

Spring 5-2014

'My Freedom is a Privilege Which Nothing Else Can Equal': The Life and Writings of Venture Smith and Phillis Wheatley, American Slaves

Donald Holmes II
University of Southern Mississippi

Follow this and additional works at: https://aquila.usm.edu/honors_theses



Part of the [American Literature Commons](#), [Literature in English, North America, Ethnic and Cultural Minority Commons](#), and the [Other Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Holmes, Donald II, "My Freedom is a Privilege Which Nothing Else Can Equal': The Life and Writings of Venture Smith and Phillis Wheatley, American Slaves" (2014). *Honors Theses*. 229.
https://aquila.usm.edu/honors_theses/229

This Honors College Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors College at The Aquila Digital Community. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of The Aquila Digital Community. For more information, please contact Joshua.Cromwell@usm.edu.

The University of Southern Mississippi

‘My Freedom is a Privilege Which Nothing Else Can Equal’:
The Life and Writings of Venture Smith and Phillis Wheatley, American Slaves

by

Donald Holmes II

A Thesis
Submitted to the Honors College of
The University of Southern Mississippi
in Fulfillment
of the Requirement for the Degree of
Bachelor of Arts
in the Department of English

May 2014

Approved by

Sherita L. Johnson, Ph.D., Thesis Adviser
Associate Professor of English

Eric Tribunella, Ph.D., Chair
Department of English

David R. Davies, Ph.D., Dean
Honors College

Abstract

Slavery in the United States was an evolving institution that lasted nearly 400 years. To understand the colonial era of slavery within the United States, I examine the life and times of Venture Smith, as documented in his autobiography, *A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, A Native of Africa* (1798), and that of Phillis Wheatley using *The Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley* (1988). Both Smith and Wheatley were African-born slaves brought to America during the eighteenth century. In Smith's narrative, he concludes by proclaiming "my freedom is a privilege which nothing else can equal" (31). This statement is used as the title of this project because it shows that Smith and Wheatley understood that freedom is not an abstract concept. Living in a society that relied on slave labor, Wheatley and Smith write extensively about their experiences of being treated as inferiors in America. Having been born free is what distinguishes their experiences from African American slaves' writing later in the nineteenth century. Most of what is known about American slavery is based on the first-hand accounts recorded in such fugitive slave narratives, a genre that developed from the latter generation and influenced by abolitionists. Early African slaves were an integral part of the American colonial society, and they were not just simply house servants or field laborers as they commonly appear in abolitionist literature. Revisionist scholarship guided my study as I examine three themes throughout this research project: society, identity, and the literacy of colonial America slaves.

In this essay, I show how Wheatley and Smith wrote freedom narratives and poetry to protest against slavery. I argue that Wheatley, specifically, identified with the

black experience of slavery though she lived an exceptional life. More importantly, by using African American literary theory, I explain how Wheatley's and Smith's writings reconstruct a black identity in early America, where blackness signified an inferior social class status, though these writers combatted such claims. Also, by using feminist theory and gender studies, I examine Wheatley's experiences as a black woman and how she claimed her womanhood (essentially her humanity), even though she was classified as slave property for most of her life and writing career. I also use gender theory to examine Smith's masculinity, as a slave and a free man. With such inquiries, I present a comparative analysis of the difficulty that Wheatley faced to gain her freedom because she was a woman *and* black slave, whereas Smith's freedom journey was less arduous considering the patriarchal culture of colonial America.

Key Words: Phillis Wheatley, Venture Smith, freedom narrative, slave narrative, black experience, early America, African, American theory, feminist theory, gender studies,

Dedication

For my mother, brothers, and family:

Thanks for believing in me!

Onward and Upward!

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my thesis adviser, Dr. Sherita L. Johnson, for her dedication and selflessness towards me! Even when I felt like giving up, you continued to guide me through a successful experience. Thank you for teaching me, I could have not asked for a better mentor!

A special thank you to the Dr. Ronald E. McNair Post- baccalaureate Achievement Program staff: Dr. Susan Bourland, Dr. Sarah Wynn, Mrs. Kim Brown, and Dr. Adina Green and the 2013 Class of McNair Scholars. Thank you to the men of the Mu Xi Chapter of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. for being my backbone throughout this process. Thanks to the Department of English for providing me with a well-versed education in literature. And to the Honors College for constant and consistent support!

Lastly, thank you to the University of Southern Mississippi. Being able to live, learn, and work amongst a community of scholars was an exceptional experience. My time at Southern Miss will never be forgotten!

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Literature Review	1
A. Introduction	1
B. African Slaves in Colonial America	3
C. Constructing a Black Identity	5
D. Slave Literacy	10
E. Conclusion	15
Chapter 2: Methodology	16
Chapter 3: Discussion	17
A. Introduction	17
B. Venture Smith	20
C. Phillis Wheatley	28
D. Conclusion	36
Chapter 4: Thesis Conclusion	38
Works Cited	40

Chapter 1: Literature Review

A. Introduction

When the American colonists fought for their independence from British rule, African slaves were not under the banner of “all men shall be created equal.” As seen in the poetry of Phillis Wheatley and the slave narrative of Venture Smith, the colonists’ call to freedom was not as abstract to these black writers as it may have seemed. Wheatley and Smith were both African-born slaves, transported to the Americas. Even though they lived polar lives, their experience of being free prior to capture drastically shaped their mode of thinking and writing, in ways very different from African Americans during the abolitionist era of the nineteenth century.

The American nation began with slavery, an institution that developed early in the colonies well in advance of the call to freedom in the late eighteenth century. Africans were first enslaved in the American colonies, or what would become known as such in 1526, in San Miguel de Gualdape colony, which is present day South Carolina (Pickett 3). Slavery lasted for nearly 400 years and ended when President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863 and later with the ratification of the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1865. Almost a century before, black writers like Wheatley and Smith were able to find freedom in their writings. Their claim to their authorship is what distinguishes them from other Africans in early America. Wheatley and Smith saw themselves not solely as property, but as black Americans, equal among those who participated in building the nation. In *A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, a Native of Africa: But Resident Above Sixty Years in the United States of America. Related by Himself* (1798), Venture Smith presents the American

dream, as he goes from being a slave to becoming a slave-owner/citizen and dying a wealthy man. Smith was just as important in his society as the white man that once owned him. In *The Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley* (1988), Wheatley uses her elegies and letters to captivate her audience with religious solemnity and rhetorical eloquence. Wheatley's writings reveal her exceptional status as an educated slave in colonial society. Both of these writers wanted to be more than a just name on a bill of sale, but a human with their own identities and lives. These writers combat the ideology of "inalienable rights" in a nation that practiced slavery. This contradiction appears consistently in the writings of Wheatley and in Smith's *Narrative*. Since they were very literate, Wheatley and Smith were exceptional blacks *and* valuable property. Wheatley was educated in the classics and Latin. Smith's informal education was gained through his life experiences, primarily learning how to work for his own profit and not solely for the benefit of several masters; Smith eventually saved enough money to buy his freedom and his family. Wheatley's and Smith's writings reveal the contradiction of slavery in a nation in which freedom is supposedly for every man. As a form of early protest literature in colonial America, Wheatley's and Smith's writings show how black authors can claim an *American* identity beyond dreams or hopes.

In this essay, I will show how Phillis Wheatley and Venture Smith used their connection to freedom, societal advantages, and education to combat the ideology and practice of slavery in colonial America. This literature review will present scholarly secondary sources that provide information about these literary figures. By using revisionist scholarship to guide my research, I will argue that both Wheatley and Smith contribute to the development of African American protest literature in unique ways.

Three key questions will guide my study: What impact did colonial society have on the writings of Wheatley and Smith? How is the identity of Wheatley and Smith constructed in their writings? How was literacy used as a pretense to escape slavery and aid others to do the same? The purpose of this research project is to dispel certain misconceptions about early experiences of black American slaves by examining primary resources that tell the most revealing truth about the era.

