine). She not only highlights the humanity of African people, but boldly links their enslavement to the bondage of ancient Israelites, suggesting an expectation for imminent divine deliverance. In so doing, Wheatley issues a direct challenge to the colonists’ characterization of themselves as God’s people, a typological narrative they had created to justify their “errand into the wilderness” that led to the forced removal, enslavement, and/or slaughter of Native Americans and African peoples. Through this declaration, Wheatley solidified her status as one of the most influential earliest Black public intellectuals of her time. In God’s New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny, Conrad Cherry cites Nicholas Street’s The American States Acting over the Part of the Children of Israel in the Wilderness as a prime example of the colonists’ sentiments, asserting that the pamphlet “insisted that the agonies of war had befallen the colonies because of their sins and warned against letting the injustices and cruelties of Pharaoh Britain obscure the wickedness of American Israel.” While Street concerned himself with the colonists’ sin of distrust in God to deliver them from Pharaoh Britain, Wheatley crafted
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her own declaration of independence to call out the hypocritical Pharaoh colonists for the sin of the enslavement of her people while revolting for liberty. The colonists had transformed their wilderness into an Egypt – for enslaved Africans.

In their petition to President John Adams and Congress near the turn of the eighteenth century, free Black Philadelphians affirmed Wheatley’s assertion of her people’s “love of Freedom” but went a step further by demanding that liberty and equality for all African peoples in America be granted by their elected officials, not through divine intervention. The events that shaped the development of this cultural and political transition were informed by the revolutionary shift of a loose confederation of colonies into the United States of America, a nation founded on principles of liberty and justice for all. By 1799 when the free Black Philadelphians penned their petition, however, it had become increasingly clear that the liberty and justice the colonists obtained by winning the Revolutionary War was not guaranteed for all, as Wheatley and other African people and their allies had hoped. Nevertheless, African people shared stories, sang songs, penned petitions, crafted poems, and published narratives that preserved their culture, expressed their dreams, and conveyed their demands for the development of a just and equitable nation.

Although we ultimately selected 1750 as the starting point for this volume, we wondered if we should have chosen an earlier historical moment. In The Cambridge History of African American Literature, Philip Gould argues, “Early black writing emerged as an identifiable genre during the second half of the eighteenth century and in the era of Enlightenment.” Gould further asserts that his focus is African people’s engagement with print culture. This methodology limits the possibility for considerations of other types of literary production by African peoples, such as those like the aforementioned Garrison who inserted biographical narratives into petitions that can be considered as the forerunners of biographical or slave narratives later written or dictated by Black writers. Gould’s approach also calls into question the literary value of the petition itself, utilized by African peoples from the age of exploration onward, limiting the writing to a legal document instead of considering it as a form of literature. Placing the genesis of early Black writing post-1750 would also omit Prince’s ballad “Bars Fight,” which she composed and shared orally in 1746, but the poem was not published until thirty-four years after her death in 1821 in a history of Massachusetts. Instead, the focus shifts to the series of literary firsts by Black authors, including Briton Hammon’s 1760 Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings, and Surprizing Deliverance,
Jupiter Hammon’s 1761 poem “An Evening Thought, Salvation by Christ, with Penitential Cries,” Wheatley’s 1773 poetry collection Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral, Olaudah Equiano’s 1789 Interesting Narrative, and Benjamin Banneker’s 1792 Almanac. This volume joins recent scholarship that complicates the designation of 1783 as the pivotal historical moment after which writings by Black authors can be characterized as an “identifiable genre” by historizing and contextualizing selected writings with analyses of literature produced by African authors during earlier periods. In so doing, we call for a reconceptualization of the historical parameters and definitions of the African American literary tradition. Writers in this volume examine a variety of texts, including petitions and a list of subscribers alongside texts like poems, narratives, letters, and sermons that are traditionally included in the canon.

