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ENTANGLED WITH THE YOKE OF BONDAGE: BLACK WOMEN IN

MASSACHUSETTS, 1700-1783

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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This dissertation expands our knowledge of four significant dimensions of black women's experiences in eighteenth century New England: work, relationships, literacy and religion. This study contributes, then, to a deeper understanding of the kinds of work black women performed as well as their value, contributions, and skill as servile laborers; how black women created and maintained human ties within the context of multifaceted oppression, whether they married and had children, or not; how black women acquired the tools of literacy, which provided a basis for engagement with an interracial, international public sphere; and how black women's access to and appropriation of Christianity bolstered their efforts to resist slavery's dehumanizing effects.

While enslaved females endured a common experience of race oppression with black men, gender oppression with white women, and class oppression with other compulsory workers, black women's experiences were distinguished by the impact of the triple burden of gender, race, and class. This dissertation, while centered on the experience of black women, considers how their experience converges with and diverges from that of white women, black men, and other servile laborers. By focusing on work, relationships, religion, and literacy, my research interrogates the limits of black women's

accommodation to slavery as well as the possibilities available to black women in eighteenth century Massachusetts.

This project challenges the idea that histories of enslaved females cannot be written because sources are not available for the construction of such narratives. Achievement of these research objectives required a shift in perspective. Whereas black women are often relegated to the fringes of historical inquiry and analysis, my research shifts the study of enslaved females from the margins of established histories of colonial slavery in North America, slavery in the North, and African American women to the center of scholarship on eighteenth century Massachusetts.

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Introduction

“In attempting to analyze the situation of the Black woman in America, one crashes abruptly into a solid wall of grave misconceptions, outright distortions of fact, and defensive attitudes on the part of many. The system of capitalism (and its afterbirth – racism) under which we all live has attempted by many devious ways and means to destroy the humanity of all people, and particularly the humanity of Black people.”¹

Frances Beal

"Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto"²

Translation: I am human, and think nothing human alien to me.

Terence

Frances Beal’s words resonate deeply with those who study African American women’s history. Historians of early black women still face a wall of misconceptions and distortions. That barrier, while less solid than it may have been forty years ago, is still formidable. This dissertation presents a history of African American women in eighteenth century Massachusetts that breaches the partition of bias and misrepresentation. Enslaved women inhabited a world in which they were constrained by the bonds of “triple jeopardy” – as females in a thoroughly patriarchal social order, as blacks in a world of white supremacy, and as servile laborers in an emerging capitalist system whose profits derived largely from the economic exploitation of the poor and dispossessed.³ Rather than focusing on what was *done to* black women, this study reveals what black women *did* in the face of overwhelming obstacles. My dissertation demonstrates that black

¹ Frances M. Beal, “Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female,” in *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, edited by Toni Cade. New York: NAL Penguin, Inc. (1970), 90.

² Terence, “Heautontimoroumenos” (“The Self Tormentor”), 1:140. Accessed April 12, 2013, http://www.gutenberg.org/files/22188/22188-h/files/terence3_4.html.

³ Beale, 10ff. The idea of triple jeopardy is an expansion of Frances M. Beale’s early articulation of African American women’s experience of the double bind of race and gender oppression. I choose to be explicit in expanding this idea to include class oppression as a third and equally constricting bond.

women aspired to live free from the entanglements of bondage and that desire is most evident in their assertions of human rights. Thus my research reveals the possibilities and limitations of black women's agency during the late colonial era.

This dissertation examines the lives of black females in eighteenth century Massachusetts from a number of perspectives: labor, relationships, literacy and religion. While the presence of females of African descent is often discounted, this dissertation highlights the significance of studying black women in eighteenth century Massachusetts—their experiences, struggles, aspirations, and achievements. My work illuminates the complicated ways that race, gender, and class were made and remade in early America, just as ideas of freedom were articulated and re-articulated, shaped and reshaped in opposition to blackness, femaleness, and lower class status.

Emerging ideologies and technologies of race as codified in laws, customs, and social relations marked persons of African descent as inferior to whites. A law of 1698, threatened white colonials with whipping as punishment for trading with any “negro servant of slave, or other known dissolute, lewd, and disorderly persons, of whom there is just cause of suspicion.”⁴ Thus blacks were legally debased through inscription with the characteristics of immorality and unruliness. Early in the eighteenth century colonial laws were enacted to restrict black mobility and to prohibit interracial sex and marriage.⁵ These laws signaled the development of race as a systematic ideology, which followed

⁴ See George Henry Moore, *Notes on the History of Slavery in Massachusetts*. New York: D. Appleton and Company (1866); reprinted New York: Negro University Press (1968), 52.

⁵ Moore, 54.

the development of slavery as an institution.⁶ Increasingly, the condition of servitude was inextricably linked to darker skin color.

An enduring legacy of patriarchal domination solidified in England's colonies as well. This resulted in firmer entrenchment of the status of women as second-class citizens. Furthermore, in addition to the codification of racial ideology and the hardening of gender hierarchies, laboring classes were increasingly exploited by an expanding merchant capitalist system, which operated to suppress workers' wages in favor of investors' profits. The experiences of enslaved African American women stand at the nexus of these interrelated and deeply tangled systems of race, gender, and class oppression.⁷ Thus, the work of shifting the history of enslaved black women in the eighteenth century from margin to center is essential if we are to fully understand racism, sexism, and economic marginalization as interconnected historical realities that served to maintain and advance the privileges of whiteness, manhood, and wealth.

An extension of the intellectual gaze is critical if historians are to "see" women in slavery and to "see" slavery in Massachusetts. Any consideration of New England history must take slavery as seriously as Puritanism, geographic expansion, social conflict, market transformation, and American intellectualism—all of which were significant factors in the development and transformation of Massachusetts from a colonial outpost

⁶ See Barbara Jeanne Fields, "Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America," *New Left Review* [Great Britain] 181 (1990), p. 6 for discussion of the emergence of racial ideology in relation to the development of slavery in the North American colonies.

⁷ See Kimberle Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics," *The University of Chicago Legal Forum* (1989), 140ff. for discussion of "intersectionality"—the idea that black women's experience of multiple oppressions simultaneously requires a shift in existing paradigms of feminist theory, antiracist policy, and class analysis.

to a position of influence during the revolutionary and new national eras. Such a view upsets certain conventional equations: slavery equals south and slavery equals male; New England equals white and female equals white. Thus, the critique of black feminists: *All the women are white, all the blacks are men, but some of us are brave.*⁸ This dissertation unmaskes the courage and fortitude of black women who labored, forged relationships, acquired literacy, and professed faith in eighteenth century Massachusetts. The essential character of this work does not, however, negate the real challenges of undertaking it. African American women who lived in the eighteenth century are not easy to study. Black females who lived during this period left few written sources. Moreover the task of recovering the history of black women requires an examination of a variety of sources in search of evidence that reveals the contours of eighteenth century African American slave women's lived experience.

The practice of slavery in New England spurred the development of markets and marketing. Slave-for-sale advertisements in eighteenth century Massachusetts newspapers illustrate this fact: "A Negro Woman to be Sold very cheap for Cash, who understands Houshold Work, is sober, neat, and otherwise bears a good character."⁹ Advertisements show that enslaved women were viewed as "commodities," marketed as merchandise, and valued as property in New England. Likewise, bills of sale clearly show that white slaveowners viewed black females as commodities:

"Know all men by These presents That I Andrew Boyd of Worcester in the County of Worcester yeoman in Consideration of Forty pounds lawl money paid me by John Chandler of Petersham in said County Esq. which I hereby

⁸ Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, eds., *But Some of Us Are Brave*. Old Westbury, New York: The Feminist Press (1982). This quote is taken from the cover of this seminal work in black women's studies.

⁹ *Boston Gazette*, January 5, 1761.

acknowledge I have this day received of him Have Bargained Sold conveyed & delivered and do hereby bargain sell convey and deliver to the said John Chandler his Executors Administrators or assigns, A certain Negro Girl Named & called Dinah about seventeen years old, for the said John to have and hold in Servitude as his Slave & Servant during her Natural Life and hereby Warrant that he may so lawfully hold her and that I have good right to Sell her in manner aforesd.”¹⁰

White slaveowners considered enslaved blacks “merchandise” to be held, bargained, conveyed, and sold as circumstances or opportunities warranted. However my research demonstrates that black women’s valuation of themselves—their lives, labor, relationships, intellectual capacity, and spirituality—was based not on market consumption but on another standard—freedom: “Thy Power, O Liberty, makes strong the weak/ And (wond'rous instinct) Ethiopians speak.”¹¹ Aspirations of freedom empowered black women to struggle against the dehumanizing effects of slavery. Despite white slaveowners’ efforts at commodification, black women understood themselves as human beings created in the image of God. My research reveals that black women considered themselves not as property or possessions but as persons created in the divine image, and therefore entitled to freedom and the rights of citizenship. Thus black women’s self-valuation was grounded in philosophical, social, spiritual, and intellectual tenets that existed in opposition to the emergence of free market capitalism.

My dissertation begins with the development of slavery in colonial Massachusetts. Like other colonies, north and south, Massachusetts grew and expanded with the help of slave labor. Chapter one also surveys the relevant scholarship in three distinct but overlapping areas of historical inquiry, namely work on colonial slavery in

¹⁰ Bill of sale from Andrew Boyd to John Chandler for Dinah (a slave), 20 February 1769, Miscellaneous Bound Manuscripts, MHS.

¹¹ Robert C. Kuncio and Phillis Wheatley, “Some Unpublished Poems of Phillis Wheatley,” *The New England Quarterly*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (Jun., 1970), 293.

North America, the study of slavery in the North, and African American women's history. I examine a number of important works in each of these areas with attention to their significance in my research. I also discuss the limitations of the existing scholarship and thereby demonstrate the need for my project. This overview provides the historiographical context for my project.

Chapter two explores the role enslaved females played as domestic laborers in Massachusetts. Black women and girls had a distinct experience as workers, whether they labored in town households or on country farms along the colonial frontier. Black females were employed in a variety of contexts and were valued for their versatility as workers. This chapter explores the role black females assumed as flexible domestic laborers who were able to perform a wide range of tasks in both urban and rural settings. I also explicate the existence of highly skilled black female workers, which challenges the idea of skilled labor as the sole provenance of males.

Enslaved women's status as servile laborers also affected their private lives. Chapter three examines black females' efforts to create and sustain interpersonal relationships. The chapter begins with an interrogation of the duality of black women's relationships under slavery, which made them members of two families simultaneously: one white and one black. I explore the contours of black family formation within the New England Puritan context, thereby revealing the cultural dissonance between black slaves and their white owners. Black women sought opportunities to forge and maintain relationships with other blacks and with sympathetic whites and thereby acted to limit slavery's negative impact. The ability to form family, extended kin, and friendship ties

reveals the possibilities and limitations black women faced when acting to assert social agency by building and nurturing interpersonal relationships.

In chapter four, I discuss black women's acquisition of literacy. Attention to black women's opportunities for and attainment of the tools of literacy reveals important political dimensions of African American life in New England. For black women who managed to attain a degree of literacy in eighteenth century Massachusetts skills could range from fluency in speech to reading and writing proficiency. Literacy gave black women a basis for public engagement beyond the limits inscribed by their gender, race, and class. Black women who achieved literacy used their ability to speak, read and write to advocate for civil rights, namely freedom, equality, and independent.

Chapter five interrogates black women and religion in eighteenth century Massachusetts. Black females who professed Christian faith did so within the context of a contentious theological debate concerning slavery. Elite white men articulated pro and anti slavery arguments during the eighteenth century. Each side used religion to justify their positions. Black women who embraced Christianity employed their faith to assert spiritual agency. Thus Christianity provided a foundation that enabled black women to resist slavery on spiritual grounds. Chapter five explores the ways that black females used their religious faith to buttress claims to full humanity and to counteract slavery's demoralizing effects.

This dissertation ends with an epilogue in which I conclude that black women's struggle against the entanglements of bondage and quest for liberty in the eighteenth century serve as a prelude for free African American women's involvement in abolitionism into the antebellum era. Exploration of the possibilities and challenges of

freedom for black women in eighteenth century Massachusetts reveals how, why, and to what end black women in the nineteenth century fought to secure the claims of liberty and to live as persons who would not be entangled again with the yoke of bondage. The goal of this research, then, is to make the lives of eighteenth century black women accessible by reconstructing a narrative around themes of work, relationships, religion, and literacy.

The emergence of the narrative of a historically free, white New England following the founding of the American republic represents a dismissal of the complicated reality of economic, political, and social relations that were shaped by racial ideologies that emerged from colonial relations, which were structured by slavery.¹² The distinctiveness of New England racism, as evinced in Massachusetts, has its origins in behaviors and attitudes that were rooted in the practice of slavery. Nevertheless, black women found ways to assert claims to liberty and citizenship.

My examination of black women's entanglement with the yoke of bondage in Massachusetts unveils the hidden complexities and cruelties of eighteenth-century American life. Thus, this study reveals a "world of conflict and hardship that contrasts dramatically with the harmonious, prosperous vision of early New England that is often lodged in our historic imagination."¹³ My research also exposes a world of possibilities, however limited, for black women in New England. One in which skills might be gained, relationships maintained, literacy acquired, and religion professed. It is my contention that the history of slavery in New England and the history of African American women

¹² Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780-1860*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press (1998), xv.

¹³ Ruth Wallace Herndon, *Unwelcome American: Living on the Margin in Early New England*. Philadelphia; University of Pennsylvania Press (2001), 26.

each looks different when we consider these narratives—their contours, intersections, and divergences—from the perspective of one of the most degraded populations in the midst.

Freedom is the concept that motivates and undergirds my research. My intellectual curiosity about black women's understanding of and appropriation of the rhetoric of liberty as well as their aspirations for freedom fueled the odyssey that culminates in this dissertation. My interest in black women and fixation on the long struggle of African Americans for freedom—a central preoccupation of all African American history—led me to a name: Phillis Wheatley. Wheatley was a black female slave in eighteenth century Massachusetts but she was not the only one. Other names emerged: Phillis Cogswell, Jinn Cole, Catherine Cornwell, Elleanor Eldridge, Elizabeth Freeman, Juno Larcom, Flora Nedson, Lucy Terry Prince, Belinda Royall, Sarah Shelter, Jenny Slew, and Chloe Spear. These names represented more than a dozen black women whose full names were preserved in the archives. There were other females who were identified only by first names: Dinah, Lidia, Marier, Venus, Zilpah, and countless others whose names are lost but whose presence is documented in source, after source, after source: a court record here, a will there, bills of sale, letters, poems, testimonials, confessions, journal entries, church registries, and newspaper notices. Extracting a narrative from these shards of evidence, however, proved challenging. Not only are these sources fragmentary but they are also mired in complexity. Black women's lives in eighteenth century Massachusetts were entangled by the mutual constraint and reinforcement of racial subordination, gender inequality, economic disadvantage, political disfranchisement and social ostracism. In other words reconstruction of a historical narrative about black women's presence in early Massachusetts can only be

achieved through dual processes of discovery and disentanglement. This dissertation represents my journey of both encounter and extrication.

The experience of black women in eighteenth century Massachusetts invites deeper historical consideration of “freedom” as contested terrain. For African Americans both the idea and status of freedom in eighteenth century New England was deeply complicated by politics, economics, and culture, all of which are deeply informed by Republicanism, the emergence of free market capitalism, and Puritanism. These forces complicate the idea of freedom, and provide impetus for a constant “reckoning” of ever-changing definitions of freedom—who and what is included or excluded is not as firmly established in the Republican rhetoric as our founding myths suggest. Freedom, when viewed through the lens of black women’s experience, is fluid territory. It is shifting sand upon which battles for independence and citizenship were continuously fought.

Chapter One:
Towards a History of Black Women in Eighteenth Century Massachusetts

If and when a historian sets the record straight on the experiences of enslaved Black women, she (or he) will have performed an inestimable service.¹

While a number of scholars have responded to the challenge Angela Davis issued more than three decades ago, the history of black women's experiences in early America still warrants attention. This dissertation represents my contribution toward setting the record straight concerning black women's lives in eighteenth century Massachusetts. The history I have chosen to write requires application of the tools of historical research, critical analysis, and narrative reconstruction. In this dissertation I aim to refocus and clarify our understanding of two distinct, yet overlapping and at times deeply entangled historiographies, namely the history of slavery in the English North American colonies, and African American women's history.

My dissertation draws on the literature of colonial slavery, studies of slavery in the North, and histories of African American women. My research reveals the interconnectedness of these literatures even as it refuses to separate deeply embedded, entangled constructions and technologies of race, gender, and class. Gender analysis is a critical dimension of this work. However, my study does not begin and end with gender as its principal focus. Gender has different meanings for non-white women. Likewise, gender has different meanings for poor and economically marginalized women. Gender, while central to my inquiry, must not subsume or be subsumed by racial ideologies on the one hand, or class analysis on the other. The black women at the center of my investigation are not either black, or female, or poor. Rather they are all of these things at

¹ Angela Davis, *Women, Race And Class*. New York: Vintage Books (1981), 4.

once. It is my assertion that the intersections and complexities of race, gender, and class as socially constructed and reconstructed technologies by which privilege is conferred and sustained, or systematically withdrawn and withheld, is clearly revealed in the experiences of black females. Thus the deeply entangled roots of multiple oppressions proved tenacious for black females who struggled for freedom, autonomy, and self-determination. This dissertation is an exercise in holding gender, race and class in dynamic tension—an undertaking fraught with challenge and conflict.