B. African Slaves in Colonial America

In “Living Conditions,” Nicholas Boston argues that paternalism played a major role in the life of a slave in the early United States. He argues that the colonial society was organized with black slaves being governed by whites and solely dependent on their masters:

To a degree, the material conditions of slave life were predetermined by the status of the slave. During the early colonial period, slaves and indentured servants enjoyed greater freedoms than black slaves would in later periods. But even then, they belonged to the lowest, poorest ranks of society. In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, slaves were condemned to impoverishment by the law. In many colonies, slaves could not participate in wage-earning trade or labor. In others they were denied the right to own property. The slave's resulting dependence on his or her master for the most basic necessities - food, clothing, shelter - was integral to the preservation of the master's power and the sustaining of the slave society. (Boston 1)

As Boston explores the slave/master relationship, he claims that paternalism guided and kept slavery alive throughout its existence. Boston states, “The doctrine of paternalism guided much of the Southern rationale for slavery” (Boston 1). Boston

concluded that slavery was based on the beliefs of the slave master, thus removing feelings of remorse from the treatment of slaves as chattel. The slaveholder had absolute power over the slave and this often meant that the slave would develop a deep bond with the slaveholder. Boston writes, “The experience of slavery was never a comfortable one. Nevertheless, the kind of labor assigned, the quantity and quality of food and clothing received, the type of shelter provided, and the form of punishments dealt could lessen or increase the level of discomfort slaves had to endure” (Boston 2). Wheatley is a good example of such paternalism; her master, John Wheatley, was wealthy and was able to present her with many privileges unlike most slaves.

Vincent Carretta in his article, “Phillis Wheatley: An 18th Century Genius in Bondage,” writes about the society around Wheatley and how it influenced her poetry. He explains how, “Wheatley increasingly came to believe that the colonial struggle for freedom from Britain would lead to the end of slavery in the former colonies. In her poem ‘To His Excellency General Washington,’ Wheatley pledged her allegiance in 1776 to the revolutionary cause, hoping that even the most eminent slave owner in North America would ultimately apply the revolutionary ideology of equality and liberty to people of African as well as European descent” (Carretta n.p.). The rhetoric in Wheatley’s poetry constantly changes to protest the condition of slavery.

As Vincent Carretta explains in his article, Wheatley was aware of the impending war between Great Britain and the United States, and that she believed the Revolutionary War would end slavery. Yet Eric Slauter in “Neoclassical Culture in a Society with Slaves,” outlines the difference between the oncoming changes that Wheatley envisioned from reality. Slauter notes, “accounts of political slavery frequently overlook the place

of race in the making of the metaphor” (86). Political slavery is how white American colonists perceived their second-class status in the British Empire. Chattel slavery was the economic system that treated blacks as nonhumans for the benefit of white colonists. Slauter goes on to note that “scholars who have made a ‘linguistic turn’ have devoted almost no attention to the relationship between the social reality and political rhetoric of slavery. Indeed, even historians who examine the ‘language of liberty’ routinely treat the metaphor of political slavery in isolation from larger social or cultural meanings” (87). The protest literature by Wheatley and other writers who opposed slavery used political rhetoric to combat the ideology of slavery. Taking note of the calls for liberty from Britain, Slauter realizes that seldom is there a call of freedom from bondage. He states that “the difference between political slavery and race slavery was that whites had a Lockean responsibility to overthrow an arbitrary government while blacks were to be pitied for their situation” (Slauter 87). Slauter’s concern is how colonial society viewed the problem of slavery, all but labeling the idea as not a problem, but a way of life.

C. Constructing a Black Identity

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. identifies Wheatley as a black poet who used the resources that she had, labeling them as “useful” (Powers 108). Gates believes that Wheatley understood the benefits of living in a home that provided her with many escapes from harsh enslavement like learning to read and write. According to Elizabeth Powers, author of “Patrimony and Its Discontents: Phillis Wheatley and *Die Weltliteratur*,” Gates and other scholars of Wheatley forget to tell the world how we should read Wheatley. Powers claims that “Wheatley wrote at the end of a long poetic tradition, at the moment when poets were beginning to turn away from the imitation of models and sought instead to be

‘authentic,’ to give expression to their subjective and individual life. It was the moment when the poetry of experience, and also of black experience, was in the process of being created by whites” (110).

Powers does not find Wheatley’s poetry exceptional even though she was a slave. Powers declares that Wheatley did not identify with being black or with the black aesthetic, and that Wheatley wrote for whites and was inspired by such as well. “Wheatley could never be accused of anticipating modernity [...] she was an imitator. She wrote, like many colonial-period versifiers, whether for friends, posterity, or simply personal edification” (Powers 110). Wheatley is described throughout Powers’ article as a canary; singing only the works of early writers – especially white writers – in full context with new words. The use of classical work is the foundation for this argument made by Powers, as Wheatley does not appear to write about her black experience explicitly.

In Powers’ article, she defines the black consciousness as a connected association with Africa and the black experience through the Atlantic slave trade, the plantation, and general harsh conditions of slavery. Powers does explain how Wheatley claims her cultural heritage by noting that she is from Africa, but Powers does not believe that Wheatley writes about her black experiences. Powers notes in “To Maecenas” by Wheatley that “lines like, ‘MAECENAS, you beneath the myrtle shade / Read o’er what poets sung, and shepherds play’d. / What felt those poets but you feel the same? / Does not your soul possess the sacred flame? (1-4) have led Wheatley’s critics to condemn her for her failure to write about herself [and] slavery [...] or the condition of her fellow slaves” (Powers 108). Despite Powers’ observation on Wheatley’s work, many critics,

as in this literature review, agree that Wheatley had a black consciousness, and wrote in her later years for the edification of the black race.

To understand slavery, we must also understand the social construction of race as a form of identity. This theory sets out to prove that race is not biologically created, but, instead, it develops as a label, based on complexion and/or material differences used to classify a specific group of individuals within a social hierarchy. Katy L. Chiles, in her article “Becoming Colored in Occom and Wheatley’s Early America,” examines the creation of “race” in the American colonies. Chiles notes that “Wheatley and Occom conceptualized the process of becoming colored in colonial America and their articulations necessitate a reworking of critical-race-studies frameworks to make them better suited for understanding early American processes of racialization” (1398). Chiles focuses on how Wheatley wrote letters to Samson Occom, a Native American minister, as a form of connecting the struggles of enslaved Africans and subjugated Native Americans by white Americans. Chiles sets out to prove that race was constructed by writers such as Wheatley due to their oppression and others around them. Chiles notes that “Wheatley’s poetry actively engages eighteenth-century discourses on science, racialization, and poetics” (1407). Unlike Powers, who believes that Wheatley does not create or write about a black experience, Chiles states that “the visual depiction of a melancholic poet physiologically blackened therefore asks, What is the link between blackness and poetic inspiration? And how does Wheatley’s poetry depict this relation?” (1405). Chiles explains that there was a clear connection to “blackness” in Wheatley’s work. Like Powers, Chiles also notes how one should read Wheatley’s work:

Wheatley rethinks how human difference is used to cohere an ontological identity category, here to justify slavery. As we shall see in ‘Thoughts on the Works of Providence,’ Wheatley connects ‘excess[ive]’ sunlight to the ‘abhor[ed] life’ of her ‘race’ under the ‘length’ned chain,’ suggesting that divinely bestowed blackness becomes problematic only when it is linked directly to slavery (lines 35–36). Wheatley highlights this figuration of blackness as a racialized category and instead characterizes it as one of many colors spread throughout the natural world, depicting the process of becoming colored as part of God’s plan to vary the progeny of a single creation. (1408)

Chiles argues further that Wheatley wished to construct the idea of being colored or black based on God’s use of different variations, not considering the label “black” as the form of oppression.