During the period between Prince’s introduction of “Bars Fight” and the free Black Philadelphian men’s release of their petition, African peoples in the young democracy carved out spaces for themselves, devising their own traditions as they transitioned to a community of people reflecting a range of statuses from enslavement to quasi-freedom. They further developed literary traditions, such as Wheatley’s aforementioned Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral as well as life writings, including Memoirs of the Life of Boston King, a Black Preacher, Written by Himself, during His Residence at Kingswood-School (1798), Life, Last Words and Dying Speech of Stephen Smith, a Black Man, Who Was Executed at Boston This Day Being Thursday, October 12, 1797 for Burglary (1797), and A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture Smith, a Native of Africa, but Resident above Sixty Years in the United States of America. Related by Himself (1798), written with and without amanuenses. They created cultural practices such as holiday celebrations punctuated by “patting juba,” complex rhythmic hand clapping, or even walks in the park or dinner parties. They engaged in social and political activism grounded in a variety of community institutions, such as the First African Baptist Church of Savannah, Georgia (1777), the African Free School in New York (1787), the Free African Society in Philadelphia (1787), and the African Lodge No. 459 for Masons (1784). At transitional moments throughout these fifty years, writers of African descent consistently commemorated events, questioned actions, demanded equality, and celebrated life, exemplified by freemason Prince Hall’s A Charge Delivered to the African Lodge, June 24, 1797, in which he urged his brethren to engage in a battle for rights, justice, and liberty for all of their people.
The second half of the eighteenth century during the transitional period of global revolutions saw the development of rhetorical strategies like those that Hall utilized in his *Charge*, Wheatley in her poems and letters, and Smith in his *Narrative*, which Black authors would refine and expand in the nineteenth century and beyond. Poets adapted traditions associated with classical poetry and the epistolary form to undermine beliefs of Africans as the inferior race. Indeed, the eighteenth century was an era of transitions that encouraged prolific literary production by a people who were “impatient of oppression.” Audiences and authors shifted and increased. Writings and genres were refined and diversified. The chapters in this volume look not only to pivotal events such as the Great Awakening, Revolutionary War, and Haitian Revolution but also to the ripple effect of draconian laws, slave revolts, political parties, social movements, and community institutions on the creation, production, distribution, and reception of literature by writers of African descent from 1750 to 1800.

In this volume, the twelve chapters that examine significant transitions in early Black literature are grouped into four parts. In Part I, “Limits and Liberties of Early Black Print Culture,” the chapters examine transitions in Black authors’ responses to challenges they faced in publishing their work and advancing their literacy. Although Black authors found means to circulate their writings, these chapters explore how they often relied on patrons who were more concerned with advancing their own interests than affirming Black voices. Both free Blacks like John Marrant and enslaved Africans like Wheatley even embarked on transatlantic journeys to publish their writings through England’s strong and influential patronage system for Black authors. In England, the Countess of Huntingdon emerged as one of the most influential patrons of Black authors, including David Margrett, Wheatley, and Marrant. Joseph Rezek provides a compelling comparative analysis of the limitations of print that the Black preacher Margrett faced in disseminating his radical antislavery sermons, which were never published with the print success of Wheatley, Marrant, and others who all created ways to incorporate anti-racist rhetoric in their texts. Unlike the writings of Margrett and Wheatley, Marrant’s *Narrative* was published in several editions and white authors adapted his life story in their own texts. Eric D. Lamore traces the transitions Marrant creates in multiple editions of his narrative and the complications that arose when other authors both affirmed and challenged Marrant’s accounts of his life, often to advance their own
agendas – social, political, religious. Finally, Jordan Alexander Stein proposes a redefinition of early Black literature that shifts us away from focusing solely on authorship to considerations of transitions in textual production reflected in literature that Black people contributed to, read, and edited.

In Part II, “Black Writing and Revolution,” the chapters analyze Black writing during the latter part of the eighteenth century when colonists as well as enslaved and free Black people drew on revolutionary rhetoric and ideals to demand liberty in the Americas. Chapters in this section analyze transitions in Black writers’ engagement with the language of revolution and the Enlightenment to fight for both freedom and equality for people of African descent in the American and French Revolutions. Enslaved and free Black people utilized petitions and pamphlets to politicize their fight for liberty by claiming Enlightenment theories of natural right to exercise a fundamental freedom that the colonists had demanded from the Crown because of liberties guaranteed in the Magna Carta that they codified in the First Amendment to the US Constitution. But they also were inspired by members of the French National Constituent Assembly who asserted their desires for liberty in Declarations of the Rights of Man and the Citizen (1789) and enslaved Africans in Haiti who fought for freedom in their revolution and expressed their ideas regarding the creation of a free and equal society in their constitution (1801). Daniel Littlefield explores how the forces of slavery, Christianity, and the Enlightenment impacted the production of literature by Black writers, sparking a series of transitions that reflected a collision of ideals during the Age of Reason in which colonists were willing to die for their own liberty while preserving the system of slavery for African peoples. Thomas J. Davis shifts our focus to the production of petitions, examining how global revolutions initiated transitions not only in the writings of African Americans but in the type of literature they produced to espouse the cause of freedom. Finally, Ronald Johnson analyzes the impact of the Haitian revolution on American diplomacy in Black authors’ writings that trace transitions in narratives of political and social thought in the Atlantic world, particularly in Haiti, France, and America.

In Part III, “Early African American Life in Literature,” the contributors examine transitions in early African American literature that reflect developments and changes in Black life as represented in literature by Black writers during the independence movement. At that time, approximately 200,000 free and 300,000 enslaved Blacks lived and labored in