This research is significant on several levels. Only a handful of histories of slavery in English North America during the colonial period offer sustained focus on New England. Fewer still center on the experience of women. Rarely do scholars fully engage both. My dissertation emphasizes and explicates the experiences of black women in the Massachusetts, while interrogating the nature of slavery in New England. While it has been argued that the New England colonies were societies with slaves in which a more humane form of bondage was practiced, my research suggests that black women in Massachusetts might have characterized their condition very differently. Thus my dissertation recovers evidence of the centrality and brutality of chattel slavery in colonial New England.

Although Massachusetts was the first of the New England colonies to hold slaves, it is difficult to date when the practice of slavery began with precision. However, the practice of slaveholding, and slave trading, can be traced to the early history of Massachusetts as a colonial settlement. While slaves formed a substantial portion of the human population of South Carolina, Virginia, and New York, they were a small percentage of the population of eighteenth century Massachusetts. Nevertheless, the

practice of slavery was widespread in the colony. The prevalence of slaveholding, when considered in conjunction with the fact that many prominent residents of Massachusetts, including clergymen, merchants, and colonial officials owned slaves and/or participated in the slave trade suggests that slavery was a significant factor in the region's social, cultural, and economic development.² Many of Massachusetts' most prominent families were slave traders:

“Cornelius Waldo, maternal great-grandfather of Ralph Waldo Emerson, was a slave merchant on a large scale, a proud importer of "Choice Irish Duck, fine Florence wine, negro slaves and Irish butter." His ship, *Africa*, plied the Middle Passage packed with 200 black people at a time crammed below-decks, though lethal epidemics of "flux" sometimes tore through the captives and cut into Waldo's profits.”³

Likewise, Peter Fanueil, whose philanthropy built Boston's famed Faneuil Hall, inherited a large fortune on his uncle's participation in the slavery trade.⁴

The first important European settlement in Massachusetts was motivated primarily by religious rather than material aspirations. On November 11, 1620, English Pilgrims (Puritan Separatists), led by William Bradford, landed near what is now Provincetown harbor after more than two months at sea. Eventually they settled across the bay and founded Plymouth colony, where they set up a democratic government according to the terms of the famous Mayflower Compact. A more significant development, however, was the arrival of the Puritans, a group of Congregationalists, who were determined to find a place where they could practice their faith free from

² Lorenzo J. Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England 1620-1776*. New York: Athenaeum (1968). See Appendix H for a list of leading slaveholding families in New England, including James Bowdoin, Dr. Zabdiel Boylston, Jonathan Edwards, Andrew Fanueil, Peter Fanueil, John Hancock, Cotton Mather, and Isaac Royall.

³ “Slavery in Massachusetts,” accessed November 10, 2008, <http://www.slavenorth.com/massachusetts.htm>.

⁴ “Slavery in Massachusetts.”

religious persecution. On March 19, 1628, a royal charter was granted to the Massachusetts Bay Company to promote settlement of the territory and govern its colonies. A large band of Puritans, led by John Winthrop, arrived at Salem in 1630. Samuel Maverick, an early pastor of the first church in Dorchester, had two slaves on Noodles Island before Winthrop's arrival.⁵ One of Maverick's slaves was a female who "had been a Queen in her own Countrey," which is evidence of the presence of black women in the colony from its conception.⁶ In 1637, Native American males captured in Massachusetts during the Pequot War were exchanged for African slaves in the West Indies. As the result of a statute enacted in the Body of Liberties in 1641, Massachusetts became the first colony to legalize slavery in English North America.⁷ The institution would not receive formal legal status in Virginia until 1662.

Within three years of slavery's legalization in Massachusetts, Boston merchants attempted to import slaves directly from Africa. However, those early efforts yielded little profit. From the late seventeenth through the early eighteenth century, Massachusetts grew in population and maritime trade. Massachusetts' trade, especially with the Caribbean, grew to such an extent that Boston came to be known as the "Mart (or Market Town) of the West Indies."⁸ By 1676, ships from Boston would sail to Madagascar to secure slave cargo for sale in the West Indies and Virginia. Africans who were too young or too weak for sale in plantation colonies were brought to New England.

⁵ Lorenzo J. Greene, "Slave-Holding New England and Its Awakening," *The Journal of Negro History*, vol. 13, no. 4 (Oct., 1928), 494.

⁶ Moore, 8.

⁷ Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England*, 63.

⁸ "Bay Colony," accessed November 10, 2008, <http://www.sec.state.ma.us/cis/cismaf/mf2.htm>.

Potential slave owners in New England could afford to purchase less hearty specimens, because New England slaves were not required to work under the same harsh physical climate and conditions as slaves in Virginia and the West Indies.⁹ Forty to fifty Africans from Madagascar were brought into Massachusetts in 1680. The majority of them were women who sold for ten, fifteen, or twenty pounds each.¹⁰ By the last decades of the seventeenth century, traders from Massachusetts were expanding their markets throughout the region, supplying slaves to Connecticut and increasing their trade with Rhode Island.

Massachusetts grew rapidly during the first half of the eighteenth century, as settlers pushed from the coast into the interior and founded new towns. The population of seacoast towns more than doubled, which resulted in social problems as well as economic opportunity. Colonials in Massachusetts continued to look to England in cultural matters but were becoming more self-aware. By 1760 Massachusetts was a “prosperous, confident, and vibrant society of independent farmers, workers, merchants, and professionals.”¹¹ The expanding colonial economy resulted in increasingly complex relationships between farmers, artisans and tradesmen. Storekeepers and merchants gradually replaced earlier, simpler ways of exchanging goods, as a result.¹² This booming economy created a shortage of labor, which many Massachusetts colonists filled with slaves.¹³

During the eighteenth century Massachusetts “became a part of the British empire,

⁹ Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England*, 35.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 32.

¹¹ Benjamin W. Labaree, *Colonial Massachusetts: A History*. Millwood, New York: KTO Press (1979), xvi.

¹² *Ibid*, xvi.

¹³ “Slavery in Massachusetts.”

politically through royal government, economically by expanding their maritime trade, which including the slavery trade and related enterprises, and militarily by their involvement in the numerous wars between the mother country and France.”¹⁴ The eighteenth century also heralded an “astounding increase in the New England slave trade.”¹⁵ This growth was caused by three factors: the breakup of the Royal Africa Company’s monopoly on the slave trade by the English Parliament in 1698; the Spanish Asiento of 1713, which gave England control in supplying slaves to Spanish colonies in the Americas; and New England’s thin, rocky soil, which forced New Englanders who hoped to amass a fortune to look to the sea.¹⁶ These developments paved the way for New England merchants to aggressively pursue the slave trade.

Black slaves increasingly staffed elite colonial households. As a result the number of slaves in Massachusetts grew over the course of the eighteenth century, from 800 in 1700, to over 4,800 in 1780, which represents an increase of 600% during this period.¹⁷ The colony’s enslaved population was concentrated in the industrial and seaside towns. By 1742, the total number of blacks in Boston alone rose to 1,514. This corresponded to almost a 400% (four hundred percent) increase during the first four decades of the eighteenth century.¹⁸ The black population of Boston grew to represent approximately 10% of the City’s total number of inhabitants in 1752. The number of slaves in

¹⁴ Labaree, xvi.

¹⁵ Greene, “Slave-Holding New England and Its Awakening,” 498.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 498.

¹⁷ Table Eg1-59, “Population, by race and by colony or locality: 1610-1780,” in *Historical Statistics of the United States*, Millennial Edition On Line, Susan B. Carter, Scott Sigmund Gartner, Michael R. Haines, Alan L. Olmstead, Richard Sutch, and Gavin Wright, eds., Cambridge University Press (2006). Accessed January 4, 2006, <http://hsus.cambridge.org.proxy.libraries.rutgers.edu/HSUSWeb/toc/tableToc.do?id=Eg1-59>.

¹⁸ Greene, “Slave-Holding New England and Its Awakening,” 497.

Massachusetts reached its largest percentage of the total population between 1755 and 1764, when it stood at around 2.2%. The total number of blacks and mulattos in the colony during this period numbered 4,891, of which 2,067 (approximately 43%) were female.¹⁹

Massachusetts' importance as a colony was the result of early settlement, population growth, and domination of trade, especially with the Caribbean. While we know a great deal about New England Puritanism, geographical expansion and conflicts with Native Americans, such as King Philip's War, social conflicts, including the Salem Witch Trials, and intellectual developments like the founding of Harvard College, slavery in the colony remains understudied. Studies of slavery in the British North American colonies have not focused on New England to the same extent that historical scholarship has focused on the southern colonies. New England, along with other Northern colonies, has been characterized as societies with slaves, in contrast to the slave societies of the southern and Caribbean colonies.²⁰ Historians have tended to view slavery as less significant to the social, political, and economic development of the North's societies with slaves. Furthermore, when slavery in the North is examined from a historical perspective, rarely does Massachusetts receive the focused attention the colony's dominant position warrants. Additionally, histories of the New England colonies often

¹⁹ Table Eg117-131, "Population of Massachusetts, by age, sex, race, and ethnicity: 1764-1784" in *Historical Statistics of the United States*, Millennial Edition On Line. Accessed January 4, 2006, <http://hsus.cambridge.org.proxy.libraries.rutgers.edu/HSUSWeb/table/nexttable.do?id=Eg110-116>.

²⁰ Ira Berlin. *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press (1998), see p. 7-9 for a synopsis of the distinction between societies with slaves and slave societies.

neglect to treat slavery with any degree of seriousness.²¹

Gender relations also shaped economic, political, and social realities in colonial Massachusetts, although women, particularly black women, are often notably absent from many historical accounts. While blacks represented a minority of the population in eighteenth century Massachusetts, and uneven sex ratios skewed the black population toward males, black women were not inconsequential to the region's development. Black

²¹ A spate of studies of colonial Massachusetts was published from 1969-1970. These include Robert G. Pope, *The Half-way Covenant: Church Membership in Puritan New England*. Princeton: Princeton University Press (1969); John Demos, *A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony*. New York: Oxford University Press (1970); Philip Greven, *Four Generations: Population, Land, and Family in Colonial Andover, Massachusetts*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press (1970); Kenneth A. Lockridge, *A New England Town; the First Hundred Years: Dedham, Massachusetts, 1636-1736*. New York: W. W. Norton (1970); G. B. Warden, *Boston, 1689-1776*. Boston: Little Brown Publishers (1970); and Michael Zuckerman, *Peaceable Kingdoms: New England Towns in the Eighteenth Century*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf (1970).

More recent works include Labaree, *Colonial Massachusetts: A History*; Christine Heyrman, *Commerce and Culture: The Maritime Communities of Colonial Massachusetts, 1690-1750*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company (1986); Richard I. Melvoin, *New England Outpost: War And Society In Colonial Deerfield*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc. (1992); David W. Conroy, *In Public Houses: Drink and the Revolution of Authority in Colonial Massachusetts*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press (1995); Phyllis Whitman Hunter, *Purchasing Identity in the Atlantic World: Massachusetts Merchants, 1670-1780*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press (2001); M. Michelle Jarrett Morris, *Under Household Government: Sex and Family in Puritan Massachusetts*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press (2012); and Roger Thompson, *Divided We Stand: Watertown, Massachusetts, 1630-1680*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press (2012). None of these works treat the subject of slavery or the experience of black women with sufficient depth, if at all.

Recent work from other disciplines that addresses slavery in colonial Massachusetts includes Alexandra A. Chan, *Slavery in the Age of Reason: Archaeology at a New England Farm*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press (2007); Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina, *Mr. and Mrs. Prince: How an Extraordinary Eighteenth-Century Family Moved Out of Slavery and Into Legend*. New York: Amistad Press (2008); Elise Virginia Lemire, *Black Walden: Slavery and Its Aftermath in Concord, Massachusetts*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press (2009); and C. S. Manegold, *Ten Hills Farm: The Forgotten History of Slavery in the North*. Princeton: Princeton University Press (2010).

women's labor in homes and on farms contributed to a thriving colonial economy. Although whites viewed them as commodities, black women saw themselves as human beings created in the divine image. To this end, African American women's labor, relationships, acquisition of literacy tools and skills from oral language facility (i.e. the ability to communicate using English language) to reading and writing ability, and religious faith and practice, served as vehicles by which black women asserted claims to dignity and worth as human beings.

While a number of historians have studied African Americans in England's North American colonies during eighteenth century, limited attention has been paid to the particular experience of African American women during this period. *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward The Negro* by Winthrop D. Jordan, represents an early and important contribution to the history of colonial slavery.²² Jordan's study explores whites' attitudes towards blacks over two and a half centuries and spans the thirteen mainland North American colonies and the West Indies. While the work is primarily a history of the origins of white racism, the question of race-based slavery and its origins receives thorough attention. Ultimately, Jordan links the origins of slavery to the material interests of English colonizers. Thus, economic imperatives, rather than race prejudice, propelled the rise of slavery. However, slavery and racism were mutually generating and reinforcing. By the beginning of the eighteenth century English settlers began to use skin color as the chief characteristic for distinguishing themselves from enslaved Africans. Eventually this differentiation would give rise to the codification of white racist ideology

²² Winthrop D. Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press (1968).

and coalesce in the intellectual claim of “America as a white man’s country.”²³ Jordan’s treatment of slavery in New England is scant and centers on the question of slavery’s existence in a region with few blacks, no staple crops, and minimal economic demand for slaves. The unique condition of black women receives almost no attention in Jordan’s work. My dissertation offers a more thorough treatment of slavery in New England. Unlike Jordan, my research explicates the conditions, contributions, and challenges black women faced in colonial Massachusetts. Furthermore my research reveals that slavery existed in Massachusetts for the same reason that it was practiced in Virginia: because whites were able to use black slaves to meet the labor demands in an expanding colonial market.

The publication of *American Slavery-American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* by Edmund S. Morgan signals another significant contribution to the study of colonial slavery.²⁴ Morgan’s study focuses on a single colony—Virginia—in an effort to explicate the ways that American ideas about freedom are predicated upon enslavement and racial subordination of peoples of African descent. According to Morgan, initial efforts to force Indians to work the land were largely unsuccessful. Indentured Europeans provided the bulk of the labor necessary for cultivation of tobacco as a cash crop for export during the early years of settlement. But by the mid-1600s, planters turned increasingly to Africans for labor, which signaled a shift from the use of short-term indentured English servants to the practice of chattel slavery. By the turn of the eighteenth century, large numbers of slaves were imported into the Virginia colony.

²³ Jordan, xiii.

²⁴ Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery-American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company (1975).

Morgan outlines the emergence of legislation that codified race by limiting the interaction between Europeans and Africans and by granting planters greater authority in disciplining slaves. Slavery in Virginia was undergirded by the development of thriving tobacco plantation culture and bolstered by an emerging political system based on the common interests of elite planters and yeoman farmers. Thus, not only did slavery and freedom coexist in the colony but the expansion of liberty for white male Americans occurred in tandem with the development and use of coerced black labor.

My dissertation complicates Morgan's work. While his examination of the "ordeal" of colonial Virginia reveals important dimensions of the history of slavery in colonial America, Virginia is not the whole story. Massachusetts' dominant role in the slavery trade, coupled with the widespread practice of slavery throughout the colony, merits greater attention if we wish to have a more accurate and comprehensive view of slavery in England's North American colonies. By focusing on Massachusetts, rather than Virginia, my research reconstructs a historical narrative that reveals the tangled roots of slavery, racism, patriarchy, class oppression, and freedom in colonial New England. Like Morgan, my research focuses on a single colony. However my work departs from Morgan's in its attention to black women. My research expands the scholarship on colonial slavery to include black women's experience of bondage and freedom in eighteenth century Massachusetts.

Seminal works on colonial slavery by Gerald Mullin and Peter H. Wood explored questions of slave resistance, as well as slave achievement and culture in the colonial

south.²⁵ While these early studies left the history of slavery in colonial New England largely unexplored, the exceptional work of Lorenzo Greene warrants recognition. *The Negro In Colonial New England* explores the conditions of African Americans in New England during the colonial period. First published in 1942, more than a quarter century before *White Over Black* or *American Slavery-American Freedom* debuted, this groundbreaking study provides a comprehensive historical treatment of the condition of African Americans in the “Puritan” colonies of Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut over a period of one hundred and fifty years, from the first English settlements through the signing of the Declaration of Independence.²⁶ Greene’s work provides a historical survey of the region’s involvement in the slave trade as well as the functioning of its slave markets. It also includes thorough demographic data on the black population in the New England colonies.