Like Chiles, Mary M. Balkun, in her article “Phillis Wheatley’s Construction of Otherness and the Rhetoric of Performed Ideology,” develops this sense of creating race by focusing on how Wheatley makes her white audience the “other.” Balkun asserts that Wheatley used religious rhetoric to construct her personal identity, but also to write to a specific audience: white Christians. Balkun notes that “Wheatley sets the stage, introduces the hypocritical stance that allows so-called Christians to accept and even promote slavery, and then lays the groundwork for a spiritual dilemma – either join with Wheatley, the black, female Christian in her critique of the existing power structure or accept the very position of ‘other’ that she and other black Americans were expected to occupy” (122). This process, as outlined by Balkun, allows whites to think of themselves

as the *other*, as all blacks are supposed to exist. Balkun writes about the unique rhetoric Wheatley uses that illustrates a sense of grace and style in her protest poetry.

In “The Prehistory of Possessive Individualism,” Jennifer Rae Greeson examines the sense of being free, yet alienated by slavery. In her article, she writes about how “John Locke formulates the theory of possessive individualism in one of the most-cited passages of his *Second Treatise of Government* (1690)” (Greeson 918). Possessive individualism is “an original possession of the self as the basis of all private-property rights. To own one’s ‘own Person’ is to have title to ‘the Labour . . . and the Work,’ actual and potential, of one’s body—and, thus, to possess ‘the means to appropriate’ any part of the Earth, and all that is therein’ to one’s own ‘private Dominion’ ” (Greeson 919). By using Locke’s theory, Greeson writes about the black slave’s right to own one’s self. Noting that Smith was once a free individual in Africa and how he understood that freedom was not abstract, Greeson uses Smith’s *Narrative* (1798) as a premise to understanding the creation of possessive individualism. She notes, “[a]s Smith tells it, this liberal self is produced through an unbroken chain of acquisition that begins not with an assumption of a natural right to one’s ‘own Person’ but rather with a struggle to acquire the already alienated self” (Greeson 920). Smith falls into the category of possessive individualism based on his claims to freedom. Greeson notes that Smith lived his entire life as illiterate, yet died a patriarch, a legend, but more importantly a landowner, which means that he died free.

James Levernier, in his article “Style as Protest in the Poetry of Phillis Wheatley,” goes into detail about the political purposes of Wheatley’s creative works. His goal is to consider the context of Wheatley’s poetry and how it was affected by those around her.

Levernier notes, “With the publication, however, of newly discovered poems, letters, and documents by or relating to Wheatley, it is becoming increasingly clear that far from ‘oblivious to the lot of her fellow blacks,’ Wheatley was indeed quite aware of the terrible injustices done to her and other slaves, that she protested these abuses as best she could, that she took pride in her African identity, and that she cultivated relationships with anyone else - black or white - who might directly or indirectly help to end slavery” (25). Levernier’s belief about Wheatley is much different from Elizabeth Powers’ critique. He explains that, “even more revealing of Wheatley’s abhorrence of slavery is the letter she wrote to Occom concerning the ‘natural Rights’ of slaves and the glaring hypocrisy of supposedly Christian slaveholders who profess Christian beliefs, which they blatantly contradict by keeping slaves” (Levernier 27). Wheatley understood that she was a slave, but more importantly her education taught her that slavery was wrong and an American contradiction to Christianity. She notes within her letter to *Occom* that slavery and Christian values could not coexist. This notion by Wheatley shows how her writing takes a keen stance against slavery.

D. Slave Literacy

Slaves used the bible as means of understanding themselves and combating the idea of slavery in the United States. April Langley, author of “The Eighteenth-Century Black Wor(l)d and Early Writers Biblical Literacy” (2008), states that “the emphasis on the value of Black biblical studies in recent literary scholarship has given us important keys for understanding the impact of religion on the study of eighteenth-century black texts” (55-56). Many slaves that were taught to read and write were done so from the bible as means of converting them to Christianity. Langley goes on to state that “authors’

extensions of the concept of redemption to argue for their spiritual and material rights demonstrate the value of metaphor in their use of biblical language to overturn or subvert negative connotations of the meaning of blackness as it is applied to people of African descent” (58). Writers like Wheatley used the bible as the foundation for most of their protest poetry. By using the bible, Wheatley is able to produce a sound, logical argument that slavery is ignoble, which is a claim that white Christians would have a difficult time opposing. Langley concludes that “early Black writers’ selective adoption and adaptation of doctrine suggest their complex and sophisticated level of biblical literacy” (65).

In *When I Can Read My Title Clear: Literacy, Slavery, and Religion in the Antebellum South* (1991), Janet Duitsman Cornelius agrees with Langley about the importance of biblical literacy in early black writings. She argues that “the primary motivation for whites who intentionally taught slaves to read in defiance of law and custom, though was traditional ‘Bible literacy’” (Cornelius 4). Yet, reading and writing by learning from the bible did more for slaves than their white teachers understood. Cornelius explains that once slaves could read and write, they “[...] could use literacy to gain advantages for themselves and mediate for their fellow slaves” (4). When literacy is used in protest, the writer’s work becomes more than just words written on the paper. The words can incite a protest for freedom. The work of Venture Smith, which is referred to as a freedom narrative (Lovejoy 93), is used in this accordance. Though Smith could not read or write, Cornelius believes that Smith “acquired the knowledge and skills in reading and writing which enable him to engage effectively in all those activities in which literacy is normally assumed in his culture group” (8). Literacy is not solely based on reading and writing, but on a person’s understanding of the society around

them, especially if one uses cultural influences to be an effective citizen. Smith, for example, obtained his freedom and went on to command both black and white men with his maritime occupation. Cornelius explains that certain jobs would require people to be literate, yet, for those like Smith, literacy was directly associated with one's desire to be free: "through literacy the slave could obtain skills valuable in the white world, thereby defeating those whites who withheld the skills, and could use those skills for special privileges or to gain freedom" (Cornelius 3). In the case of Smith, literacy was connected to securing his freedom, understanding the laws of colonial America, and identifying that *he was a man not just a slave*.

E. Jennifer Monaghan, in *Learning to Read and Write in Colonial America* (2005), in chapter nine "Literacy Instruction and the Enslaved," outlines the practice of educating slaves. Monaghan identifies Phillis Wheatley as an early example of a slave being taught to read and write and perhaps "the most remarkable instance in colonial America of an enslaved person who acquired literacy" (245). Monaghan stresses the importance of literacy as a key root to freedom for the enslaved. Slaves like Wheatley were given an education "based on the premise that reading instruction promoted Christianity" (Monaghan 248). Monaghan, like Langley and Cornelius, connects slaves' literacy to Christianity. But unlike Langley and Cornelius, Monaghan concludes that literacy only consists of the art of reading and not writing. She states, "instruction in reading the scriptures, therefore, was not the safe activity that its supporters once supposed, and the day would come when southern states [...] would prohibit it with as much ferocity as they prohibited writing instruction" (Monaghan 272). Monaghan argues that writing and reading instruction were different in the antebellum era. The practice of

educating slaves in both was highly supported during Wheatley's lifetime. Monaghan, on the writing of Wheatley, notes that "what is important is that Wheatley had a brilliantly clear conception of what the skill of writing could do for her. She turned writing into creation, and through it she created herself. She had the support and understanding of her white Christian family, who aided her search for publication, the most public form of identity construction" (Monaghan 247). Wheatley would understand that literacy implied freedom. The notion of protest literacy is present when Wheatley writes to Samson Occom, "I have this day received your obliging kind Epistle, and am greatly satisfied with your Reasons respecting the Negroes, and think highly reasonable what you offer in Vindication of their natural Rights" (Wheatley 225). Wheatley is literate, enough to read and write, therefore, her correspondences, poems, and prose reflects this ability as she aids in the fight against the abhorrence of slavery.

Phillis Wheatley without question wrote her poetry and letters. In contrast, Venture Smith dictated his narrative to an editor. This distinction does not undermine the authors' goals because they are able still to liberate themselves, whether through the pen or verbal diction. Biblical literacy plays a major role in both of the authors' texts. Langley, Cornelius, and Monaghan identify literacy as some form of education, whether from reading and writing to just one of the two. Robert Desrochers, Jr., in his article "'Not Fade Away: The Narrative of Venture Smith, an African American in the Early Republic" (1997), identifies literacy as a form of verbal dictation. Scholars have a hard time accepting the legitimacy of the art of dictation as a form of literacy. Desrochers states, "For many scholars, the power of whites to omit, arrange, correct, and otherwise manipulate the dictated stories of slaves and former bondsmen sabotaged the unique

black perspectives that texts such as Smith's might otherwise have illuminated" (43). For this article, the focus is not the fact of whether Smith's narrative provides legitimate truth to his life or not; it is, however, the legitimacy of Smith's literacy. Dictation was commonly used by editors to write stories about black slaves who could not read or write, and Smith was no exception. Desrochers goes into great detail about the possible manipulated diction of Smith's autobiography. For Smith, verbal diction was the only way that he could have told his story, which is not to say that his narrative is not authentic. To the contrary, if Smith would have not dictated his narrative, this study, like many, would be missing valuable information in the understanding of early black American literature. Desrochers notes that his "essay seeks to establish some of the ways in which Venture Smith worked within and around Anglo-American cultural and literary restrictions, capitalizing on the malleability of the words and language that supposedly bound him, to forge a narrative persona that drew on the African and New World materials available to him" (44). Within his article, Desrochers outlines the conventions of Smith's writing. These conventions illustrate how Smith's narrative should be read by extracting the black message of Smith from a white envelope (Desrochers 45). Also, another convention seen in Smith's work is how he focuses on *his* black message, rather than *the* black message (Desrochers 45), which insinuates that Smith is simply telling his life story.

Verbal dictation stands as a positive contribution to understanding Smith's work in Desrochers' article, yet it is not the only form of literacy that can be examined. The idea that Smith used manipulation or life skills for his benefit can be seen as a form of literacy or an education. Desrochers notes that Smith "employed his own fleet of more

than twenty sailing vessels in the lucrative coasting trade around Long Island Sound, selling fish, cordwood, and homegrown produce” (41). Literacy should not be categorized as the understanding of words, as Desrochers points out. Smith’s ability to learn and use life skills for his benefit is paramount to understanding literacy beyond the pen. Smith’s education distinguishes him from other slaves in the early nation: his ability to succeed despite being “illiterate,” though a shrewd businessman makes him a true American.

E. Conclusion (Literature Review)

By using revisionist scholarship, this literature review presents detailed information about the most telling critics on the lives of Phillis Wheatley and Venture Smith. The purpose of this literature review is to present key sources that will allow me to make a sound argument based on three themes: society, identity, and literacy. From Elizabeth Powers to Nicholas Boston, these sources are ideal based on their level of academic research and thoughtful revision of the works of Wheatley and Smith. These sources will aid my argument that Wheatley and Smith understood their black experience and wrote a renewed sense of protest literature against the institution of slavery in colonial America.

Chapter 2: Methodology

The poetry and prose of Phillis Wheatley and the slave narrative of Venture Smith present freedom as a non-abstract concept. These authors write to prove that “freedom is a privilege which nothing else can equal” (Smith 31). This research project used Wheatley’s and Smith’s primary works and revisionist scholarship to better understand early African American literature. This study was conducted by using academic search engines such as Academic Search Premier and MLA International Bibliography to compile a diverse group of scholarly sources. I have provided literary criticism based on a reader’s response approach, through two distinct literary theories. First, I will use African American literary theory and cultural studies to critique selected works, by showing how Wheatley and Smith use their writings to fight oppression and how these writers use their authorship to (re)define “blackness.” A feminist and gendered critique was necessary to examine how Wheatley’s claim to freedom was challenged due to her womanhood; also, it was important to show how masculinity is central to Venture Smith’s freedom narrative. This research was collected via online journal and databases mostly, yet there was ample research in the Joseph Cook Library located on the campus of The University of Southern Mississippi.

Chapter 3: Discussion

A. Introduction

Freedom is more than a thought, a process of thinking, or an abstract concept. Freedom is derived from self-awareness through personal feelings. It is identity, consciousness of life as derived from living in a society that ultimately aids in shaping one's distinctiveness. Born Broteer Furro, an African prince in a place he calls Dukandarra, Venture Smith, who lived mostly in colonial Connecticut and Rhode Island, documents this sense of freedom in his 1798 autobiography, *A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, a Native of Africa: But Resident Above Sixty Years in the United States of America. Related by Himself*. Smith vehemently declared, “[m]y freedom is a privilege which nothing else can equal” (31). Smith’s attitude about freedom inspired my research into the lives of early black Americans’ struggles for independence. I will also examine the life and writings of another early American slave, Phillis Wheatley, using *The Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley (1988)*. Wheatley was born around 1753 in Senegambia, Africa. Both Wheatley and Smith understood that no matter how good life may seem or was, to be labeled a slave was to be bound by chains of oppression.

Wheatley wrote her last poetry fourteen years before Smith’s 1798 *Narrative*, yet one can easily see the connection between the two authors. Not only did they write to inform or entertain, but they also wrote early forms of protest literature to combat the status quo that blacks would always be inferior to their white counterparts. Smith worked to acquire his freedom and wealth eventually. Wheatley was more educated than most white people during colonial America. Yet, they both started their journey to freedom, being brought from Africa to become chattel property in the Americas. Smith who could not read or

write used verbal diction to record his life's story. In the preface of his *Narrative*, the editor, Elisha Niles, assures readers that the words are Smith's own, labeling him as an "untutored African" (Smith iii). Although there is not much information about the personal relationship between Niles and Smith, the two did collaborate on creating one of the earliest African American slave narratives. As uneducated as Smith may have seemed, he claimed his freedom by constantly defining himself as a man in the *Narrative*. For Smith, being a man meant being a citizen. Smith was aware that citizenship was granted only to white men, and slavery was a contradiction to this notion. More importantly, Smith's understanding of the laws that governed slaves, specifically, is what clearly defines his literacy. Throughout Smith's *Narrative*, we learn about his entire life, from his early childhood in Africa to his experience as an American slave to his life as a free man. Like most freedom or slave narratives, Smith concludes with his certificate of emancipation.¹ Wheatley's education in the classics and mythology can be seen in her elegiac poetry and epistle letters to such famous Americans like George Washington. Likewise, Wheatley's writings were so controversial that her work had to be validated by prominent colonial American aristocrats like John Hancock, one of the first signers of the Declaration of Independence, and Thomas Hutchinson, who was the governor of Massachusetts. The men attested that "[w]hose Names are under-written, do assure the World, that the poems specified in the following Page, were (as we verily believe) written by PHILLIS, a young Negro Girl [...] She has been examined by some of the best judges, and is thought qualified to write them" (Wheatley 9). Not only do these men believe that Wheatley wrote the poems, they also put her being a black person and a woman under

¹ A certificate of emancipation was a document that attested a slave's freedom. Some historians note this as a bill of sale issued to the slave when freedom was obtained.

scrutiny. One can imagine the type of questions that were asked to Wheatley during this grueling process.

Protest Literature as a genre, especially in later generations of African American literature, can be seen as a production from this early protest literature created by Smith and Wheatley. When reading protest literature, one will note how the writer wishes to condemn social injustices of the blacks. For instance, Wheatley does this by making her white audience feel as if they were the *others* by using sarcasm and irony. Also, the writer rejects racism totally. Wheatley does this in her poetry and letters, especially when she notes how race is only a problem when it equates blackness with inferiority (Chiles 1407). Lastly, protest literature claims equality between black and whites through militant means. This method is apparent in Smith's *Narrative* with the many episodes of his physical fights for freedom. By using these guidelines, this essay shows how Smith and Wheatley write in an early tradition of African American protest literature.