Greene was not the first to historicize slavery in Massachusetts. Beginning as early as the nineteenth century, George Moore and George Sheldon published histories of

²⁵ Gerald W. Mullin, *Flight and Rebellion: Slave Resistance in Eighteenth-Century Virginia*. New York: Oxford University Press (1972); and Peter H. Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion*. New York: Knopf (1974). More recent histories of slavery in the southern colonies include Daniel Littlefield, *Rice and Slaves: Ethnicity and the Slave Trade in Colonial South Carolina*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press (1981); Gloria L. Main, *Tobacco Colony*. Princeton: Princeton University Press (1982); Betty Wood, *Slavery in Colonial Georgia, 1730-1775*. Athens: University of Georgia Press (1984); Allan Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves: The Development of Southern Cultures in the Chesapeake, 1680-1800*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, (1986); Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Low Country*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press (1998); and Anthony S. Parent, *Foul Means: The Formation of a Slave Society in Virginia, 1660-1740*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press (2003).

²⁶ Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England*, preface.

Massachusetts in which the subject of slavery was discussed.²⁷ However, Greene’s scholarly treatment of blacks in colonial New England represented the first comprehensive study of African Americans during this period. In addition to the slave trade and slave markets, Green discusses the social, political, and economic impact of slavery on a wide range of Puritan institutions.²⁸ My dissertation expands on the foundational work of Lorenzo Greene, a pioneer in the Negro History Movement and a protégé of Carter G. Woodson. Greene’s study, although published more than sixty years ago, remains the most thorough study of slavery in the New England colonies. For all of its expansiveness the experience of enslaved women does not factor prominently in Greene’s study. The central assertion of his work—that slavery in New England was milder than in the southern and Caribbean colonies—reflects a historical gaze that is too narrow:

“The widely held notion, perpetuated by many town historians and still somewhat prevalent today, that slavery in the small New England states...was a kinder, more benevolent (acceptable?) version than that practiced in the South is patently false...the act of enslaving an individual, no matter where one was located, produced harsh conditions and life-altering consequences.”²⁹

The enduring argument that slavery in colonial New England was gentler obscures the importance of how slavery made white lives “work” in the region and obfuscates the ways that black female labor in homes and on farms helped keep those estates viable and served to make many of them more profitable. In contrast to Greene, my dissertation

²⁷ Moore; George Sheldon, *A History of Deerfield, Massachusetts: The Times When and the People of Whom it was Settled, Unsettled and Resettled: With a Special Study of the Indians Wars in the Connecticut Valley. With Genealogies*. Deerfield, Massachusetts: The Press of E. A. Hall and Company (1895).

²⁸ Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England*, preface.

²⁹ Glenn A. Knoblock, *“Strong and Brave Fellows” : New Hampshire’s Black Soldiers and Sailors of the American Revolution, 1775-1784*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, Inc. (2003), 7.

centralizes the experience of black females, who embodied the intersectionality of race, gender, and class, and who faced multi-layered, systematic oppression whether enslaved or free.

Histories of colonial slavery in the North have largely built upon, rather than refuted, Greene’s fundamental assessment of slavery in New England as “milder” and “kinder” than slavery in other regions.³⁰ Greene concluded that New England’s slaves were better treated based on the his analysis of economic and political conditions that were unique to this section as well as Puritan ideas of slavery that were deeply rooted in an Old Testament concept of patriarchy. Green further surmised, “strong bonds of affection frequently developed” between slaves and their owners as a result.³¹ My research interrogates Greene’s thesis and complicates his conclusions. Rather than engaging this long-standing historical debate, I aim to show how that slavery was not the same in Massachusetts as it was in the southern and Caribbean colonies—not necessarily better, or worse, but certainly different. This study explores that difference as reflected in the lived experience of black women. My research on black women in Massachusetts amplifies our historical understanding of colonial slavery’s many variations.

Black Bondage in the North by Edgar J. McManus links African American enslavement to northern whites’ experiences of economic hardship, especially craftsmen who were forced into competition with slave labor in the North.³² McManus’s research builds on Greene’s earlier work and expands upon it to include the middle Atlantic colonies of New York, New Jersey, Delaware, and Pennsylvania. McManus argues that

³⁰ Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England*, 219.

³¹ Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England*, 327.

³² Edgar J. McManus, *Black Bondage in the North*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press (2001), x.

slavery was vital to the economic development of the northern colonies and that slaves “provided the basic working force that transformed shaky outposts of empire into areas of permanent settlement.”³³ Like Greene, McManus explores the connection between the type of labor slaves performed and their treatment, which could vary according to their relationships to the larger economy. Thus Northern slaves who were more skilled were likely to be treated better than their unskilled counterparts. The study of slavery in the Northern colonies was further extended by a number of more recent works by Shane White, Graham Hodges, Leslie Harris, Julia Foote, and Jill Lepore.³⁴ While these histories contribute significantly to our understanding of racial formation, society and culture, labor, religion, resistance, and style within the context of colonial slavery in the North, they focus on urban New York.

Nevertheless history of slavery in New England has advanced beyond Lorenzo Greene’s early scholarship in a number of profitable directions. In 1954, Lawrence Towner wrote an important dissertation based upon research in colonial Massachusetts sources that would not be published until 1998. His study, *A Good Master Well Served: Masters and Servants in Colonial Massachusetts, 1620-1750*, is a careful consideration of

³³ McManus, 17.

³⁴ Shane White, *Somewhat More Independent: The End of Slavery in New York City, 1770-1810*. Athens: University of Georgia Press (1991); Graham Russell Hodges, *Root & Branch: African Americans in New York and East Jersey, 1613-1863*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press (1999); Leslie Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626-1863*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press (2002); Thelma Wills Foote, *Black and White Manhattan: The History of Racial Formation in Colonial New York City*. New York: Oxford University Press (2004); Jill Lepore, *New York Burning: Liberty, Slavery, and Conspiracy in Eighteenth-Century Manhattan*. New York: Knopf (2005).

the plight of black slaves and white servants in one New England colony.³⁵ Towner's research reflects an interest in the experiences of ordinary people, rather than an institutional history of servitude in the colony. His bottom up approach to the study of colonial history represents a pioneering effort for the period in which it was initially undertaken. Towner used two distinct analytical categories of a "servant elite," that was comprised of apprenticed and indentured servants whose terms were fixed by contract, and "servant lower classes, which was made up of Indians and Negroes who were enslaved for life. Poor boys and girls put into servitude by the Overseers of the Poor, debtors, and war criminals were also part of the servant lower class. Towner's study represents an important contribution to our understanding of the social aspects of slavery and servitude in Massachusetts. However, his work does not deeply interrogate the experiences of black women in the colony. His elite and lower class servants are white, Native American, and African American. They are skilled and unskilled. They are apprenticed, indentured, and enslaved but they are primarily male. My research on black women broadens our understanding of the ways that gender, together with race and class, shaped the experience and practice of slavery and servitude in Massachusetts.

Black Yankees, William Piersen's path-breaking study of the development of a uniquely African American sub-culture in New England, was published ten years before Towner's research.³⁶ Piersen, a folklorist as well as a trained historian, investigates a plethora of sources to support his contention that "despite the strictures of bondage, the black Yankees of eighteenth-century New England created a sustaining folk culture of

³⁵ Lawrence William Towner, *A Good Master Well Served: Masters and Servants in Colonial Massachusetts, 1620-1750*. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc. (1998).

³⁶ William D. Piersen, *Black Yankees: The Development of an Afro-American Subculture in Eighteenth-Century New England*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press (1988).

their own.”³⁷ His work takes a view of slavery in New England that centers on the emergence of an “Afro-Yankee” culture that is evident in slaves’ religious beliefs and worship practices, work habits, folk arts and crafts, food preparation, personal style, physical carriage, folk medicine, and holiday celebrations. For Piersen, the development and persistence of a unique “Afro-Yankee” culture represents a form of black resistance to white dominance and control.³⁸ Like Greene and McManus, Piersen views New England slavery as a less brutal system than was practiced in other colonies.³⁹ Piersen’s contribution to our understanding of the cultural dimensions of black life in early New England, while valuable, fails to fully explicate the experiences of black women in the region—a void this dissertation aims to fill.

One decade after Piersen and concurrent with Towner, Joanne Pope Melish published *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780-1860*. This study expands the scholarship into the period of gradual emancipation in New England, which begins with the emergence of legal statutes to end slavery following the American Revolution and continues well into the nineteenth century. Through her focus on the development of a unique racial ideology and experience in New England, Melish explores how the narrative of a historically “free” and “white” New England “displaced a more complex reality in which economic, political, and social relations were structured by “race,” itself emerging from a still earlier set of relations structured by slavery.”⁴⁰ Melish argues against economic historians, such as Jackson Turner Main, who dismiss

³⁷ Piersen, ix.

³⁸ Ibid, 155. Piersen asserts that folk arts and expressions should be considered as evidence of “overt resistance.”

³⁹ Ibid, 3.

⁴⁰ Melish, xv.

slavery as unimportant to the development of New England's diverse commercial economy. Melish contends that slaves' domestic labor released white males to engage in professional, artisan, and entrepreneurial activities, which increased productivity and eased the region's transition from a household[1] to a market-based economy.⁴¹

Disowning Slavery charts the progress and triumph of New England's brand of American nationalism, which embodies a form of cultural imperialism that extends from the Pilgrims to the Puritans and beyond to include Revolutionary persons and events, such as Paul Revere and the Boston Tea Party. Melish's work demonstrates the ways in which this cultural imperialism is central to the construction of an American heritage and identity that erases the centrality of slavery in the nation's historical narrative. My work addresses this historical erasure but departs from Melish by focusing on the experiences of black women. My reconstruction of the history of black women in Massachusetts offers a corrective to traditional narratives of American identity based on progress and triumph.

Later work by John Wood Sweet also addresses the issue of race – its construction as well as its function – in relation to questions of citizenship and democracy. In *Bodies Politic: Negotiating Race in the American North: 1730-1830*, Sweet examines colonial society and its relationship to the development of democracy.⁴² His examination centers on the experiences of English settlers, native Indians, and enslaved Africans in New England. Like Melish, Sweet identifies the erasure of an African and Indian presence from common historical narratives of the growth and development of colonial New

⁴¹ Melish, 8.

⁴² John Wood Sweet, *Bodies Politic: Negotiating Race in the American North, 1730-1830*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press (2003).

England as a powerful, durable myth. Sweet's work, however, extends the scholarship related to the history of slavery in New England by its inclusion of native Indians, together with African and African American slaves, as well as whites. *Bodies Politic* recounts the possibilities of acculturation for Indians and enslaved blacks in the colonial era. The limits of assimilation become evident in Sweet's analysis of the Revolutionary War – a conflict that revealed the different understandings of liberty, independence, and freedom held by enslaved Africans, free blacks and Indians, and whites. Ultimately, according to Sweet, American Liberty and Independence from British rule, would depend to a significant degree on the military service of persons of African and Indian descent who were excluded from access to full citizenship in the emerging republic. Sweet's history of New England documents the ways that "America came to present itself as a white nation when it was, and had been from the start, diverse, hybrid, and multiracial."⁴³ My dissertation both affirms and expands the idea of early American diversity to include gender and class, as well as race, as embodied in black women.

Likewise, the scholarship on slavery in the northern colonies advanced significantly with the publication of *Many Thousands Gone*, Ira Berlin's synthesis of the first two hundred years of slavery in England's North American colonies. Berlin provides a thorough account of the development and transformation of slavery from the beginnings of English settlement through the Revolutionary era. The work surveys the development of slavery within four distinct regions – the North, the Chesapeake, the Lowcountry, and the Lower Mississippi valley – over three discreet periods: the charter, plantation, and revolutionary generations. Berlin emphasizes change over time and asserts that people of

⁴³ Ibid, 10.

African descent crossed the line between bondage and freedom many times during the first two centuries of the practice of North American slavery. Berlin characterizes the northern colonies of New England and the Middle Atlantic as *societies with slaves* that never develop into full-fledged *slave societies* but rather evolve into free societies with the emergence of gradual emancipation legislation following the Revolutionary war.

While the early development of slavery in New England and the Middle Atlantic may have paralleled that of Virginia and Maryland for the charter generation, their paths diverge sharply over time. According to Berlin, “The northern colonies began as societies with slaves, not slave societies, and remained such through the seventeenth and well into the eighteenth century.” Slavery in the northern colonies was further shaped by what Berlin classifies as the “multifarious character of the northern economy,” which when coupled with the low ratio of blacks to whites enabled African Americans to be more easily integrated into the larger society.⁴⁴ The incorporation of blacks into northern societies, however, was neither uniform nor complete, and black women faced particular challenges. My dissertation highlights the unique trials black females faced at work, in relationships, in religious communities, and in their attempts to attain education, as well as the strategies they employed to mitigate the debilitating effects of racial, gender, and class discrimination. My research suggests that to characterize Massachusetts as a society with slaves one must overlook an important fact. The same system of race, gender, and class oppression that thrived in the slave societies of the South worked to the advantage of elite whites in Massachusetts.

⁴⁴ Berlin, 47.

Even after several decades of profitable study of slavery in the North, the history of African American women in colonial New England remains understudied. In fact, scholarship on the lived experience of enslaved and free black women in the United States has centered largely on females in the slave societies of the plantation south during the antebellum period. While little attention has been devoted to the unique experiences of enslaved women in the northern colonies generally, and colonial New England more specifically, there is a body of scholarship that explores the history of enslaved African American women. *Ar'n't I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, Deborah Gray White's seminal study of slave women reexamines sources long available to historians, such as slave narratives, plantation records, European travelogues, and personal diaries, bringing a critical consciousness of race, class, and gender to the field of slavery studies.⁴⁵ White deconstructs the historical roots, as well as the interconnectedness, of stereotypical images of enslaved Black women as either hypersexualized *Jezebels* or infinitely nurturing *Mammies*. White clearly demonstrates the ways that chattel slavery separated the experience of Black women from that of white women. White's study also explores issues of labor, sexuality, reproduction, family and kinship ties, and female support networks. *Ar'n't I a Woman* concludes with an epilogue in which White analyzes the similarities between free and enslaved women. Despite their experience of extreme exploitation and powerlessness, enslaved African American women managed to develop strategies for survival. The first monograph published on the subject, White's work still stands as the definitive study of Black women and slavery in

⁴⁵ Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton and Co. (1985), pp. 13-14.

the antebellum south. My dissertation builds upon this pioneering work by directing scholarly attention to the plight of black women in an early New England colony.

The study of African American women has expanded in a number of profitable directions since the publication of *Ar'n't I A Woman*. Historical research on black females in Antebellum era has advanced our understanding of African American women in a number of important areas. Sharla Fett's study of healing and health in antebellum slave communities provides another model of historical reconstruction and intervention. In *Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slave Plantations*, Fett explores the competing ideas of slave health held by white planters, mistresses, and physicians, and by black midwives, conjurers, and herbalists.⁴⁶ Fett goes beyond biological, medical, and other scientific approaches to the study of slave health to examine dimensions of health as experienced and embodied in antebellum slave communities in Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia. Fett contrasts slaveholders' concept of "soundness," which equated slave health with the potential for productive (and in the case of females, reproductive) labor and market value, with slaves' ideas of health that were spiritual and relational. Slave health is contested terrain for Fett, who argues that slaves struggled with slaveholders for the right to determine how their bodies would be cared for, and by whom. Fett also examines the role of female slave healers, whose skills were depended on by the very slaveholders who sought to limit their authority and influence within slave communities. My dissertation builds upon Fett's research in its discussion of black women's health and well-being in early Massachusetts.

⁴⁶ Sharla M. Fett, *Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slave Plantations*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press (2002).

Stephanie M. H. Camp's *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South*, investigates questions of mobility and constraint on southern slave plantations.⁴⁷ Camp's work explores what she terms the "geography of containment," a system that embodied the technologies of power planters deployed to control slave movement. Thus, in a system where planters placed a premium on controlling mobility, enslaved people resisted by attempting to retain control over the movement of bodies, objects, and information. Camp's study identifies multiple *sites* of resistance: the practice of truancy, engagement in the pursuit of pleasure through participation in frolics and other secret amusements, and in rare cases, the decoration of slave cabins with abolitionist print materials. These sites constitute a "rival geography" in which slave women were able to appropriate various spaces for use in manners that conflicted with the ideals and demands of their white masters and mistresses.⁴⁸ For slaves, the building of "rival geographies," allowed for different ways of knowing and using plantation spaces. While planters viewed black female bodies in terms of productive and reproductive capacity, enslaved women sought ways to use their bodies for purposes of pleasure and self-expression. For enslaved women, gender paradoxically limited and expanded their opportunities to resist slavery. Planters often assigned men responsibilities that enabled them to travel away from the plantation and thus offered greater opportunities for escape, while women's greater familial responsibilities limited their opportunities for flight. Enslaved women were more often choose truancy over running away to freedom in the North as a result. Through her study of spatial geography,

⁴⁷ Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press (2004).

⁴⁸ Ibid, 7. Camp builds upon Edward Said's idea of a rival geography, extending the concepts utility from discussions of colonial occupation to slavery in the south.

social relations, gender and power, Camp reveals how enslaved women and men moved beyond the constraints of bondage, thus extending our understanding of black resistance. My research supports and extends Camp's claim that enslaved women sought ways to move beyond the entanglements of bondage, as evinced in newspaper advertisements for fugitive women in eighteenth century Massachusetts.