Specifically, Wheatley and Smith wrote freedom narratives and poetry to protest against slavery. I will argue that Wheatley identified with the black experience of slavery though she lived an exceptional life. More importantly, by using an African American theoretical critique, I will explain how Wheatley's and Smith's writings reconstructed a black identity in early America, where blackness equaled inferiority, though these writers combatted such claims. Also, by using a feminist theoretical critique, I will examine Wheatley's experiences as a black woman and how she claimed her womanhood, even though she was a slave. Also, I use a gender theoretical approach to examine Smith's masculinity, as a slave and free man. With such inquiries, I will present a comparative analysis of the difficulty that Wheatley had to gain her freedom because she was a

woman and a black slave, whereas Smith's freedom journey was less arduous considering the patriarchal culture of colonial America.

B. Venture Smith

Many scholars find it difficult to authenticate Smith's *Narrative* because it is a dictated work. But to understand Smith, one must not neglect the notion that Smith was a man of his time, using every resource to strengthen his claims to his freedom "of which nothing can equal" (Smith 31). Smith wanted to tell his story, so he enlisted the help of editor, Elisha Niles, who was a school teacher and a Revolutionary War Veteran. It would seem that the editor gained some interest in Smith and wanted to record his life. Nevertheless, Smith made sure it was done his way, very candid and straightforward, unlike other slave narratives of the eighteenth century.²

In Smith's *Narrative*, we are presented with many episodes of his trials and tribulations as a slave. The *Narrative* develops around explicitly, powerful scenes that show how Smith responds to certain challenges of being treated as a social inferior. Smith explains to his readership that his fight for freedom was a constant battle, thus providing legitimacy to his protest narrative. For example, Smith dictates an account when one of his master's son, James Mumford, wanted Smith to quit what the master (Mumford's father) had assigned him to do for something that the son wanted done:

One day in particular, the authority which my master's son had set up, had like to have produced melancholy effects. For my master having set me off my business to perform that day and then left me to perform it, his son came up to me in the

² Other slave narratives appearing in the 18th century includes the following: A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert "Ukawsaw Gronniosaw", an African Prince by Ukawsaw Gronniosaw (Bath, England, 1772); The Interesting Narrative and the life of "Olaudah Equiano" or Gustavus Vassa, the African, by Olaudah Equiano (London, 1789).

course of the day, big with authority, and commanded me very arrogantly to quit my present business and go directly about what he should order me. I replied to him that my master had given me so much to perform that day, and that I must therefore faithfully complete it in that time. He then broke out into a great rage, snatched a pitchfork and went to lay me over the head therewith; but I as soon got another and defended myself with it, or otherwise he might have murdered me in his outrage. [...] My upstart master then desisted, put his pocket handkerchief before his eyes and went home with a design to tell his mother of the struggle with young VENTURE. [...] I recovered my temper [...] He took me to a gallows made for the purpose of hanging cattle on, and suspended me on it.” (15-16)

Smith realized the danger of fighting his master, but it is important to note that Smith claims his manhood nevertheless.³ This encounter with Mumford, who was perhaps younger than Smith, allows Smith to consciously think about his situation as a slave. Also, this moment defines Smith’s claim to freedom. Within the passage, notice the words “defended myself.” If Smith would have allowed this beating to occur, he could have been killed. This passage, which shows Smith’s bravery, reminds readers of Smith’s African past. Like when his manhood was being tested by his slave master’s son, Smith recalls a moment when his father was tested in an effort to protect his family’s lives. Smith remembers, “[...] my father discovered the party [African warriors], and immediately began to discharge arrows at them. [...] and it alarmed both me [Smith] and

³ This notion of manhood can be seen in the *Narrative of Fredrick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845), published later during the antebellum generation of slavery. Fredrick Douglass was challenged by the slave breaker Mr. Covey. Covey’s intentions were to make Douglass more submissive. Douglass writes, “This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood.” Like Douglass, when Smith was challenged by Mumford, he had a renewed sense of freedom and manhood.

the women, who being unable to make any resistance [...] and left the old king to fight alone. For some time I beheld him from the reeds defending himself with great courage and firmness [...]" (Smith 10). In this moment, Smith remembers his father protecting his own life. Like his father, Smith began to fight for his freedom while yet a slave. Both of these moments would define the rest of his life, living and writing in protest to civil injustice. But beyond physical fights for his freedom, Smith's understanding of the laws of slavery gave him a great advantage in his pursuits.⁴

Literacy is what defined slaves' claims to freedom. To understand what was prevalent in society allowed slaves to not only to claim their freedom, but to fight for it, literally. Smith was never taught to read or write. Insomuch, he never learned to do either by the time of his death in 1805. What is unique about Smith's black experience is *his rise in a capitalist society despite being illiterate*. As aforementioned, Smith dictated his narrative, which causes some scholars to question this practice. To his advantage, "Venture Smith worked with in and around Anglo-American cultural and literary restrictions, capitalizing on the malleability of the words and language that supposedly bound him, to forge a narrative persona that drew on the African and New World materials available to him" (Desrochers 44). Ultimately, Smith tells his story about how he lived the American Dream. To understand how Smith capitalizes on a life that was never destined for him, we must look at his understanding of slave laws.

Seeing that Smith understood such laws, he wasted no time in challenging Thomas Stanton, his master, concerning the *fair* treatment of slaves. For Smith to

⁴ These slave laws can be compared to the slave codes of later generations of slavery, particularly in the southern United States. Such laws show how slavery was evolving into a regional stronghold compared to what Smith experienced in New England during the 18th century. Refer to Andrea Stone's article: "Interracial Sexual Abuse And Legal Subjectivity in Antebellum Law And Literature." *American Literature* 81.1 (Mar. 2009): 65-92. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 31 July 2013.

understand slave laws does not mean that he could read, it simply means that he was proactive in gaining his freedom. Smith understood that the fight between him and his master was a matter of property value. As a slave, Smith recognized that he was valued property, if not for his master then to someone. Therefore, Smith knew that there were laws that protected slaves against extreme abuse. Smith notes:

The first blow made me have my wits about me [...] I snatched the club out of his hands and dragged him out of the door. [...] I presently left my master, took the club he wounded me with, carried it to a neighboring Justice of the Peace, and complained of my master. [...] before I set out for my master's, up he come and his brother Robert after me. The Justice [...] asked him for what he treated his slave thus hastily and unjustly, and told him what would be the consequence if he continued the same treatment towards me. (19).

Smith not only understood that there were laws that protected him as property, he also understood that he could save his life, and continue his pursuit to freedom. Like the incident with James Mumford, Smith seized the opportunity to challenge white authority. Stanton must have been so taken aback by Smith's apparent understanding of the laws that he could do nothing but obey the judge's decree to protect the slave. Also, note that the judge must have understood that a slave was a human or that he understood Smith's humanity versus him being just chattel property. Equally important here, is Smith's ability to convey this information to the editor as one of Smith's "adventures." Although I do not assume that most early American slaves were as proactive in their pursuit of freedom as Smith, his experiences do illustrate how others could have also challenged the status quo of black inferiority.

Even though Smith was successful in saving his life, Stanton still had the authority to punish him in a less *dehumanizing* way. Smith was bounded by chains at his ankles and wrists and kept away from his wife. Smith was determined then not to work for his current master, when asked if he was ready to come back to work. To this accord, Stanton told Smith that he would banish him to the West Indies. This reference to the West Indies insinuates that slavery there must have been more brutal for slaves than compared to slavery in colonial America. Notice here that traveling further south to the Caribbean suggests the type of brutality most commonly associated with the practice of slavery as it develops in the southern United States. Boldly Smith replies, “ I crossed the waters to come here, and I am willing to cross them to return” (20). Witty as this statement by Smith may sound; it shows the severity of the Middle Passage and African slaves’ tenacity to survive it. Smith makes this statement to show Stanton how ineffective sending him to the West Indies would be. Smith believes that to survive the Middle Passage, he could survive anything.

Smith later would use legal matters to procure an end to his enslavement by Stanton and be sold to Hempsted Miner. Smith notes:

[...] one Hempsted Miner, of Stonington, asked me if I would live with him. I answered him that I would. He then requested me to make myself discontented and to appear as unreconciled to my master as I could before that he bargained with him for me; and that in return he would give me a good chance to gain my freedom when I came to live with him. I did as he requested me. Not long after Hempsted Miner purchased me of my master for fifty-six pounds lawful. (20)

From this conversation, Smith understood that a slave master would not keep a slave if the slave had no intention of working. Here Smith shows his understanding of the laws once more, notice how he uses the word “lawful” as if to show that there was no ill doings in this proceeding. Also, this instance shows Smith’s cunning ability to manipulate men for his benefit. Smith used the law to his advantage here, by understanding that his actions could legally get him a new master and closer to his freedom.

Smith’s authorship is how he constructed his personal identity. Throughout his *Narrative*, we are told of his constant connections to freedom – his African past, his struggle for manhood, and understanding of the laws. Jennifer Rae Greeson uses Smith’s autobiography to illustrate possessive individualism or the depiction of the individual as himself over what society has labeled him. Smith’s claim to freedom is prevalent in his *Narrative* from the opening, where he tells the reader where he was born⁵, a similarity that can be seen in most slave narratives, to the end where he prints in full his certificate of emancipation. Within his narrative, Smith dictated certain “adventures” of how he gains his freedom. So it can be assumed that there are many instances in Smith’s life that are not recorded here. Consider how Smith outlines the purchase of his family and other blacks:

I purchased my wife Meg, and thereby prevented having another child to buy, as she was then pregnant. I gave forty pounds for her. [...] Next after my wife, I purchased a negro man for four hundred dollars. But he having an inclination to

⁵ Most slave narrative writers like Smith and Douglass, begin their narratives from birth. Refer to James Olney’s classic essay: "I Was Born": Slave Narratives, Their Status As Autobiography, And As Literature." *The Slave's Narrative*. 148-175. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 31 July 2013.

return to his old master, I therefore let him go. Shortly after I purchased another negro man for twenty-five pounds, whom I parted with shortly after. Being about forty-six years old, I bought my oldest child Hannah, of Ray Mumford, for forty-four pounds, and she still resided with him. I had already redeemed from slavery, myself, my wife and three children, besides three negro men. (27)

Not only does Smith wish to cement his freedom in writing, he also does so for his family and three other Africans. Smith bought his entire family before he was fifty years old; he had done so by being hired out from his master and saving his money. It was common for slaves to hire themselves out as hands as allowed by the slave master. This was usually done in the off season of harvesting the master's crops or concluding his business venture. Even though Smith freed slaves upon purchasing them, he also hired other black Americans, both free and enslaved. This practice is most notably documented during his whaling business. These examples from Smith's *Narrative* are what make it an early example of protest literature. Even though Smith does not outright say that his goal in life was for the freedom of blacks, his claim to freedom and for the freedom of others allows us to read Smith as protest literature. Likewise, his physical actions to save his life and to rebel against his master are a clear connection to protest literature.

Even in freedom, Smith tells "adventures" of hardships and problems. He does this to show how living the American life, as a free citizen, can be tough, but his willfulness allows him to constantly find success. This notion goes back to how Smith develops his sense of rugged individualism. For instance, Smith recalls a moment of fortune and lost:

Since my residence at Haddam neck, I have owned of boats, canoes and sail vessels, not less than twenty. These I mostly employed in the fishing and trafficking business, and in these occupations I have been cheated out of considerable money by people whom I traded with taking advantage of my ignorance of numbers. (29)

Smith recalls a moment soon after his freedom, where he was doing well for himself. He relates this story to show the treachery that he faced even as a free man. But what is important here is Smith's persistence. Smith admits to being duped of his money due to his "ignorance of numbers" in several business transactions (29). This moment shows Smith's humbleness at the cost of being free. Though he has problems, like most free men would have, yet Smith remains content. What is remarkable about this moment is that Smith moves forward, reminding his reader that he is still a successful employer and honorable man.

The word "freedom" is mentioned eleven times in Smith's *Narrative*, not to be redundant on Smith's part, but not to allow the reader to confuse freedom with being anything *but* having certain inalienable rights. Scholars like Henry Louis Gates, Jr. cite that protest literature falls into certain categories, especially how a writer uses words to define self. In Smith's *Narrative*, we see how Smith combats injustices done to him by whites and Africans alike. He presents certain "adventures" that either show him physically or mentally fighting against oppression. Whether it is with defending himself by knowing slave laws or even defending himself with fists, Smith challenged oppression by standing up for his freedom.

C. Phillis Wheatley

Like Smith's *Narrative*, the writings of Phillis Wheatley should be viewed as protest literature. Many slaves who were taught to read and write were done so by the bible. By using biblical literacy to push an equality agenda, Wheatley produces protest literature. She asserts the hypocritical contradiction found in Christian ideology and the Christian practices by whites in early America. By doing so, Wheatley calls into question not only the practice of slavery, but an issue with women's equality, as well. Unlike Smith, Wheatley was a black woman, so her fight for social equality was challenged by a patriarchal society. Therefore, Wheatley's writings can be a testament to feminist protest literature. In an effort to compare Wheatley's and Smith's polar experiences, note how Wheatley was questioned by prominent Boston aristocrats to authenticate her works; for Smith, Elisha Niles and "a number of respectable persons who are acquainted with him" (Smith iv) sought out Smith to record his life. The difference between the two experiences is that Wheatley was a woman whose creative skills could have been deemed inferior because of her gender identity not based solely on her talent. Nevertheless, much of Wheatley's work should be classified as early protest literature.

Many scholars who read Wheatley's writings do so only on the surface and do not accredit her with identifying with the black experience of slavery. James Levernier notes that "Wheatley was indeed quite aware of the terrible injustices done to her and other slaves, that she protested these abuses as best she could, that she took pride in her African identity, and that she cultivated relationships with anyone else - black or white - who might directly or indirectly help to end slavery" (Levernier 25). What should be gained primarily from Wheatley is this early sense of protest literature. In order to achieve this,

readers should focus on the words of Wheatley and how they convey a freedom message. By surveying her letters, one should be able to see how passionate she was for both blacks' rights and women's equality. Equally important, is who Wheatley writes to in her poetry and letters. These inferences show that Wheatley had a keen interest in achieving equality for all people, thus a sincere foundation of protest literature should be recognized.

According to Elizabeth Powers there lies an underlying premise that Wheatley did not write about the black problem, nor did she connect with it. An educated woman, Wheatley understood the American political system and wrote for the benefit of herself, forgetting the black problem, argues Powers:

Wheatley wrote at the end of a long poetic tradition, at the moment when poets were beginning to turn away from the imitation of models and sought instead to be 'authentic,' to give expression to their subjective and individual life. It was the moment when the poetry of experience, and also of black experience, was in the process of being created by whites. (110)

Powers claims that Wheatley was not writing because she wanted to uplift or unite the black community, instead she wrote for her white counterparts. So Powers insinuates that the poet wrote in long standing Greek and Latin literary traditions, where emulating other writers was standard practice among white counterparts, and that Wheatley's writings lack a sense of uniqueness or special qualifications in which it should be called protest literature. Wheatley wrote mostly elegiac poetry, composed in couplets. This tradition is derived from a classical foundation, but Wheatley produced original work by focusing on a Christian God in most of her poetry, and in these writings her black

experiences are clearly defined. Therefore, Wheatley was not just a mockingbird versifier as other scholars claim. They fail to recognize the many nuances in Wheatley's works that outline a protest against slavery and, in some instances, a feminist sentiment.