The interconnections between gender, work, and family for enslaved women and men in Georgia is the focus of "*Swing the Sickle for the Harvest is Ripe*": *Gender and Slavery in Antebellum Georgia* by Daina Ramey Berry.⁴⁹ Berry's study extends the meaning of "skilled" labor to include agricultural work performed by female, thus she complicates our understanding of "skilled" work as the exclusive domain of enslaved males. By defining skilled labor as the ability to do something well, Berry demonstrates that skilled females laborers outnumbered their male counterparts on Georgia plantations. Berry also argues that women were often preferred as a result of their reproductive capacity and their lower cost-to-output ratio. Enslaved females as well as males performed both agricultural and non-agricultural work and skilled labor crossed gender lines on Georgia plantations.⁵⁰ Berry's work challenges traditional definitions of "skilled" labor as work involving a particular craft or trade, which was largely performed by males. My dissertation builds upon Berry's research to reveal the presence of "skilled" black female workers in eighteenth century Massachusetts. These works on the history of enslaved black women in North America, while exploring an important range of topics, focus largely on black females in the antebellum south. Thus they do not adequately

⁴⁹ Daina Ramey Berry, "*Swing the Sickle for the Harvest is Ripe*": *Gender and Slavery in Antebellum Georgia*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press (2007).

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 2.

address the experiences of black women in eighteenth century Massachusetts, a void my research seeks to fill.

While book length studies of black women colonial North America remain few, one notable exception is *Laboring Women*, Jennifer L. Morgan's pioneering study of African American women and slavery in the colonies, which explores the intersections of gender, race, labor and sex.⁵¹ In *Laboring Women*, Morgan examines the connections—the continuity and diversity—in the experience of enslaved women by using reproduction as a comparative framework for the study of slavery in the Americas, rather than more common categories, such as plantation/household size or type of crop cultivated. Morgan demonstrates that the reality of slave women's reproductive lives provides a fertile site for an investigation of slavery as an economic and social institution. The reproductive capacity of enslaved women was also a significant factor in shaping the female experience of enslavement. Morgan's work demonstrates that female slaves were essential to the British colonial enterprise as *producers* and *reproducers*. As producers, their grueling physical labor in the sugar cane fields of Barbados and the rice paddies of South Carolina served as a potentially renewable resource for expanding the economic wealth of their owners. As persons with potential physical reproductive capacity, female slave bodies became a site of definition and perpetuation for the institution of chattel slavery in the Americas. Morgan's seminal study, however, does not explore the condition of enslaved women in colonial Massachusetts. In Massachusetts, the value and meaning of black women's reproductive labor varied. Thus my research complicates our

⁵¹ Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press (2004).

understanding of enslaved women's dual capacity as productive and reproductive laborers.

Love of Freedom: Black Women in Colonial and Revolutionary New England by Catherine Adams and Elizabeth H. Peck presents an important corrective to the historical oversight and inattention paid to black women in early New England.⁵² Adams and Pleck's study primarily chronicles and analyzes assumptions about patriarchy that informed black women's definition of freedom during the colonial and revolutionary eras. Adams and Pleck also explore how gender shaped the development of free black communities that emerged throughout New England in the wake of gradual emancipation statutes that were enacted following the American Revolution. Adams and Pleck's work is grounded in the assertion that fundamental institutions of American life, namely slavery and marriage, were based on principles of male dominance. Thus, patriarchy limited the meaning black women ascribed to freedom, as well as their experience of freedom after emancipation.⁵³ According to Adams and Pleck, black women failed to "recognize any contradiction between freedom and patriarchy."⁵⁴ *Love of Freedom* represents an interdisciplinary partnership that reflects the authors' expertise in both literary and legal history, in which freedom is characterized in a number of dimensions: legal, religious, educational, and spiritual. Pleck and Adams' research makes black women visible, which challenges existing historical narratives of New England as the sole provenance of free white, elite, males.

⁵² Catherine Adams and Elizabeth H. Peck, *Love of Freedom: Black Women in Colonial and Revolutionary New England*. New York: Oxford University Press (2010).

⁵³ Ibid, 3.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 17.

My research both diverges from and expands upon that of Adams and Pleck. First, I interrogate the experiences of black females in one New England colony, rather than an entire region. Second, I employ a more thorough treatment of black female labor and access to literacy, in addition to extending the discussion of relationships and religion. Finally, I explore the definition of black female freedom. While patriarchy constrained the meaning and experience of freedom for black women, it was one limiting factor among many. Black women in Massachusetts aspired and struggled to live free from interrelated and mutually reinforcing “entanglements” of gender, race, and class. Black women struggled against multiple oppressions in their quest for liberty, self-determination, and full citizenship.

The study of black women in eighteenth century Massachusetts reveals both the form and function of gender as a social construction in early America, whose meaning shifts as it is raced and classed. While my project takes serious account of the ways that gender oppression limited black women’s access to economic, social, religious, and educational opportunities, gender was only one aspect of the multiple constraints black women faced in colonial Massachusetts. Black women had to struggle for recognition, equality, and freedom on multiple fronts: as females in a patriarchal society; as blacks in a world of white supremacy; and as “lower sorts” in a economic, political, and cultural hierarchy that privileged wealth and social status. Unlike Pleck and Adams, my study focuses on social dimensions of black women’s lives in Massachusetts. My research explores the impact of women’s work, relationships, religious practice and education on the meaning of black freedom.

Outsiders and onlookers may have counted black women in Massachusetts more fortunate and better treated than their counterparts in Virginia, South Carolina, Jamaica and Barbados. However my research suggests that black women in Massachusetts did not consider their lot privileged. Rather, they had to contend with constant surveillance, the drudgery of unrelenting domestic labor, disruptions to family life, and barriers to education. Although historians have often characterized race relations in early Massachusetts as intimate and benign, my study of black women reveals the oppressive nature of slavery in colonial New England. Discussions of the relative kindness or brutality of slavery from region to region can serve to obscure deeper understanding of how persons who were degraded by the institution understood their lot. My study reveals the adversity black women faced, as well as the opportunities they seized, in slavery and freedom in colonial Massachusetts.

Like many historians of African American history, questions of freedom and equality are central preoccupations. My dissertation is an effort to explicate black women's experience as "entangled" by structures of domination. My research is also an attempt to cast black women's aspirations for freedom, equality and self-determination in light of this complexity. Black women's struggle for liberty was fraught with more than legal challenges. Black women faced seemingly insurmountable barriers to economic independence, social recognition and support, religious equality, and access to literacy. While these obstacles proved stubborn and nearly impossible to overcome, black women in eighteenth century Massachusetts evinced an indomitable desire to be free in body, mind, and spirit.

My research reveals that black women developed myriad strategies to survive the brutality of enslavement, gender subordination, racial stigmatization, economic disadvantage, and political disfranchisement in Massachusetts and found ways to assert claims to full humanity and liberty. This study re-examines, reconstructs, and re-configures commonly held assumptions about slavery in the northern colonies and black women in early America. Thus my dissertation represents an expansion of the scholarship on important dimensions of black women's lives in eighteenth century Massachusetts, namely work, relationships, literacy, and religion—all of which deserve more sustained historical consideration. Furthermore my research contributes to the ever-expanding canon of work, which focuses on black women and takes full account of the complications and complexities scholars must face when writing histories that explore and explicate the meaning of lives lived at the intersections of race, gender, and class.

Chapter Two:
“Fit for Town or Country”: Black Women and Work in Colonial Massachusetts

I. Introduction

Slavery in Massachusetts, like slavery throughout the English colonies, was a system of coerced labor that relegated the vast majority of black women, men, and children to a life of perpetual bondage, servitude, and unremunerated work. Therefore, labor was a primary component and an essential aspect of the experience of enslaved females. Historians have long concluded that the absence of task and gang labor systems in Northern colonies meant that life was easier for slaves in the region. However, the demands of New England’s diversified economy required greater versatility and skill from the region’s slaves than was necessary on plantations where a single cash crop was cultivated.¹[3] In the Bay colony, enslaved female workers performed as multipurpose laborers, which contrasts with work undertaken by black women and girls on the tobacco, indigo, and rice plantations of the southern colonies. Thus versatility and skill contributed to enslaved women’s value as workers in homes and on farms where they labored and in the “markets” where they were sold.

This chapter demonstrates that historians have not paid sufficient attention to black women’s domestic work in colonial Massachusetts. Thus the objective of this chapter is threefold. Its primary aim is to elucidate personal characteristics of enslaved females as both individuals and workers who contributed to a thriving colonial economy. A secondary objective of this chapter is to assert that enslaved black females were adaptable workers who were able to perform a wide range of domestic tasks in urban and rural settings. Through analysis of slave-for-sale advertisements from colonial

¹ Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England*, 101.

newspapers published in Massachusetts, I intend to demonstrate that black women's value as laborers was directly related to their flexibility. Finally this chapter explores and examines evidence of the existence of highly skilled enslaved female workers, thus challenging the notion that skilled work was the sole provenance of males. It is important to note that indentured servitude was not as widespread in Massachusetts as in some other North American colonies, despite the stated preference of elite white colonials, one of whom opined: "It would conduce more to the Welfare of the Province, to have White Servants for a Term of Years, than to have Slaves for life."²

In 1705, lawmakers established a duty of four pounds per head on African imports to encourage the immigration of white servants into the colony, but few came. By the end of the decade Massachusetts colonists were accepting shipment of Indian war captives from Carolina to augment the labor force.³ Good white servants were still "scarce to be had" in the 1720s. Upon arriving in Boston in the early years of the decade, Thomas Amory, an Irish merchant who had lived in Barbados, remarked on the scarcity of servants in the colony: "No one sells but endeavors to buy."⁴ Thus black slaves were imported to make up for Massachusetts' labor shortage problems.

Enslaved black women had a distinct experience as females and as laborers. Often the uniqueness of their experience found its basis in their status both as workers and as potential mothers. While Jennifer L. Morgan has convincingly argued that enslaved

² Samuel Sewall and Sidney Kaplan, *The Selling of Joseph: A Memorial*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press (1969), 2.

³ Robert E. Desrochers, Jr., "Slave-for-Sale Advertisements and Slavery in Massachusetts, 1704-1781," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, Vol. 59, No. 3, Slavery in the Atlantic World (Jul., 2002), 642.

⁴ William B. Weedon, *Economic and Social History of New England, 1620-1789*. New York: Hillary House Publishers (1963), 456, 570.

women's value in English colonial settlements in Barbados and South Carolina was determined both by their ability to undergo physical labor and by their potential to bear children who would be the legal property of their enslaved mothers' owners, enslaved women in colonial Massachusetts were not valued for their reproductive capacity. Rather, enslaved women in colonial Massachusetts were often discounted and sold if they proved to be too fertile. This chapter explores the experiences of enslaved females as workers in colonial Massachusetts, thus highlighting their value as productive laborers whose toil made a significant contribution, not only to individual owners and households, but also to the region's economy^{[4][5]}.

This chapter will focus mainly on slave-for-sale advertisements in an effort to understand the nature and character of enslaved females' experience as laborers as well as how the work of enslaved females contributed to the development of a thriving colonial economy. Black^[6] women's work in colonial Massachusetts has been long discounted historically because most labored as domestic servants.^{5[7]} Such an assessment, however, undervalues the contributions of black female workers in households and on farms. The fact that black women's labor throughout the northern colonies was primarily domestic in nature should not obscure its oppressive character^[8]. Black female domestics in Massachusetts "paid a high price for the material improvements in living conditions they may or may not have had," relative to their counterparts in southern or island colonies. Females enslaved in the Bay colony lived in close proximity to their white owners and often worked long hours, at the beck and call of white masters and mistresses. Because enslaved women lived and worked in such

⁵ McManus, 38.

close proximity to their owners they were under constant surveillance and were often exposed to harsh punishments for minor transgressions.⁶ Additionally, many of the domestic tasks performed by enslaved females in households and on farms were tedious and relentless. Enslaved women and girls often labored day and night at unremitting tasks while under the intense scrutiny of ever-present masters and mistresses. My research complicates the older view of slavery in the North as a more benign form than was practiced in the south or Caribbean. The experiences of enslaved females in Massachusetts diverged from those of enslaved females in plantation colonies, even as they shared a condition of unremunerated, lifelong servitude. Exploring those differences yields a deeper, more nuanced and complex portrait of slavery in the North American colonies.

II. What the Advertisements Reveal

“There is to be Sold at the House where Mrs. Blair dwelt, best brocaded Silks, black Velvet, strip’d and plain Lutestrings, Taffeties, Gorgorons, black Allimode, with sundry sorts of Mourning; as also Silver and Gold Trimmings of all sorts, and many other valuable Goods, not here mention’d, to be Sold by John Phillips, living in said House: Likewise a Negro Wench, fit for either Town or Country.”⁷

In April 1739, John Phillips, son of the late Mrs. Mary Blair and administrator of her estate, published this advertisement in the *Boston Evening Post*. Phillips issued his notice more than once, demanding “immediate compliance” from all who were indebted to the estate and threatening legal action against any who failed to act in accordance with his request. Phillips had plans to leave the colony for Great Britain “speedily (being under an absolute Necessity of settling said Estate before his Departure).”⁸ Thus he

⁶ Chan, 219.

⁷ *Boston Evening Post*, April 30, 1739.

⁸ *Boston Evening Post*, April 30, 1739.

needed to settle his late mother's accounts and liquidate the remaining assets as quickly as possible. Her material legacy included clothing, household goods, and an enslaved woman. This advertisement conveys little information about the enslaved woman Phillips offered for sale. We learn nothing personal about her. There is no mention of her name, ethnic background, place of origin, tenure in the colony, or language ability. We do not know how old she was. We do not know her marital status or whether or not she had children. Phillips failed to disclose any of these details. Perhaps he thought them insignificant, given his goal of gaining his rightful inheritance. Despite this seller's attempt to depersonalize his human merchandise, the advertisement reveals one significant fact about an otherwise anonymous enslaved female. She was a worker—"fit for either Town or Country"—whose ability to labor in a variety of settings represented a marketable commodity.

Black women, like their male counterparts, were brought to Massachusetts to satisfy a general labor need. Enslaved females and males were not the only source of bound labor in eighteenth century Massachusetts. Indians and poor whites were also a source of bound labor.⁹ It has been argued, however, that the immigration of indentured servants to New England was of little relative importance, especially when considered in relation to other colonies, such as Virginia and Pennsylvania. Unskilled and poor whites immigrants did not find the kind of opportunities in New England that were widely

⁹ Towner, 25-49; 77-101. Towner identifies two distinct servant classes in colonial Massachusetts: the servant elite, which consisted of apprentices and white (immigrant) indentures, and the servant lower classes, which was made up of debtors, war prisoners, criminals, Indians, and Negroes.

available in the middle and southern colonies during the eighteenth century.¹⁰ It must be noted that black slaves shared some common experiences with other members of the “servant” class, whether “elite” apprentices or “lower” criminals, prisoners of war, debtors, Indians and indentures. Slaves’ daily activities and work were often nearly indistinguishable from those whites and Indians who shared their condition of servitude. However, the fact that black slaves were servants for life certainly distinguished them from other servile workers.¹¹

While slavery did not thrive anywhere in New England to the extent that it flourished in England’s Southern and Caribbean plantation colonies, historians’ focus on the marginality of the practice of slavery in New England obscures the fact that “New Englanders at certain times, in certain places, and under certain conditions made the institution work.”¹² The institution was working effectively enough at the turn of the eighteenth century to cause one prominent colonial to remark upon “The Numerousness of Slaves at this day in the Province.”¹³ The tendency of historians to relegate the practice of slaveholding to a place of relative unimportance in Massachusetts perpetuates what Robert E. Desrochers, Jr. calls “the New England studies tradition of exceptionalism,” which obscures the ways that “trends in New England dovetailed with broader currents of slavery and political economy in the non-plantation societies of the mid- Atlantic and the North and in the larger Atlantic world.”¹⁴ Economic growth or stagnation, currency inflation, wartime tax burdens, and fluctuating commodities prices impacted the value of

¹⁰ Clifford K. Shipton, “Immigration to New England, 1680-1740,” *The Journal of Political Economy*, 44:2 (Apr., 1936), 225.

¹¹ Towner, 89.

¹² Desrochers, 624.

¹³ Sewall, 1.

¹⁴ Desrochers, 624.

slave labor in New England, just as those factors did in other English colonies. Slave labor was exploited in Massachusetts, just as it was on plantations in Virginia, the Carolinas, Georgia, and throughout the British West Indies. Thus, the work of enslaved females helped turn Massachusetts' farms, shops, and markets into profitable concerns^[10].

From 1704 to 1781, more than 1,000 advertisements for the sale of enslaved black females were published in Massachusetts' newspapers.¹⁵ The vast majority of these notices were printed in a handful of publications, including the *Boston News-Letter*, the first continuously published newspaper in America.¹⁶ The first advertisement for the sale of a black female was published within three months of the paper's founding: "Two Negro men, and one Negro Woman & Child; to be Sold by Mr. *John Colman*, Merchant; to be seen at Col. *Charles Hobbey*, Esq his House in Boston."¹⁷ Another notice published in the same volume announced the sale of a "Negro Woman about 16 Years Old."¹⁸ The earliest published notices contain scant information about the females being marketed for sale. But the advertisements confirm the presence of black females in the colony.

¹⁵ See Appendix A, 184. For this study I reviewed the following colonial newspapers published in Massachusetts: *American Gazette*, *Boston Chronicle*, *Boston Evening Post*, *Boston Gazette*, *Boston Newsletter*, *Boston Post Boy*, *Continental Journal*, *Essex Gazette*, *Essex Journal*, *Massachusetts Spy* (Boston), *New England Chronicle*, *New England Courant*, *New England Weekly Journal*, *Salem Gazette*, and *The Weekly Rehearsal*. I focused on slave-for-sale, slave wanted and runaway slave advertisements published between 1700 and 1783, in which black females were specified. It is worth noting that 91.3 % (1041 of 1150) of advertisements for the sale of enslaved females were published in five newspapers: *Boston Evening Post*, *Boston Gazette*, *Boston News-Letter*, *Boston Post Boy*, and *New-England Weekly Journal*.

¹⁶ First published on April 24, 1704, by John Campbell, postmaster of Boston, the *Boston News-Letter* had no competition until 1719, when the first issue of the *Boston Gazette* appeared.

¹⁷ *Boston News-Letter*, June 12, 1704.

¹⁸ *Boston News-Letter*, June 12, 1704.

Furthermore, careful, critical reading of these published notices reveals important details about enslaved females' experiences as workers in eighteenth century Massachusetts.

Unlike other sources of information about the institution of chattel slavery during this period, such as diaries, personal correspondence, and political treatises, newspaper advertisements were relatively objective in their presentation of facts surrounding the slaves they represented. Individuals who published advertisements for the sale of slaves in Massachusetts' newspapers were neither praising nor criticizing slavery as an institution. They were concerned primarily with providing information that might hasten the prompt, profitable exchange of property for cash. It is important to note, however, that these advertisements were not without biases. Printed at the request of slave owners and their agents for a fee, published notices offered limited information about enslaved women, filtered through the visual and linguistic prisms of a dominant class.¹⁹ According to Jonathan Prude, "what the ads underscore, is that eighteenth-century Americans consistently observed themselves and their world, and that the 'look' of what they saw was deeply consequential."²⁰ In a number of cases slave-for-sale advertisements reported slave owners' observations about the characteristics and personalities of enslaved females, even as the notices reinforced social hierarchies inscribed by race and gender. The eighteenth century masters and mistresses who published notices in Massachusetts newspapers observed and reported origin, degrees of acculturation, physical characteristics, and personality traits for the human merchandise they sought to market.

¹⁹ White, 120.

²⁰ Jonathan Prude, "To Look upon the "Lower Sort": Runaway Ads and the Appearance of Unfree Laborers in America, 1750-1800." *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 78, No. 1 (June, 1991), 126.

That slave owners also ‘saw’ gender is evident in the advertisements. Slaves-for-sale were gendered male or female and reported as such in newspaper notices.

Slave-for-sale advertisements reveal the role colonial newspapers played in helping elite whites secure and maintain economic privilege through commodity exchange. Slavery and newspapers had a “close and synergetic relationship,” in colonial Massachusetts, and both institutions grew together.²¹ Within this context colonial newspapers held a “self-assumed” function as agents of “social identity in a colonial English Atlantic world tied together by print, consumerism, and...the shared experience of slavery.”²²

Slave-owners who hoped to sell their female chattel through newspaper advertisements occasionally reported the point of origin and language ability of their ‘merchandise.’ Advertisements abounded for the sale of a “parcel of likely Negro Boys and Girls, just imported from Africa.”²³ Adult females imported to Boston directly from Africa were also advertised, as evinced in the notice for the sale of “A Lusty, healthy, strong Negro Woman about 28 or 29 Years of Age, has been in Boston (direct from Guinea) about 15 Years.”²⁴ Another advertisement for the sale of “A Very likely, strong and healthy Negro Girl, lately imported from the West Indies, about 12 Years old,” is evidence that some enslaved females had undergone “seasoning” in the Caribbean prior to their arrival in Massachusetts’ markets.²⁵ In addition to information about the origin of

²¹ Desrochers, 623.

²² Desrochers, 625.

²³ *Boston Evening Post*, October 30, 1749. Also see *The Boston Gazette*, June 19-June 26, 1732, for evidence of slaves imported from the Gold Coast of Africa.

²⁴ *Boston Evening Post*, February 26, 1750.

²⁵ *Boston Evening Post*, August 3, 1741. Also see *The Boston News-Letter*, October 30-November 6, 1729, for evidence of slaves imported from the West Indies.

enslaved females offered for sale, clues about acculturation in terms of familiarity with English are evident in advertisements for sale. Examples of notices announcing the sale of “likely Negro” females who speak good English are evident in colonial newspapers.²⁶ Notice for the sale of an enslaved female who was described as “very fluent in the English Language” suggests that some enslaved females were acculturated to life in New England in the eighteenth century.²⁷

A close reading of the notices illuminates the dimly understood world of African Americans in colonial New England. Whether or not the names of those enslaved females offered for sale were included, most advertisements contained some physical description, however limited. Furthermore, through the use of descriptive categories such as Negro, mulatto, and black, for sale advertisements published in eighteenth century Massachusetts newspapers reveal how slave owners ‘saw’ race in broader terms than a strict binary of black and white.²⁸

A number of women advertised in for sale as well as runaway notices were referred to as “wenches.” In eighteenth century language usage the word *wench* had several connotations. It could be used to refer to any girl or young woman but it might also signify a weak, fickle female, or a prostitute.²⁹ Colonial newspapers are full of notices for the sale of “strong hearty,” “sprightly healthy,” and “Likely Creole Negro”

²⁶ See *Boston Evening Post*, September 8, 1735; *The Boston Gazette*, September 22-September 29, 1735; and *The Boston New-Letter*, March 23-March 30, 1713, for examples of English language ability.

²⁷ *Boston Evening Post*, September 3, 1744.

²⁸ See *Boston Chronicle*, March 23-March 27 1769, *Boston Evening Post*, July 19, 1773, *Boston Gazette*, June 25, 1770, *Continental Journal*, September 19, 1776, for examples.

²⁹ *Online Etymology Dictionary*. <http://www.etymonline.com>. *The Oxford American Dictionary*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Oxford_American_Dictionary.

wenches.³⁰ Therefore, slaveowners' use of the term in newspaper advertisements with the intent of marketing their female slaves for sale must not be considered benign. Rather, the numerous references to black women as "wenches" in colonial publications should be read as evidence of white slaveowners' desires to denigrate enslaved females and thereby maintain a social hierarchy based on patriarchal power, racial dominance, and class privilege. On the surface the advertisements reveal enslaved black women not as persons but as 'things' whose individuality is subsumed by their status as compulsory workers. In the notices, enslaved women are portrayed as disposable commodities. Thus the advertisements represent black women as items available for purchase to anyone who was willing and able to pay the right price.

Besides providing clues about point of origin and degree of acculturation, some notices lump black women in with a plethora of inanimate objects:

"To be LETT, A Very convenient Work-House for the Tallow-Chandlers Trade, with a large Copper and Furnace, and all Utensils for said Business, near Oliver's Dock. Also a large Chaise-House, near Mr. Thornton Barret's, and a good Dwelling House in King-Street, next Door to the Hon. Col. Fitch's. And, To Be SOLD, A Large Quantity of the best hard Soap, and Candles, Hog's Fat, Butter and tried Tallow, good Glass Bottles, sundry Marble Mortars, a good Chaise and Tackling, and also a Negro Woman and a Negro Lad."³¹

Another colonial merchant advertised the availability of chocolate for "13s. per Pound," and "a Negro Woman" for reasonable terms.³² One seller offered "Mahogany Tables, Chairs and Desks," in addition to an enslaved woman.³³ Another had "a Variety of China Dishes," "a fine large Harpsicord," "a microscope," "one Negro Woman and three Negro

³⁰ *The Boston Gazette, or Weekly Journal*, February 20, 1753; *The Massachusetts Spy: Or, American Oracle of Liberty*, December 26, 1776; *The Boston Gazette, and Country Journal*, November 12, 1764.

³¹ *Boston Evening Post*, December 22, 1735.

³² *The Boston Gazette*, March 26-April 2, 1739.

³³ *Boston Post Boy*, January 21, 1751.

girls” for sale.³⁴ In colonial Massachusetts’ markets, one could rent property or buy furniture, dishes, musical instruments, scientific equipment soap, candles, lard, chocolate^[13], and slaves for ready cash or credit.

In the notices white owners and publishers sought to depict black women as workers—‘objects’ that were obligated to labor without rights or compensation. Although the names of the enslaved females offered for sale were rarely mentioned in the advertisements, approximate ages were often included. In one instance, a notice pronounces a twenty-six year old enslaved female as “Very careful” and “industrious”³⁵ Another black woman of “about 18 or 20 Years old” is described as “Very Likely and healthy.”³⁶ A girl of “about 14 Years old,” is depicted as “very likely handy and good Tempered...and in perfect Health,” while a girl of 10 was offered for sale on account of “not being Wanted.”³⁷ Also^[14] advertised was a “likely, strong, healthy” and mature female of “about 36 Years of Age.”³⁸ In the advertisements where the age of the female offered for sale is indicated, more than 75% were between the ages of eleven and thirty years old, with females between the ages of twenty-one and thirty years old making up more than half of that number.³⁹ The fact that approximate ages, but not names, were so often included in slave-for-sale advertisements suggests that as far as slave buyers and sellers were concerned, the identities of enslaved females did not factor into their value at sale. Rather, advertisers sought to render the distinct personalities and particular

³⁴ *Boston Post Boy*, April 24, 1758.

³⁵ *Boston Evening Post*, May 9, 1737.

³⁶ *Boston Evening Post*, September 5, 1737.

³⁷ *Boston Evening Post*, May 17, 1736.

³⁸ *Boston Post Boy*, January 18, 1762.

³⁹ Appendix D, 187.

differences of enslaved females as insignificant, thus portraying individual black females interchangeable in their role as workers.^[15]

However, a deeper reading of slave-for-sale advertisements reveals enslaved females as individuals with varied traits and temperaments. Although owners and publishers of slave-for sale advertisements sought to commodify black women as workers, closer inspection of the notices suggests the limits of white slaveholders' attempts to completely objectify their chattel. Newspaper notices reported slaveowners' observations about the physical characteristics and attributes of the female workers they sought to sell, even as the notices reinforced social hierarchies inscribed by race, gender, and class.^{[16],[17]} Myriad terms were used in the notices to describe black women, among them bandy, handy, healthy, hearty, industrious, lusty, likely, spry, and strong. When owners included descriptive markers, like the aforementioned, they sought to expedite sales for profit.

The use of descriptive words in the notices reveals clues about how slave owners 'saw' race, gender, and work in colonial Massachusetts. This same information also offers glimpses into the personalities of enslaved females in colonial Massachusetts. For example, it is probable that the "Sprightly, clean and healthy" enslaved woman who was "possess'd of every Domestic Quality, except Taciturnity" possessed a personality that conflicted with her owner's desire for a more reserved servant.⁴⁰ The advertisements reveal other personal traits of the females represented therein, giving a human face to the inhumane practice of slave trading. Black female workers came in a variety of ages, with distinct physical characteristics, and individual temperaments. They ranged in age from

⁴⁰ *The Boston News-Letter and New-England Chronicle*, August 6, 1767.

children to teens and mature adults. They might be African born, seasoned in the West Indies or long time residents of the colony. Some were bow-legged. Others were notable for their industry, honesty, and sobriety. Some appeared “cheerful.”⁴¹ Others spoke fluent English, while still others bore physical markers of their African past. All were individuals, despite their common plight as laborers, bound for life, in colonial Massachusetts.

III. Versatility, Skill, and Enslaved Female Labor

Black females in colonial Massachusetts labored in a variety of settings—“Town or Country”—and performed a wide range of tasks in their daily work. Their value as productive laborers is evident in slave-for-sale advertisements in colonial Massachusetts’ newspapers. A close reading of published notices reveals the kind of work performed by enslaved women in the colony and the existence of skilled black female laborers in the eighteenth century. It is possible on the basis of these notices to identify three distinct, yet at times overlapping, kinds of work that black women performed in the colony: household service, rural labor, and versatile labor.⁴²

Some white owners determined that their female slaves were best suited to household service. One owner published a notice for the sale of an enslaved woman, whom he described “as good a House Negro as any in America.” The sale was motivated by the slaveholder’s impending move from Boston to the countryside and his consideration that his female slave was “incapable of Country work.”⁴³ Likewise the *Boston Evening Post* listed the sale of “A Likely strong and healthy Negro Woman, about

⁴¹ See *The Boston News-Letter*, October 9, 1735.

⁴² Desrochers, 633.

⁴³ *Boston Post Boy*, February 8, 1773.

Thirty Years old,” who was “capable of doing all sorts of Houshold Business,” and spoke “good English.”⁴⁴ Clearly an enslaved female’s ability to communicate in English proved to be a valuable asset to buyers in the market for female slaves to work in households in town settings.

Sewing, cooking, and childcare were also considered desirable abilities for household workers. One notice declared that “A Negro Woman about twenty four Years of Age,” was “fit for any Houshold Work, can sew well and is a good Cook,” while another advertisement offered “A Very likely Negro Woman, that can be well recommended, and understands Sewing, taking care of Children, &c. and can do most sort of Houshold Work.”⁴⁵ Enslaved women who worked in household service performed a range of domestic tasks, which included but was not limited to food preparation and preservation, cleaning, laundry, soap making, candle making and other routine chores associated with the maintenance of a well-ordered household.

Enslaved women’s domestic labor often served to lighten the considerable burden of white women in their role as colonial homemakers. A poem by Edward Taylor, a minister in Westfield, Massachusetts, outlined the domestic responsibilities and duties of the ideal colonial housewife. According to Taylor, colonial housewives’ earthly and divine aspirations could be united through fulfillment of domestic tasks. Through the use of images drawn from traditional female work, such as spinning, weaving, and sewing, Taylor invoked spiritual truths. Taylor likened the faithful, diligent colonial housewife to God’s spinning wheel--her “Soule thy holy Spoole to bee” and her words made “to be thy Reelee.” Such a woman “shall display before yee/That I am Cloathd in Holy robes for

⁴⁴ *Boston Evening Post*, April 17, 1738.

⁴⁵ *The Boston Gazette*, August 29, 1720.

glory.”⁴⁶ Housework, according to Taylor, constituted a white Puritan woman’s divine calling, to be undertaken with all diligence, grace, and good humor. The work of black female domestic laborers provided some white women the opportunity to fulfill their divine election as daughters of Zion who managed their households well.

Nevertheless elite white women often had difficulty embracing housework as a spiritual vocation and sought relief from the unrelenting drudgery of domestic labor. While poor white women could not afford to hire help with maintaining their homes and caring for their families, white women who were better off financially regularly sought and employed help with a variety of household tasks.^[18] Laundry, in particular, was a chore that most white women loathed and gladly ceded to black women: “For most white women the greatest value of an enslaved woman was that she would do the laundry, the kind of work they did not want to do.”⁴⁷ Doing laundry involved pumping and carrying huge jars or buckets full of water, building a fire, moving heavy washtubs, as well as lifting and bending over heavy cauldrons of boiling water:

“With her heavy wash stick the laundress stirred and lifted the clothes in the boiling water; she beat the excess lye and ash out of clothes with her stick. After she rinsed the clothes, she wrung them out by hand, and hung them up to dry. Laundry was done separately for each set of clothes...flannels, whites, and colors.”⁴⁸

The black laundress might also need to perform the caustic task of making soap from lye and animal fat. Washing was one of the “perennial tasks of housekeeping” that **Martha**

⁴⁶ Edward Taylor, “Huswifery.” <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/175404>.

⁴⁷ Adams and Pleck, 34.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 41. Also see Maureen Richard, “Washing Household Linens and Linen Clothing in 1627 Plymouth,” in *Women’s Work in New England, 1620-1920*, edited by Peter Benes. Boston: Boston University (2003), 10-21, for details of laundering in colonial Massachusetts.

Ballard^[19], a midwife on the New England frontier, avoided for as long as she could: “I have washt the first washing I have done without help this several years.”⁴⁹^[20]

Doing laundry involved more than pumping, hauling, and boiling water, scrubbing soiled garments and linens, and making lye soap. There was also ironing. Esther Edwards Burr (1732-1758), daughter of noted theologian Jonathan Edwards and wife of Aaron Burr, Sr., kept a daily letter-journal for her dear friend, Sarah Prince. Burr and Prince grew up together in Massachusetts but Burr moved to New Jersey after her marriage. Burr frequently wrote to Prince about her daily life. Yet, Burr’s correspondence to her dear friend was often interrupted or postponed as a result of domestic demands. Burr complained in her journal: “Saturday All in the hurries with a great Ironing so cant get time to say any thing but that I think of you if I dont talk to you.”⁵⁰ Burr, like other privileged white women eagerly sought help with pressing clothes and household linens, which required heating heavy irons over an open flame: “A woman is here Ironing for me, and I am very busy mending stockings and one thing and other.”⁵¹^[21] Laundry was demanding, exhausting, and uncomfortable work that white women sought to avoid whenever possible. It was common, as a result, for black women to be relegated to the backbreaking work of washing and ironing clothes and household linens in colonial Massachusetts. ^[22]Newspapers published in eighteenth century Massachusetts are replete with notices that affirmed enslaved women’s experience and skill as laundresses.⁵² It is

⁴⁹ Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife’s Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812*. New York: Vantage Books (1991), 220.