To fully understand Wheatley's work as protest literature, her work should be viewed as writing that rejects the practice of slavery. We can look at the 1773 poem, "On Being Brought from Africa to America":

Twas mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land;
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there's a God, that there's a *Saviour* too:
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew,
Some view our sable race with scornful eye;
'Their colour is a diabolic die.'
Remember, Christians, *Negros*, black as *Cain*,
May be refin'd and join th' angelic train. (1-8)

"On Being Brought from Africa to America" is important because it illustrates Wheatley's reflection on her African heritage. Firstly, she does understand that slavery exists, as the speaker reminds us, "Remember, Christians, *Negros*, black as *Cain*, / May be refin'd and join th' angelic train" (7-8). Wheatley makes the claim that blacks can be "refined" as a way of connecting the black experience to a Christian foundation. April Langley considers black "authors' extensions of the concept of redemption to argue for their spiritual and material rights demonstrate the value of metaphor in their use of biblical language to overturn or subvert negative connotations of the meaning of blackness as it is applied to people of African descent" (58). Being "refined" focuses on

being accepted into the Christian community as a follower of Christ, something that Wheatley believes is available to all people, especially blacks, thus making them equal to whites. Powers' claim that Wheatley does not connect with the black experience is clearly challenged in this poem.

Wheatley connects her race to a bigger problem, the contradiction of Christianity and slavery. In most protest literature, this contradiction is a major contention for early black writers. By examining this issue, Wheatley not only deflates the white claim that blacks must always be dependent on slave owners, but also makes a strong claim that blacks can be Christians. Wheatley shows how blackness does not equal inferiority. If anything, Wheatley illustrates how blacks are intelligent in the line "Taught my benighted soul to understand" (2). Wheatley's intelligence comes from the concepts – English, Latin, biblical literacy, and literacy - she learned from John Wheatley. In other words, if Wheatley was just as literate as her master and better educated than average white colonists, then should not she be considered equal? She proclaims that blacks can be Christians, and that others – white Christians – should not view them as unequal in society. She notes that white pretenders of faith will miss the "angelic train" as long as they continue to practice slavery. "Wheatley sets the stage, introduces the hypocritical stance that allows so-called Christians to accept and even promote slavery, and then lays the groundwork for a spiritual dilemma – either join with Wheatley, the black, female Christian in her critique of the existing power structure or accept the very position of 'other' that she and other black Americans were expected to occupy" (Balkun 122). Wheatley vindicates her sable race by making her white readership feel as if they were the *other*.

Ironically, Wheatley uses the rhetoric of a patriarchal white society to include her own race as equal and to critique the foundation of white society. Through her connections with prominent whites and others, Wheatley's poetry and letters could have some influence on ending slavery in America. Consider, for example, Wheatley's letter to Samson Occom,⁶ an ordained Presbyterian minister, who was also a Mohegan Indian. She considers how Native Americans were experiencing similar problems as blacks in early America. Though Wheatley wanted to alleviate the American colonies of slavery, she understood that she could not do this by herself. In 1774, Wheatley writes to Occom thanking him for his powerful disposition against chattel slavery:

I have this Day received your obliging kind Epistle, and am greatly satisfied with your reasons respecting the Negroes, and think highly reasonable what you offer in Vindication of their natural Rights: Those that invade them cannot be insensible that the divine Light is chasing away the thick Darkness which broods over the land of Africa; [...] the glorious Dispensation of civil and religious Liberty, which are so inseparable united, that there is little or no Enjoyment of one without the other: [...] How well the Cry of Liberty, and the reverse Disposition for the exercise of oppressive Power over others agree, - I humbly think it does not require the Penetration of a Philosopher to determine. (176-177)

Wheatley looks beyond the white race, of which she has an insurmountable level of comfort, to a Native American, who is also a Christian. Throughout her prose and letters, she "rethinks how human difference is used to cohere an ontological identity category,

⁶ Notice how the language of Wheatley in the letter to Occom is similar to the *freedom* language used by white colonists during the Revolutionary War era; especially, illustrated in such documents like the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights.

here to justify slavery” (Chiles 1408). In this letter, Wheatley shows how slavery cannot exist in a Christian nation. Notice how Wheatley challenges the practice with, “divine Light is chasing away the thick Darkness which broods over the land of Africa” (176). Here she refers to those Africans who are suffering oppression in America. Yet, she believes that her faith will sustain them. Wheatley writes, “the glorious dispensation of civil and religious liberty, which are so inseparable untied, that there is little or no enjoyment of one without the other” (176). Here Wheatley boldly makes the claim that “freedom is a privilege which nothing can equal” (Smith 31). Wheatley is concerned with the social construct that one can be a slave and a Christian and not equal. This contradiction is challenged by Wheatley’s persistent claims that blacks are not inferior to whites. Wheatley understands the difference from living an extraordinary life as a slave versus living a life as a free person, in one’s own right. Wheatley and Occom, knew that “[...] the exercise of oppressive Power over others,” (Wheatley 177) could not exist in a place where there is a Christian God. As Christians, they believed that owning people depletes any notion of personal freedom.

Wheatley writes to other African born artists to strengthen her claims to social equality. In her poem, “To S.M., a Young *African* Painter, on Seeing His Works” (1773),⁷ Wheatley connects with another talented artist, who can directly aid in the vindication of Africans as slaves within his work:

To show the lab’ring bosom’s deep intent,
And thought in living characters to paint,

⁷ Scipio Moorhead, a skilled painter, was a slave from Boston that had an acquaintance with Wheatley. Most scholars believe that without the connection to Wheatley, nothing would be known about Moorhead. Refer to Sharon F. Patton’s article: “Expanding The Aesthetic Horizon.” *International Review Of African American Art* 24.1 (2012): 42-48. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 31 July 2013.

When first thy pencil did those beauties give,
And breathing figures learnt from thee to live,
How did those prospects give my soul delight,
A new creation rushing on my sight?
Still, wond'rous youth! each noble path pursue,
On deathless glories fix thine ardent view:
Still may the painter's and the poet's fire
To aid they pencil, and they verse conspire! (1-10)

Here Wheatley writes to Scipio Moorhead on the importance of his work. Though there is little information on Moorhead's life, his artistry must have been very influential in his community, not solely with Africans, but with whites as well. As the poem's speaker ponders, "And thought in living characters to paint / When first thy pencil did those beauties give, / And breathing figures learnt from thee to live" (2-4). Wheatley outlines how important it is for African artists to use their talents to *live*. Wheatley used her talents to her own benefit (in gaining favor from white patrons) and to fight against slavery. This poem shows how other Africans were able to do so as well. Wheatley understood that Moorhead was able to use his art to show how Africans were more than chattel slaves. She takes the opportunity to celebrate "how did those prospects give my [Wheatley's] soul delight" (5). In other words, she is inspired by the paintings of Moorhead to consider the possibilities of racial equality. As evident in perhaps in the most important lines in the poem, Wheatley understands that together they are stronger as freedom fighters and creative artists: "On deathless glories fix thine ardent view / Still may the painter's and the poet's fire / To aid thy pencil, and they verse conspire" (8-10).

Like with her own work, Wheatley considers how Moorhead's talent might also change whites' perceptions of black inferiority. Even more, Wheatley writes these lines as a way to inspire Moorhead to continue the fight, to proceed in his efforts in using his artistry in showing the importance of the black race. The verb "conspire" signals the subversiveness of their artistry. Wheatley understands that the fight for freedom does not end nor begin in the home of the Wheatleys; it is however, a universal fight for the freedom of all people.