⁵⁰ Esther Edwards Burr, *The Journal of Esther Edwards Burr, 1754-1757*, eds. Carol F. Karlsen and Laurie Crumpacker. New Haven: Yale University Press (1984), 207.

⁵¹ Burr, 95.

⁵² See *The Boston News-Letter*, October 6, 1774, *Boston Gazette*, December 1, 1741, and *Boston Evening Post*, June 25, 1764.

interesting to note that notices for, or about, white servant women as skilled laundresses are not evident.

Burr's journal reveals other details concerning the never-ending demands of housework. Burr whitewashed walls, polished furniture, cleaned dinnerware, changed bedding, quilted, and purchased provisions for her household. An entry from June 1755, reads: "Wednesday, and Thursday, and Fryday, all up in Arms a cleaning House, white-washing, rubing Tables, cleaning silver, China and Glass, etc. And poor I am almost tired out of my senses."⁵³ She writes of being "Very busy puting up Beds and no body to help me and it is a good deal of work to pin up two beds."⁵⁴ Burr also recounts four days of being "Busy a quilting."⁵⁵ Burr also had responsibilities beyond her immediate household: "Rode out with my Cousen, made several vissits and did a deal of business, such as speak for Butter, buy syder and Apples; and now I am as tired as if I had been heard at work all day. Indeed vissiting is the hardest work that I do."⁵⁶[23] For Burr, "vissiting" and doing the business of securing staples provisions such as butter, apples and cider constituted hard work. One can only wonder whether or not enslaved females would have concurred with such an assessment.

Since the maintenance of a clean, orderly, and well-run colonial household involved the performance of countless menial, routine tasks, elite white women routinely sought to acquire household "help." Not all attempts to find, engage, and keep adequate household help were successful, however. Burr's journal also reveals her frustration with the quality and availability domestic assistance: "I have not help in the House except

⁵³ Burr, 127.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 148.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 268.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 155.

what is in our Ketchin and you know what that is--our young women are all Ladies and its beneath them to go out."⁵⁷ The nature of Burr's kitchen help may have been obvious to her intended correspondent but is not specified in the journal. It is probable that Burr could not manage to secure the services of younger white females of comparable social background and standing who would willingly work as "apprentices" in exchange for the opportunity to acquire the knowledge and experience essential to running a well-to-do colonial household. Burr's journal makes it clear, however, that good help was hard to come by in the colonies. Still Burr experienced occasions of success in securing household help: "I have got an exceding good Wench to help me till Fryday, one that I can trust."⁵⁸

Burr's journal entries suggest that enslaved female laborers sometimes provided better help than that of white female hires or apprentices. Thus, Burr lamented when her female slave took ill^[24]:

"My Wentch has been in a poor way ever since our remooval--but now is so bad as to keep her Bed. She has been under the Doctrs hands for six Weeks past but to no purpose--she is in a very uncommon way I fear poisoned, and if that is the case I dont expect she will live. The loss o[f] her will be very great. She is uncommonly good for her Colour, and I cant expect to have her place filled."⁵⁹

While there is evidence of attempts by enslaved women to poison members of the white households in which they served the poisoning of enslaved females was a fairly uncommon occurrence.⁶⁰ Burr's "wentch" was an important asset to the household—valuable enough to merit several weeks of doctor's care. White women who were able to

⁵⁷ Ibid, 192.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 213.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 239.

⁶⁰ *Boston Post Boy*, January 21, 1751, contains a report of an enslaved woman who was jailed for poisoning a white infant. Also see *Newport Mercury*, December 7, 1742, for notice of the arrest of slaves who allegedly poisoned an enslaved woman.

buy help did so, and that help was often black. Hence the owner who offered “A Very likely Strong and healthy Negro Woman, about 27 Years old...that can Wash, Brew, Bake, and Iron Cloathes, and do all other sorts of Houshold Business excellently well,” for sale could hope to profit from supplying the means by which vital labor demands might be met.⁶¹

The ability to do domestic labor in an individual household did not necessarily translate into facility with the agricultural labor required in rural settings. Some slaveowners determined that certain females were better suited to rural life. Farm work often included tending livestock and cultivating garden crops in addition to more routine domestic tasks. The advertisements reveal that a number of owners viewed their enslaved females as particularly well suited to farm work and said as much in their advertisements for the sale of black women and girls. One offer in colonial newspapers was “A fine well hearty Negro Wench...Said Negro can do all kinds of Houshold Work, understands milking a Cow, &c.”⁶² In addition to the ability to care for domestic farm animals, knowledge of gardening was also a valuable asset, as evinced in an advertisement for the sale of “A Likely, Healthy & strong Negro Wench...knows most of all Garden Seeds & Herbs.”⁶³ The advertisements suggest that enslaved females who demonstrated the capacity to do agricultural work, such as tending livestock and cultivating herbs, vegetables, and staple grains, were seen as best suited to “country” service. Farm work also required greater physical strength and stamina than might be required in a household setting, hence a notice offering “A Lusty and hearty Negro Woman, well seasoned to the

⁶¹ *Boston Evening Post*, October 24, 1737.

⁶² *The Boston News-Letter*, November 22, 1771.

⁶³ *The Boston Weekly News-Letter*, February 4, 1742.

Country, in perfect Health, and very fit for Country Business.”⁶⁴ Familiarity and experience with “country” life could also be a selling point. *The Boston Gazette, or Weekly Journal* offered an experienced “Negro Woman who has been in the Country from a Child” who was “us’d to the Business of a Farm.”⁶⁵

Another characteristic that could lead an owner to determine that an enslaved woman was best suited to “country” life was fecundity: “To be Sold Cheap to any Person in the Country, a Negro Woman about 23 Years Old, can do Family Work, and a pretty good Cook, the Reason of her being offer’d for Sale is, for being too good a breeder.”⁶⁶ It is no surprise, then, that another owner declared his slave “not fit for the Country” because she was “a very poor breeder.”⁶⁷ Exactly why black women’s reproductive labor might be more valuable in rural Massachusetts is open to speculation. Plausible reasons are twofold. First, there was more available space in the country. Thus room for larger households than might be comfortably accommodated in town. Second, more available hands for work could provide a significant advantage to a farm owner who hoped to turn a profit. Thus it is likely that slaveowners in rural Massachusetts hoped to benefit from enslaved women’s dual role as productive and reproductive laborers. The same reproductive capacity that could be a liability Massachusetts’ town might be an asset on a country farm. Thus Massachusetts’ slaveowners viewed fertile females as better suited to agricultural work, much like their Southern and Caribbean counterparts.

In numerous advertisements, black women are described as workers that are “fit for town or country,” which is evidence that many enslaved females were versatile

⁶⁴ *Boston Evening Post*, March 15, 1736.

⁶⁵ *The Boston Gazette, or Weekly Journal*, May 10, 1748.

⁶⁶ *The Boston Gazette, and Country Journal*, June 22, 1772.

⁶⁷ *The Boston Gazette*, April 16, 1745.

laborers. An advertisement published in the summer of 1742, announced the sale of “A Very likely Negro Girl, that can do any Houshold Work, fit for Town or Country.”⁶⁸

Another notice offered “A Very likely Negro Woman...fit for any sort of Houshold work either in Town or Country.”⁶⁹ Language ability sometimes contributed to an enslaved female’s versatility as a worker, as evinced in a notice for “A likely young Negro Woman who talks very good English, can do all sorts of Business requisite for a Family, either in Town or Country.”⁷⁰ Enslaved female’s adaptability as workers was evident in their ability to do a range of tasks in urban or rural settings in colonial Massachusetts.^[25] Thus, the value ascribed to the work of enslaved females in colonial Massachusetts correlated directly with her ability to perform “any” and “all” kinds of labor in a variety of contexts.

In addition to versatility, work performed by enslaved females in colonial Massachusetts also required robust health, as evinced in an advertisement for “The very best Negro Woman in this Town, who has had the Small Pox and Measles, is as hearty as a Horse, as brisk as a Bird, and will Work like a *Beaver*.”⁷¹ This white owners’ comparison of a black female to animals—both wild and domestic—served to highlight qualities that potential buyers might find desirable while reinforcing racial hierarchies at the same time.⁷² This notice also provides a window into another aspect of enslaved

⁶⁸ *Boston Evening Post*, August 30, 1742.

⁶⁹ *The Boston News-Letter*, October 9, 1735.

⁷⁰ *Boston Post Boy*, November 13, 1749.

⁷¹ *Boston Evening Post*, August 30, 1742.

⁷² Mia Bay, *The White Image in the Black Mind: African-American Ideas about White People*. New York: Oxford University Press (2000), see 127ff, for fuller discussion of white’s use animal metaphors to describe and subordinate African Americans as well as blacks’ responses to the comparisons.

female health, namely susceptibility to potential devastating disease.⁷³ Immunity from communicable diseases, especially small pox, is mentioned in a number of newspaper advertisements.⁷⁴ Boston was plagued throughout the eighteenth century by smallpox epidemics. Published notices reveal that enslaved females were among those stricken with the disease.⁷⁵ On numerous occasions the Selectmen of Boston took pains to reassure residents that the city was safe from outbreaks of the dreaded disease. Instances of enslaved women who were afflicted with smallpox are apparent in colonial newspapers:

“The Public are hereby inform’d that the Lad who broke out with the Small Pox about 13 Days since in middle street, it’s hop’d is getting well: That a child was taken with it last Week ner the DrawBridge, who has it very favourable, and no other Person in Town has this Sixtemper, except a Child, and a Negro Woman at the Hospital, who are upon the Recovery.”⁷⁶

Small pox could be especially devastating to Boston’s enslaved community, many of whom had no resistance to the disease.²⁶ Thus, it was not unusual for advertisements to mention those who had immunity to the illness: “To be Sold, a likely Negro Woman that has had the Small Pox.”⁷⁷ Another notice offered “A Young Negro Woman, aged about Twenty Years, hath had the Small Pox, and been ten Years in the Country, & can do all Houshold Work.”⁷⁸ The fact that this enslaved female had been “in the Country” for a decade and was approximately twenty years old suggests that she survived a bout of the

⁷³ Fett, 122-124, for discussion of the impact and treatment of infectious disease on enslaved communities.

⁷⁴ See *The Boston News-Letter*, January 28, 1725; *Boston Evening Post*, November 7, 1748; *Boston Post Boy*, January 14, 1765; and *Boston Gazette*, January 11, 1768, for examples.

⁷⁵ *New England Weekly Journal*, March 30, 1730.

⁷⁶ “Printed by order of the Select Men,” *Boston Evening Post*, February 2, 1761.

⁷⁷ *The Boston Gazette*, March 9, 1730.

⁷⁸ *New England Weekly Journal*, April 25, 1738.

disease as a child during the 1730 epidemic. A thirteen-year-old enslaved female that “has had the Small-pox & Measles” was offered for sale. Not only was this teenager immune to two diseases that were deadly during the colonial era but she was also fluent in English and “very handy in a house.”⁷⁹ Black females who had been exposed to, and survived, diseases such as small pox and measles might be particularly attractive to potential owners, hence the mention of immunity in slave-for-sale advertisements.

Enslaved women in colonial Massachusetts were also valued for their “skilled” labor, whether it was spinning, needlework, or writing poetry for publication. According to Daina Raine Berry, whose study of black women’s skill as plantation laborers in the antebellum Georgia expands commonly held ideas concerning enslaved females’ special ability and training as workers:

“A person might develop skills because of natural talent, rigorous training, or continuous practice. Skilled labor, therefore, includes all activities and crafts that a person mastered with her or his hands or body, regardless of whether the work took place in the fields, barnyards, plantation homes, or enslaved cabin, or along creeks, in the woods, in provision grounds, at the spinning wheel, or in the kitchen.”⁸⁰

Southern plantations were not the only context in which enslaved females cultivated and mastered particular skills for which they were valued as workers. Enslaved women in colonial Massachusetts developed special skills and talents, which are evident in newspaper advertisements for their sale: “A fine young Negro Woman of about 15 Years of Age; Born at, and lately Come from Bermuda, a Place famous for bringing up excellent Servants. She understands working with the Needle, and Houshold Work, very well.”⁸¹ Although brief, this for-sale notice provides evidence of black women’s skill in

⁷⁹ *New England Weekly Journal*, March 30, 1730.

⁸⁰ Berry, 9.

⁸¹ *Boston Post-Boy*, December 22, 1735.

needlework. Newspaper advertisements further reveal black women's skill in those "occupations open to their sex."⁸² While it is true that the majority of black women in colonial Massachusetts performed menial, routine domestic work as sculleries, laundresses, and cooks, some were trained in crafts. It was not uncommon for enslaved females who labored in white households to achieve proficiency in the "domestic arts." Enslaved female workers who were engaged in household service work also carded wool for spinning into yarn, and knitted said yarn into garments. Many enslaved women participated in household crafts such as spinning, weaving, and knitting as a result.⁸³ Thus the enslaved female who was able to "handle her needle well," and the one who was "a good Simpstress," both evinced skill as laborers.⁸⁴

In some cases enslaved females excelled at mastering complex tasks, which provides additional evidence of highly skilled labor. Lucy Terry Prince, of Deerfield, Massachusetts, in addition to being a prolific storyteller, was also an a competent spinner, who "spun flax and wool for the doctor, Thomas Williams" to satisfy her family's medical bills.⁸⁵ Lucy Terry Prince used her skill as a spinner to purchase "remedies of an herbal nature...spinning 5 Rum [Runs] Tow Yarn" for 2 shillings and 6 pence."⁸⁶ Not only did Lucy spin "To pay the good doctor" but, together with her husband Abijah, she "hoed Williams's garden."⁸⁷

⁸² Greene, "Slave-Holding New England and Its Awakening," 503-504.

⁸³ Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England, 1620-1776*, 110.

⁸⁴ See *Boston Post Boy*, February 28, 1763, and October 8, 1770.

⁸⁵ Gerzina, 99.

⁸⁶ David R. Proper, *Lucy Terry Prince: Singer of History*. Deerfield, MA: Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association (1997), 24.

⁸⁷ Gerzina, 102.

Elleanor Eldridge is an example of an enslaved woman who developed considerable skill as a weaver. While still in her teens, Eldridge not only “learned all the varieties of house-work, and every kind of spinning” but also “learned plain, double, ornamental weaving, in which she was considered expert.” By the age of fourteen Eldridge had mastered double weaving, the process used to create items such as carpets and damask coverlets, and was, “pronounced a competent and fully accomplished weaver.”⁸⁸ Eldridge^[27] was not the only black female to master the art of spinning at a young age. One published notice advertised the sale of “A Hearty, likely NEGRO WENCH, about 12 or 13 Years of Age...can wash, iron, card, and spin, &c.”⁸⁹ It must be noted that much of the fabric produced in America prior to 1780 was plain and functional. Thus, an enslaved female’s ability to produce household goods of fabric woven in intricate designs is particularly significant in an era when most decorative textiles were imported. In addition to her proficiency as a weaver, Eldridge possessed other talents and abilities. She was said to be an accomplished dancer and singer whose “light foot in the dance, and her sweet voice in the song, made her an object of great interest among the colored swains.”⁹⁰

While some black women weaved in a manner that conformed to traditional^[29] western techniques, other enslaved women expressed their skill in a manner that harkened back to their African past. Old Dinah, an African-born slave in Salem, did her spinning in the African fashion—on a stick centered on a plate, rather than with a loom.⁹¹

⁸⁸ Robert J. Cottrol, ed., *From African to Yankee: Narratives of Slavery and Freedom in Antebellum New England*. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe (1998), 42.

⁸⁹ *The Independent Chronicle and the Universal Advertiser*, November 21, 1776.

⁹⁰ Cottrol, 43.

⁹¹ Piersen, 97.

Evidence of black women's skill as spinners is also apparent in newspaper advertisements for their sale. One notice offered "A Very likely healthy Negro Woman, that can spin and do all other sorts of business."⁹² Another advertised the sale of "a very likely Negro Woman, about 19 or 20 years of age, that has been several years in the Country" and "spins extraordinary well...can milk Cows, and do many other sorts of Country work."⁹³ Skilled black female craft workers also had to possess the traits and abilities of versatile, flexible workers who were competent in other domestic tasks. This was true of an enslaved woman who could "Knit, Card Spin, make Butter and Cheese, and do any sort of Houshold Work."⁹⁴

It is not surprising that black women possessed skill in the "needle" trades. White women were also deeply involved in the needlework trade in early America, as were some men. These early crafts-persons represented a variety of economic, social, political, geographical and familial backgrounds.⁹⁵ In fact, white women were "massively involved" in the clothing trades, as dressmakers, mantua makers^[30], and tailors.⁹⁶ Persons of both genders gravitated toward the needle trades for similar reasons. Needlework did not require a great amount of capital or equipment to set up shop. Tools of the trade—pins, needles, thimbles, shears, scissors, and irons—were small, inexpensive, and easily acquired. Apprenticeships in the needle trades were typically less expensive than in other

⁹² *Boston Evening Post*, January 14, 1740.

⁹³ *New-England Weekly Journal*, January 22, 1733.

⁹⁴ *Boston Post-Boy*, February 19, 1739.

⁹⁵ Marla R. Miller, "Gender, Artisanry, and Craft Tradition in Early New England: The View through the Eye of a Needle," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, Vol. 60, No. 4 (Oct., 2003), 747.

⁹⁶ A mantua was an article of women's clothing, made popular in the late 17th and 18th century as a comfortable alternative to gowns with boned bodices. Originally a loose gown, the mantua eventually evolved into an over-gown or robe, which featured elbow-length, cuffed sleeves and was worn over stays, stomacher, and petticoat.

more lucrative crafts that required more expensive instruments and elaborate shops. In fact, needle workers could and often did work in their own homes.⁹⁷[31]

While most women, and many men, could do basic needlework, such as basting seams and mending everyday garments, “the ability to sew a strong seam was not necessarily an aptitude possessed by all sewers.”⁹⁸ Needle trades, like many crafts in early America, encompassed a broad spectrum of ability and training, from measuring and cutting, which required the most skill, to assembling garments, and finishing work, such as applying buttons. It is interesting to note that in early America, use of the term “tailoress” denoted skill level, rather than simply gender. Women who could sew but not cut were usually referred to as tailoresses, while men and women who had the ability to cut and make men’s clothing were called “tailors.”⁹⁹ [32] Tailoring was apparently demanding work, according to Esther Edwards Burr, a white mistress who complained about being: “So busy about some Tayloring that I must beg to be excused. You must know that I am the Taylor. I’m altering old Cloths which is very hard work.”¹⁰⁰

Phillis Wheatley provides another example of an enslaved female who was a skilled needle worker. A London newspaper described Wheatley’s multiple talents in the following manner: “She is a compleat sempstress, an/ accomplished mistress of her pen, and discovers a/ most surprising genius.”¹⁰¹ In addition to her skill as a “sempstress,” Phillis Wheatley excelled as a writer. In this respect, Wheatley belonged to the ranks of

⁹⁷ Miller, 756. While Miller gives a thorough exposition of white women’s involvement in the needle trades the role of enslaved females is not discussed.

⁹⁸ Ibid, 751.

⁹⁹ Ibid, 753.

¹⁰⁰ Burr, 165.

¹⁰¹ *The London Magazine: Or, Gentleman’s Monthly Intelligencer*, 41 (March 1772), in William H. Robinson, *Phillis Wheatley and Her Writings*. New York: Garland Publishing (1984), 308.

the most skilled and accomplished persons in the colonial North Atlantic world.^[33] She distinguished herself as a writer of poetry in England and America. Writing was as much a job for Wheatley as it was a form of creative self-expression, and “she was made to spend most of her waking time either reading or writing her “poetic performances” before curious guests.”¹⁰² Wheatley’s additional duties as personal servant to her mistress, Susanna, was as likely to include sitting “close beside her mistress reading and discussing the Bible” and “visiting among ladies of Boston’s first families, holding forth on “feminine topics, ” as performing other routine domestic tasks.¹⁰³^[34]

Wheatley’s skill as a writer, however, did not exempt her from common household chores such as caring for the sick. In correspondence to her enslaved friend, Obour [About] Tanner, Wheatley apologized for her delayed response to earlier letters: “I have been very Busy ever since my arrival or should have, now wrote a more particular account of my voyage...my mistress has been very sick above 14 weeks & confind to her Bed the whole time, but is I hope somewhat Better, now.”¹⁰⁴^[35] Wheatley’s increasing domestic responsibilities contributed to her failure to write a prompt response to her friend. Although highly skilled and extraordinarily gifted as a writer, Phillis Wheatley remained subject to the requirements and needs of the household in which she lived as a slave. After the passage of several months Wheatley, overburdened by the demands of domestic service, still found it difficult to write a reply to her beloved friend: “Pray excuse my not writing to you so long before, for I have been so busy lately, that I could

¹⁰² Robinson, 25.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Phillis Wheatley, “Letter from Phillis Wheatley to Obour Tanner, 30 July 1773,” *Miscellaneous Bound Manuscripts*, MHS.

not find liezure [leisure].”¹⁰⁵ Despite having published a volume of poetry--an extraordinary feat for any colonial female, even more so for an enslaved one--Wheatley was required to perform the duties of a personal servant and nurse to Susanna Wheatley, her mistress.

Besides writing and domestic service, Wheatley also worked to actively market her compositions for sale. Publishing was a business that involved money and Wheatley exhibited considerable drive and skill toward the goal of profiting from her “work” as a writer. In a letter to an influential patron and supporter, Wheatley writes: “I beg the favour that you would honour the enclos’d Proposals, & use your interest with the Gentlemen & Ladies of your acquaintance to subscribe also, for the more subscribers there are, the more it will be for my advantage as I am to have half the Sale of the Books.”¹⁰⁶ Wheatley also had the audacity to ask for support in her campaign to curtail printing piracy:

“I must also request that you would desire the Printers in New Haven, not to reprint that Book, as it will be a great hurt to me, preventing any further Benefit that I might received from the Sale of my Copies from England. The price is 2/6d. Bound or 2/ Sterling Sewed. If any should be so ungenerous as to reprint them the genuine Copy may be known, for it is sign’d in my own handwriting.”¹⁰⁷

Furthermore, Wheatley used her connections to prominent clergymen, like Samuel Hopkins, Pastor of the First Congregational Church in Newport, Rhode Island, to further her marketing aspirations:

“Rev’d Sir,—I take with pleasure the opportunity by the Post, to acquaint you

¹⁰⁵ Wheatley, “Letter from Phillis Wheatley to Obour Tanner, 21 March 1774,” *Miscellaneous Bound Manuscripts*, MHS.

¹⁰⁶ Phillis Wheatley, “Letter from Phillis Wheatley to David Wooster, October 18, 1773,” in Mukhtar Ali Isani, “Phillis Wheatley in London: An Unpublished Letter to David Wooster,” *American Literature*, 51:2 (May 1979), 257.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

with the arrival of my books from London. I have sealed up a package containing 17 for you, and 2 for Mr. Tanner, and one for Mrs. Mason, and only wait for you to appoint some proper person, by whom I may convey them to you. I received some time ago 20s sterling upon them, by the hands of your son, in a letter from About Tanner.”¹⁰⁸

Through personal correspondence, Wheatley reassured her friend Obour [About] of her commitment to her publishing work: “I shall send the 5 Books you wrote for, the first convenient, Opportunity. if you want more, they Shall be ready for you.”¹⁰⁹ Tanner’s assistance proved an invaluable source of support for Wheatley. Tanner sold Wheatley’s books and forwarded the proceeds from their sale: “I have recd. the money you sent for the 5 Books & 2/6 more for another, which I now send & wish safe to hand.”¹¹⁰ Wheatley found other occasions to inform Tanner of her publishing efforts: “I have recd by the last ships 300 more of my poems.”¹¹¹[36]

Wheatley demonstrated considerable finesse, as well as skill and drive, in her literary business. She wrote in a condolence letter to the widow of David Wooster: “You will do me a great favour by returning to me by the first oppy those books that remain unsold and remitting the money for those that are sold--I can easily dispose of them here for 12/Lmo. each.”¹¹² Phillis Wheatley’s labor in the Wheatley household, where she worked both as a domestic servant and poet, required dexterity, versatility, and skill—traits common to many black female laborers in colonial Massachusetts. **Though entangled with the yoke of bondage, the work of enslaved black women, from those**

¹⁰⁸ Phillis Wheatley, “Letter from Phillis Wheatley to Samuel Hopkins, February 9, 1774,” in Benjamin Quarles, “A Phillis Wheatley Letter,” *The Journal of Negro History*, 34:4 (Oct., 1949), 463.

¹⁰⁹ Phillis Wheatley, “Letter from Phillis Wheatley to Obour Tanner, 21 March 1774.”

¹¹⁰ Wheatley, “Letter from Phillis Wheatley to Obour Tanner, 6 May 1774.”

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Phillis Wheatley, “Letter from Phillis Wheatley to Mary Wooster, 15 July 1778,” Hugh Upham Clark collection, MHS.

unnamed individuals advertised for sale in colonial newspapers to the celebrated Phillis Wheatley, contributed to the comfort and wellbeing of white owners and households, and by extension to the larger colonial society^{[37][38]}.

IV. Conclusion

The primary intent of slaveowners in eighteenth century Massachusetts who published newspaper advertisements was to market and sell their enslaved females for profit. On the surface, then, such notices served to portray enslaved females simply as disposable commodities. A closer inspection of the advertisements, however, elucidates personal characteristics about enslaved females who lived and labored in eighteenth century Massachusetts. Black women and girls who endured a life of chattel slavery in New England faced an existence of unremunerated toil. But they were not simply nameless objects to be traded to the highest bidder. The advertisements reveal black females as more than merchandise. The advertisements expose the humanity of black females as individuals who ranged in age from young children to mature adults and who possessed a variety of personal characteristics. The advertisements also disclose enslaved females contributions as workers who were an integral part of a thriving colonial economy.

Enslaved women's flexibility as household workers in urban settings, agricultural workers in rural surroundings, and as adaptable laborers who could function in either "town" or "country" is also evident in slave-for-sale advertisements published in colonial Massachusetts newspapers^[39]. Enslaved females' value as workers is evident in their role as flexible laborers who were able to perform a wide range of domestic tasks in urban and rural settings. Thus the value of enslaved women's work in eighteenth century

Massachusetts was directly related to their flexibility. Versatility, however, was not the only indication of black women, and girls, worth as workers. A number of enslaved females developed high degrees of skill in crafts such as needlework, spinning, weaving, and in the case of Phillis Wheatley, writing, thus challenging the idea that skilled work was the sole provenance of males. Like Wheatley, most enslaved females served as domestic laborers. In fact, even some of the more routine domestic tasks performed by enslaved females required special skills and abilities. Nevertheless a number of enslaved females developed considerable skill in crafts, most notably as seamstresses, spinners, and weavers. While Phillis Wheatley's literary talents may be considered exceptional when viewed in relation to other enslaved females, it is important to note that Wheatley's skill and accomplishments as a writer is also exceptional when compared with the achievement of most elite white women and many elite white men. Colonial newspapers routinely published advertisements that highlighted enslaved women's skill as domestic, agricultural and craft workers. Thus, enslaved female's versatility as domestic workers as well as their skill in a variety of crafts contributed to the development of a powerful, prosperous colony.

Chapter Three:
Members of Two Families Simultaneously: Black Women, Slavery and Relationships in
Eighteenth Century Massachusetts

I. Introduction

While black women in eighteenth century Massachusetts worked a great deal of the time, they did not work every moment. Despite the fact most of their time was spent laboring on behalf of white owners, enslaved women made efforts to build, nurture and sustain family and community relationships.¹ An examination of black women's relationships provides a clearer picture of how their non-working hours were spent. Such an investigation may^[40] also reveal the meanings black females ascribed to human connections with others. Although "bondpeople were hardly ever free from their owner's interference in their relationships," black women in eighteenth century Massachusetts sought to build and extend kinship relations and social networks with other black women, men, and children, while they negotiated complex^[41] ties to their white owners.²

Whether or not enslaved women married and/or bore children, the nature of New England slavery was such that most slaves were members of two families simultaneously—one black, one white. One family was structured by the formal conventions of white slaveholding society; the other was constructed in defiant opposition or maintained in the shadow of slavery.³ This duality was an inherent part of black women's relationships, which were necessarily complex^[42]. Black and white attachments within New England households were contradictory in nature, "interweaving formal expectations of social roles with coarser strands of racial prejudice and fine

¹ Berry, 74.

² Berry, 103.

³ Melish, 45.

threads of human affection. Many slave owners felt real love for their bondspeople^[43]; and many slaves returned this emotion.”⁴ By developing relational ties to other blacks as well as with whites, black women seized opportunities to recreate families and to maintain the bonds of kinship and affection amid the numerous onslaughts of slavery.

Like all humans, black women in eighteenth century Massachusetts were relational beings. The trauma and tragedy of estrangement from families of origin in Africa as a result of kidnap, the brutality and horror of middle passage, and the injustice of forced servitude on foreign shores could not extinguish the desire and need for intimate interaction with other human beings. ^[44] Nevertheless, the institution of slavery had a negative impact on black relationships. Slavery severed ties between parents and children. Slavery damaged marriages. Slavery compromised friendships and undermined community formation. Thus slavery in Massachusetts was much like slavery in the Southern and Caribbean colonies. Yet, despite the adverse influences of slavery on black family and community formation, black women in eighteenth century Massachusetts, like their counterparts in the antebellum South, seized opportunities to create and sustain mutually affirming relationship ties with other blacks. The purpose of this chapter, then, is two-fold. One aim is to interrogate the “practical limits” of family and community formation for black women in eighteenth century New England.⁵ Another goal is to explore the possibilities for black women’s social agency in eighteenth century Massachusetts as evinced in the creation and maintenance of interpersonal relationships. Black women in eighteenth century Massachusetts developed strategies to enable a variety of human relationships to take root and develop. Black women married,

⁴ Piersen, 32.

⁵ Chan, 136.

conceived children, nurtured connections with blood relatives, and forged friendships^[45]. The fact that enslaved women created families and developed other nurturing relationships is evidence that black women actively sought to limit slavery's demoralizing effects.

II. Black Women and Family Formation in Eighteenth Century Massachusetts

The formation of black families in eighteenth century Massachusetts developed within a larger social context of New England Puritanism, which held the patriarchal family at its core. In his 1707 publication, *Family Religion, Excited and Assisted*, Cotton Mather argued for the centrality of the family within the Puritan life and culture of New England: “But is not a Family, the very first Society, that by the Direction and Providence of God, is produced among the Children of Men?”⁶ Mather found a basis for such ideas within scripture itself. According to the creation narrative in the book of Genesis, the conception of human beings marked the apex of divine activity. Humans—male and female created in the divine image—were “to be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion...over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”⁷ This divine directive would be played out again and again in the biblical account with the birth of offspring—sons and daughters who represented the fulfillment of divine promise and the future of human relationships. Thus Mather could easily posit the idea of “Family” as the very first Society—first in terms of chronological order but first also in terms of primacy of place. The family formed the nucleus of community life in eighteenth century Massachusetts. But Puritan New Englanders affirmed a particular kind of family—a patriarchal household, headed by a male. All others in the household—

⁶ Cotton Mather, *Family Religion, Excited and Assisted*. Boston (1707), 1.

⁷ Genesis 1: 27-27, NRSV (New Revised Standard Version).

wives, children, servants, slaves, and other dependent relations—were subservient to the authority of the male head of family. Well-ordered, meaning male headed, families, then, provided the basis for a well-ordered society, in which every member knew his or her place and great pains were taken to preserve the social hierarchy.

The presence of enslaved Africans complicated the New England Puritan social order. [The very first society [46]in most African cultures was not a patriarchal family. Rather, African society was comprised of large extended families that were based on matrilineal descent whereby family heritage was traced down the woman’s line “from mother’s brother to sister’s son.”⁸ In these societies, family lineage and heritage is tied to mothers rather than fathers but this pattern of descent is not to be confused with “matriarchy.”⁹ Thus, in African societies, siblings, cousins, and even more distant blood relatives were bound together by shared common ancestry.¹⁰

It is widely recognized that there were African societies in which “matrilinearity, female economic independence, or both gave...African women more autonomy and precolonial power than European American women can claim historically.”¹¹ In these African societies, spouses did not practice community property and women had the right to own and convey property without male permission. Furthermore, in many Coastal West African societies women practiced extensive involvement in trade. As a

⁸ Claire Robertson, “African Into The Americas? Slavery and Women, The Family, and the Gender Division of Labor,” in *More Than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas*, David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine, editors. Bloomington: Indiana University Press (1996), 10.

⁹ Ibid, 10. According to Robertson, no historical evidence exists to confirm the existence of a matriarchal society, equivalent to patriarchal society, in which women held most positions of power and authority and dominated the ideological and economic structures of society, anywhere in Africa.

¹⁰ Piersen, 87.

¹¹ Robertson, 9.

consequence, women were sometimes able to secure economic and political power within the community. It can be argued, then, that “African cultural forms that survived slavery might include wider and more authoritative roles for women” than were generally recognized among European-Americans.¹²

Persons of African descent in New England, however, were forced to adapt to a family relationship structure based on patrilineal descent, in which family heritage and legacy was traced down the male line. In this system, a female’s heritage was tied to her father until marriage, after which it was transferred to her husband. Children’s heritage was also traced through their fathers. Families in New England were structured along lines of patrilineal descent that in turn fostered a “bilateral” system of kinship “where only full siblings shared identical kindred.” Africans and their descendants who lived in colonial Massachusetts encountered a prevailing notion of family that conflicted with African practices of extended kinship within communities that were bound together by common history, heritage, and culture. This conflict effectively undermined the “powerful corporate associations” of large, stable extended African families.¹³ Females of African descent were particularly impacted by such cultural conflict in their attempts to create and sustain family ties in Massachusetts.