Wheatley calls into question one of colonial America's most enduring practices, the subjugation of women. Wheatley understands that being a double minority, black and a woman, might prevent her from achieving full freedom and gender equality. Thus, Wheatley writes black protest literature to spread her message of racism and sexism. Consider the poem, "Farewell to America":

Thee, charming Maid, while I pursue,
In thy luxuriant Reign,
And sigh, and languish thee to view,
Thy Pleasures to regain / SUSANNA mourns, nor can I bear
To see the Christal Show'r / Fast falling – the indulgent Tear,
In sad Departure's Hour! (Wheatley 9-16)

The "charming maid" is Wheatley's call to women, especially those that are in "luxuriant reign" or wealthy white women. In this poem, Wheatley wishes to show women the error of their ways, and to have them to unite. Wheatley understands that being a black woman pits her even more against the established society; however, she advocates for a unified sisterhood. Aided by other women, especially white women, the fight for gender equality

can be achieved as well as racial equality. Wheatley understood that she lived in a chauvinistic society, but her cry out of “SUSANNA” suggests her calling all women to understand and realize that their place in society is similar – not to say equal here – to that of slaves: “Thy wond'rous acts in beauteous order stand, / And all attest how potent is thine hand. / From Helicon's refulgent heights attend, / Ye sacred choir, and my attempts befriend: / To tell her glories with a faithful tongue, / Ye blooming graces, triumph in my song” (Wheatley 3-9). Wheatley understands the power that women can have as a union, not separated by race or any other political means. What the reader should gain from “On Imagination” is the motivational stance that Wheatley issues to women, in order for them to understand their power. Wheatley was dealt a double edged sword, to be black and a woman in a society in which neither was supposed to equal that of white men. Wheatley realizes that to be free and a woman, without proper provisions or rights, then she would still be a “slave” to men. Wheatley’s feminist agenda might appear insignificant—being dismissed and/or ignored by most scholars, but it resonates through later of generations of black feminists.

D. Conclusion

In summary, the foundation of the black aesthetic is created in Wheatley’s work, according to Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Likewise, both Wheatley and Smith provide important information on understanding slavery in early America. Their writings are key to understanding the forming of a nation, and how there was an overwhelming black presence in this process. Wheatley (re)constructs blackness in her poetry and prose with references to the collective experiences of “Africans in America.” Smith writes his life’s story in an effort to show how his claim to the American dream came to fruition before

his death in 1805. Both Smith and Wheatley provide a voice for those early American slaves who might appear as a voiceless mass in the history of this country. Their lives show how African slavery was an evolving institution that lasted in the Americas for more than 400 years. More importantly, they display how writing one's life and thoughts can be a way to escape the confinements of chattel slavery and to show how the right to freedom is inherent to all men. These authors deliver to readers the powerful message that "freedom is a privilege which nothing can equal." Smith and Wheatley write their works in defiance to what was common, the idea of blacks writing, either by the pen or verbal diction was rare, yet they persevered and inspired a nation. These early forms of protest literature proved to be a dominant force when they were first published, but today they allow scholars to understand better the varied experiences of black Americans during the colonial era.

Chapter 4: Thesis Conclusion

This research project presents detailed information about the lives and writings of Venture Smith and Phillis Wheatley, early American slaves. The purpose of this project is to provide accurate information on the practice of slavery in early America. By examining those who lived during this era, this project uses an African American theoretical approach to show how Wheatley and Smith reconstructed their black identity. Also, by using a feminist critique, I explain how Wheatley's experiences as a black woman intensified her claim to freedom even more so than Smith's. Lastly, I use a gender theoretical approach to examine Smith's manhood and show how this affected his fight for freedom drastically. All and all, this essay uses the guidelines of protest literature to show how Wheatley and Smith wrote an early form of this tradition in African American literature. Specifically, this essay shows how Wheatley combated the practice of slavery by rejecting racial and gender ideologies. In more subtle ways, Wheatley attacks the practice of slavery by using irony and sarcasm. Smith wrote a protest narrative using more militant techniques, for example by recalling in his "adventures" the physical fights with his masters.

It was tedious to compile concrete secondary sources that could be used definitively for my argument and against my stance. During this process, I wanted to make sure that I had sources that could be read as historical documentation on the lives of Wheatley and Smith. Equally important, I needed to find solid sources that produced critical literary analyses on the primary texts. By using such sources, I was able to examine information that is most prevalent in the scholarship of transatlantic blackness. Also, I searched for information that could serve as a counterargument to my work. In

doing so, I was able to provide refutations that solidified my argument. My scholarly secondary sources allow readers to see general thoughts, especially in the literature review, and to see how I incorporate these sources to make my arguments concise.

There were many issues with organization in my earlier drafts of this research. It took me some time to grasp writing in more direct terms, so readers would not be confused within my arguments. Inasmuch, I had to completely rewrite the essay so that my thoughts transitioned better, therefore, allowing the reader to better understand the direction of my arguments.

Research in early American literature with African American literature as a sub-field is relatively new. This scholarship can be researched in many avenues that provide valuable information to understand the early American canon. Even more, this research can be used as testament to the creation of early African American and women's protest literature. Specifically, the *Narrative of Venture Smith* should be further analyzed by using a masculine gender theory. In doing so, research could be produced on how Smith created his manhood or his male identity. More attention should be given to Phillis Wheatley's claim to womanhood, and how she calls on the unification of all women in early America. These research efforts will provide substantial information on understanding both Smith and Wheatley and how their lives influenced later generations of American writers, especially those who present the experience of oppressed groups.

Works Cited

- Balkun, Mary McAleer. "Phillis Wheatley's Construction of Otherness and the Rhetoric of Performed Ideology." *African American Review*. 36.1. (Spring 2002): 121-135. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 21 Feb. 2013.
- Boston, Nicholas. "Living Conditions." *Slavery and the Making of America*. (2004): Web. 31 Jan. 2013.
< <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/slavery/experience/living/history.html>>
- Carretta, Vincent. "Phillis Wheatley: An 18th Century Genius in Bondage." *The Public Domain Review*. (2011). Web. 30 July 2013
- Chiles, Katy L. "Becoming Colored in Occom and Wheatley's Early America." *Publication of the Modern Language Association of America*. 123.5 (Oct. 2008): 1398-1417. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web.
- Cornelius, Janet Duitsman. *When I Can Read My Title Clear: Literacy, Slavery, and Religion in the Antebellum South*. Columbia: University of South Carolina, 1991. Print.
- Desrochers, Jr., Robert E. "'Not Fade Away': The Narrative of Venture Smith, An African in the Early Republic." *Journal of American History* 84.1 (June 1997): 40-66. *Academic Search Premier*. Web.
- Gates, Jr., Henry Louis, and Nellie Y. McKay, eds. *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. 2nd ed. London: W.W. Norton, 2004. Print.
- Greeson, Jennifer Rae. "The Prehistory of Possessive Individualism." *Publication of the Modern Language Association of America*. 127.4 (Oct. 2012): 918-924. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 21 Apr 2013.

- Langley, April. "The Eighteenth-Century Black Wor(1)d and Early Writers' Biblical Literacy." *Beyond Douglass: New Perspective on Early African-American Literature*. Eds., Michael J. Drexler and Ed White. 1st ed. Cranbury: Rosemont Publishing & Printing Corp., 2008. 55-69. Print.
- Levernier, James A. "Style as Protest in the Poetry of Phillis Wheatley." *Style* 23.2 (Summer 1993): 172-194. Web.
- Lovejoy, Paul E. "'Freedom Narratives' of Transatlantic Slavery." *Slavery and Abolition*. 32.1 (Mar. 2011): 91-107. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 14 Feb. 2013.
- Monaghan, E. Jennifer. *Learning to Read and Write in Colonial America*. Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005. Print.
- Pickett, Margaret F and Pickett, Dwayne W. *The European Struggle to Settle North America: Colonizing Attempts by England, France and Spain, 1521-1608*. North Carolina: McFarland, 2011. Web.
- Powers, Elizabeth. "Patrimony and its Discontents: Phillis Wheatley and "Die Weltliteratur." *Yale Review*. 98.4 (Oct. 2008): 104-22. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 21 Feb. 2013.
- Slauter, Eric. "Neoclassical Culture In A Society With Slaves: Race And Rights In The Age Of Wheatley." *Early American Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 2.1 (2004): 81-122. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web.
- Smith, Venture. *A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, A Native of Africa*. New London: C.Holt, At Bee-Office, 1798. eBook.
<<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/venture/venture.html>>.

Wheatley, Phillis. *The Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*. New York: Oxford
University Press, Inc., 1988. Print.