Belinda Royall, a slave on the estate of Isaac Royall, was one of the myriad black women whose lives were torn apart as a result of being snatched from Africa and enslaved in eighteenth century Massachusetts:

“Could the Tears, the sighs and supplications, bursting from Tortured Parental affection, have blunted the keen edge of Avarice, she might have been rescued from Agony, which many of her Country’s Children have felt... She was ravished

¹² Ibid, 10.

¹³ Piersen, 87.

from the bosom of her Country, from the arms of her friends—while the advanced age of her Parent's, rendering them unfit for servitude, cruelly separated them from her forever!"¹⁴

Slavery severely damaged black relationships, a fact which prominent Puritan Samuel Sewall bemoaned: "It is likewise most lamentable to think, how in taking Negroes out of *Africa*, and Selling them here, That which GOD has joynd together men do boldly rend assunder; Men from their Country, Husbands from their Wives, Parents from their Children."¹⁵ Thus Sewall equated the practices of slave trading and slave holding with the desecration of divinely ordained human relationships.

III. Black Women and Marriage in Eighteenth Century Massachusetts

While it was difficult for black women in eighteenth century Massachusetts to build and nurture intimate relationship ties with men, some managed to do so. A legal statute, passed in the colony in 1703, "provided against the unreasonable denial of marriage to Negroes with those of their race on the part of the master."¹⁶ The right of slaves to marry was a unique entitlement of their dual legal status as both person and property under Massachusetts's law. Massachusetts, like other New England colonies, required that wedding banns either be read at three public meetings or be posted in a public place for at least two weeks before a marriage could be solemnized—a regulation that applied to blacks as well as whites, slaves as well as free persons. Females enslaved in Massachusetts were not subject to poll taxes or levies based on their status as laborers, as in some southern colonies. However slaves could only marry with their owners'

¹⁴ *Original Text of Belinda's Petition* (1783), <http://ase.tufts.edu.local.videocases/medford/belindaPetition/petition.pdf>.

¹⁵ Samuel Sewall, *The Selling of Joseph: A Memorial*, ed. Sidney Kaplan. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press (1969), 11.

¹⁶ Greene, "Slave-Holding New England and Its Awakening," 504.

permission and those same owners could severely undercut the marital union by selling any slave they owned, regardless of that slave's marital status.

While it was difficult for black females in Massachusetts, where most slaves lived in households or on small farms with only a handful of other blacks, some managed to find acceptable marriage partners. Evidence of such unions was attested by church records, which reveal that black marriages were often duly solemnized and recognized in Christian congregations. Mary and Richard, two Boston slaves, were married in King's Chapel on October 27, 1739. Likewise, Marier and Tom Stannifor united in holy matrimony in King's Chapel in 1745, as did Margaret and Lancaster a decade later.¹⁷ Free blacks also participated in Christian marriage ceremonies during the era.¹⁸ John Humphrey and Lidia Quoy, "Free Negroes" both of Boston were married in King's Chapel in 1749.¹⁹ Of note is the 1761 marriage of Coopera, a "Free Negroe" woman, to Hazzard, "Negroe Servant to Dr. Gardiner." In 1773, Jenny, a free black woman, married Kato, "sevt of Thomas Hill."²⁰ Although Hazzard and Kato were referred to as servants, it is likely that both were enslaved, since Massachusetts' slaveowners often used the term "servant" when referring to black bondsmen and women. The historical record also

¹⁷ King's Chapel (Boston, Mass.) Records, Register of marriages, 1718-1841, Vol. 39, MHS.

¹⁸ Ibid; also see Second Baptist Church (Boston, Mass.), Record Book, 1768-1815, vol. 7, MHS, for entries documenting the marriages of free blacks in Boston.

¹⁹ King's Chapel (Boston, Mass.) Records, Register of marriages, 1718-1841, Vol. 39, MHS.

²⁰ Ibid; also see Second Baptist Church (Boston, Mass.), Record Book.

provides evidence of black women and men who engaged in “Negro marriages,” in which couples consented to “take each other for better or worse in their own way.”²¹

Forced separation was the primary threat to the stability of slave marriages. Fugitive slave advertisements reveal black women’s resistance to that particular menace. A number of notices suggest that women sometimes absconded with black men, who were most likely their husbands, in an effort to thwart slaveowners’ plans to separate spouses. Dinah, “a Negro woman...about 24 Years old,” ran away from her owner, Mr. John Billings of Boston, at the same time that George, “a Negro Man-servant...aged about 26 or 27 Years,” ran away from his owner, Mr. Thomas Salter of Boston. The notice for their escape suggests that the couple ran away together.

Venus, an enslaved woman whose age was estimated at between 35 and 40 years old, ran away from her owner. Venus made her escape with “A Negro Man named Jupiter,” and she did not leave empty handed. She “carried away with her, a strip’d light colour’d Coat and Jacket, a Callico Coat and Jacket, a Pair of Bone Stays, cover’d with green Shalloon, and many other Garments, Aprons, Caps, Handkerchiefs, &c.” Clearly appearance mattered to Venus, as she “usually wore rings on her fingers, her Ears were bored, and she had Gd Earrings in them.” Beyond her clothing and accessories, Venus wore her hair tied up “like an English Woman.” Jupiter was described as of “middling stature,” and he, too, fled his master with a number of garments, among them “a striped Calamanco Jacket and Breeches, a double breasted grey homespun Jacket, a strip’d

²¹ “Christian Barnes Letterbook,” in Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty’s Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company (1980), 66.

homespun Jacket, one fine Shirt, and several others, and several Pair of Stockings.”²²

While Venus and Jupiter had different owners, they fled slavery together, most likely to preserve the relationship they had built while entangled with the yoke of bondage.

In another notice it was speculated that Kate Daniel, a “Molattoe” of approximately twenty years old, ran away with Cato, an enslaved man of about the same age. Little description of Kate was provided in the advertisement but Cato was referred to as “about five feet seven inches high,” with “pimples in his face,” and “very nice about the hair.” Cato was also described as fluent in English and able to tell “a very plausible story upon any extraordinary occasion.” The notice also indicated that Cato “pretends he has a pass signed by John Watson.”²³ Cato’s pass and Kate’s light skin color may have aided the couple in their attempt to flee slavery and preserve the relationship that bound them so tightly that they were willing to run away together in the hope of freedom. Economic reversals, relocation of an owner, or the need to settle an estate could prompt the sale of slaves. Indeed, women were more likely to be sold than men who were deemed more valuable in the eyes of slaveowners. This ran counter to the “situation in Africa, where [enslaved] women were more valued and retained.”²⁴

While some black women risked flight in their attempts to sustain intimate ties with male partners, others found death preferable to forced separation. The fragility of intimate relations between black women and men comes into stark relief in the following account:

“Last Thursday Evening a very surprising Tragedy was acted here, in the following manner...A Negro Fellow at the North End, and a Negro Woman

²² *Boston Post Boy*, June 8, 1741.

²³ *The Boston Chronicle*, March 23, 1769.

²⁴ Robertson, 13.

belonging to a Gentleman at the South End of the Town, having contracted an intimate and strict Friendship together, and understanding that the Wench was about to be sold into the Country, they resolved to put an End to their Lives rather than be parted.”²⁵

From the evidence we can safely deduce the woman’s status as enslaved. She belonged to a “Gentleman at the South End of the Town” of Boston, likely in the vicinity of Fort Hill, near the town’s many wharves. While evidence of his social status is inconclusive it is plausible that the black male referenced here was a free man. The newspaper account does not reveal his status as bond or free. We do learn, however, that the aforementioned “Negro fellow” lived “at the North End,” perhaps near Beacon or Fox Hill.

Although the couple lived on opposite ends of town it was news of the female slave’s impending sale away from town that led to the tragic outcome:

“About seven o’Clock, (the Wench being at the House of her Countryman) they went up stairs into the Garret, where the Fellow, as is supposed, cut the Wench’s Throat with a Razor, and then shot himself with a Gun prepar’d for the Purpose. They were both found lying upon the Bed, she with her Head cut almost off, and he with his Head shot all to pieces.”²⁶

There is not sufficient evidence to ascertain the deeper motives behind the action taken. It is difficult to deduce assuredly whether or not the enslaved woman was a co-conspirator and we cannot even know for certain whether or not the woman voluntarily accompanied her domestic partner, the perpetrator of such terrible acts. While this narrative might be conveniently interpreted as an episode of domestic violence, it may also be read in light of black resistance. Such a reading would lead to a plausible interpretation of events as evidence of radical opposition on the part of a black couple who acted in defiance of

²⁵ *Boston Evening Post*, December 8, 1746.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

white owner's claims on black lives and control of black relationships. This event could then be understood as a precursor to the sentiment articulated in the words of the Negro spiritual:

*Oh Freedom
Oh Freedom
Oh Freedom over me!
And before I'd be a slave
I'd be buried in my grave
And go home to my Lord and be free.*²⁷

It is important to acknowledge the difficulty of discerning devotion, commitment, and resistance in this tragic tale of colonial homicide/suicide, while pointing to the possibilities for black agency within intimate relationships that were subject to white slaveowners' control. Enslaved women who were married had to face the lamentable reality that the bonds of slave marriages were subject to the whims and desires of callous owners: "we are strangers for we are no longer man and wife then our masters or [Mistresses] thinks [sic] proper [married] or [unmarried^[47]]." Many black marriages were compromised, undermined, or destroyed by slavery, which strained "the endearing ties of husband and wife."²⁸

Although the threat of separation through sale severely compromised the unions of enslaved women and men, free black women sometimes managed to have stable marital relationships.²⁹ On November 26, 1778, noted poetess Phillis Wheatley and John

²⁷ William E. Barton, *Old Plantation Hymns* (1899), http://www.negrospirituals.com/news-song/before_i_d_be_slave_oh_freedom.htm.

²⁸ "Petition for Freedom to the Eighteenth century Massachusetts Governor Thomas Gage, His Majesty's Council, and the House of Representatives, 25 May 1774," Jeremy Belknap Papers, MHS. Blacks in Connecticut, Delaware, Virginia, and North Carolina also petitioned government officials for emancipation.

²⁹ Norton, 41.

Peters were wed in Boston's Second Church.³⁰ Wheatley was a free woman at the time of her marriage, having been manumitted after her return to Boston from London. It is not possible to deduce Phillis Wheatley's motives for uniting with Peters with any certainty. It has been suggested that the deaths of Susannah and John Wheatley, Phillis Wheatley's former owners and surrogate parents, was a precipitating factor in her marriage.³¹ That Wheatley's marriage to John Peters had its basis in mutual affection and respect is well within the realm of possibility. Within weeks of her marriage, Wheatley wrote a letter to her lifelong friend Obour Tanner with a request: "You will do me a great favour if you'll write me by every opp'y. Direct your letters under cover to Mr. John Peters in Queen Street."³² Clearly Wheatley came to understand and embrace the transformation of her personal status from single woman to "wife," for she signed her later correspondence as "Phillis Peters," despite the fact that she would have been far more well-known through her earlier connection to the Wheatleys.³³

Lucy Terry Prince stands as another example of a free black woman who managed to forge and sustain strong kinship relations through marriage. Prince, who is best known for her poem *Bars Fight*, which commemorated the 1746 [Deerfield massacre](#)^[48], married her husband, Abijah, on May 17, 1756. A local justice of the peace

³⁰ Second Baptist Church (Boston, Mass.), Record Book.

³¹ Robinson, 53. By the time Wheatley married John Peters on April 1, 1778, Susanna and John Wheatley, and Mary (Wheatley) Lathrup were all dead; Nathaniel Wheatley had relocated to England.

³² Phillis Wheatley, "Letter from Phillis Wheatley to Obour Tanner, 29 May 1778," *Miscellaneous Bound Manuscripts*, MHS.

³³ Phillis Wheatley, "Letter of Phillis Wheatley to Obour Tanner, 10 May 1779," *Miscellaneous Bound Manuscripts*, MHS. Also see *Boston Evening Post and General Advertiser*, October 6, 1779, for a proposal for a volume of poems and letters by Phillis Peters. The notice was reprinted twice in November and three times in December.

duly solemnized their union.³⁴ Lucy was in her late thirties when she and Abijah were wed; he was in his fifties. The disparity between Lucy and Abijah's ages was probably the result of the uneven sex ratio among slaves in Eighteenth century Massachusetts. In 1755, one year before Lucy and Abijah married, male slaves outnumbered female slaves by a ratio of almost two to one, thus "Negro males of marriageable age had almost no prospect of marrying within their age group."³⁵ Lucy and Abijah not only married, but they acquired property and raised six children—Caesar, Duroxa, Drusilla, Festus, Tatnai, and Abijah. They also managed to gain "a lasting impression for Bijah's tenacity and Lucy's gift for words."³⁶ Lucy Terry Prince, together with her husband Abijah, created and sustained family ties in the midst of a society that did little to foster relationships between black women, men, and children. Their marriage stands as an example of affectionate, enduring relations between black women and men in eighteenth century New England.

While the bonds of slavery were often much stronger than those of matrimony, black women strived to forge and maintain intimate relationships with men. Colonial church records attest to this fact. Newspaper advertisements are rife with evidence of enslaved women and men who defied the limitations of slavery by choosing to flee the institution in attempts to preserve meaningful intimate ties. It is not possible to deduce black women's motivations for marriage, or the benefit they hoped to derive from the institution with absolute certainty. However it is likely that black women married for affection and companionship. Thus it is quite plausible that both enslaved and free black

³⁴ Proper, 23.

³⁵ Ibid, 24.

³⁶ Ibid, 24.

women in Massachusetts viewed marriage as a means of counterbalancing the social isolation of slavery in New England. Furthermore, free black women who married were sometimes able to foster long-term, companionate relationships that provided a more stable basis for black family and community formation.

IV. Black Mothers and Children in Eighteenth Century Massachusetts

Black marriages were not the only relationships compromised by slavery. Slavery constantly threatened to sever the sacred ties between parents and children. Blacks decried the capture of African children who were “stolen from the bosoms of our tender Parents and from a Populous Pleasant and plentiful country and Brought hither to be made slaves for Life in a Christian land.” They also protested the miseries of enslaved parents who suffered the loss of children who were taken away and “sent [many] miles from us wear [sic] we seldom or ever see them again there to be made slaves of fore Life which [sometimes] is [very] short by [reason] of Being dragged from their mothers [Breast].”³⁷ Black children were especially vulnerable to the emotional ravages of an institution that routinely undercut the relationship between women and their natural offspring. For black mothers and their children, slavery in Massachusetts functioned much as it did in the slave societies of the Caribbean and Southern colonies.

The puritan culture of eighteenth century Massachusetts was one in which the practice of separating children from their parents was relatively common. Children were often apprenticed or indentured to other households or artisan shops for training. Hence the practice of separating black children from their parents may not have seemed

³⁷ “Petition for Freedom.”

particularly cruel to New England's slaveholders.³⁸ White parents were not the only ones who followed this practice. Lucy and Abijah Prince had their son Caesar indentured when he was ten.³⁹

While the practice of selling or giving away slave children may not have seemed especially harsh to some New England owners, enslaved women might have felt differently about the matter. Although slave owners often devalued the progeny of enslaved women and men, black mothers and fathers took steps to affirm the worth of their offspring by having them baptized in Eighteenth century Massachusetts' congregations.

Baptism represented a tangible demonstration and affirmation of involvement in a religious community. Furthermore, the practice of infant baptism among New England Puritans signified the child's formal relationship to both congregation and community. Jonathan Edwards, in expounding on the meaning of infant baptism, declared: "All that acknowledge infant baptism, allow infants, who are the proper subjects of baptism, and are baptized, to be in some sort members of the Christian church." Baptism alone, however, was not sufficient to confer all the privileges of congregational membership and societal acceptance: "None suppose them to be members in such standing as to be the proper immediate subjects of all ecclesiastical ordinances and privileges: but that some further qualifications are requisite in order to this, to be obtained, either in a course of nature, or by education, or by divine grace."⁴⁰

³⁸ Piersen, 27.

³⁹ Gerzina, 123.

⁴⁰ Jonathan Edwards, Dwight Sereno Edwards, Edward Hickman, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, A. M., With An Essay on His Genius and Writings, By Daniel Rogers*. New York: David Appleton and Company (1835), 434.

Still baptism was a public exercise that held special significance for enslaved African Americans, many of whom lived and worked in private households. While the evidence is inconclusive concerning the motivation of slave parents who baptized their offspring, it is possible that black mothers and fathers viewed baptism as a means of inoculation against future separation. Church records are replete with evidence of black women's familial relationships. Lincoln and Zilpah, had their son, Peter, baptized on August 18, 1728.⁴¹ Between 1746 and 1753, the entire family of Nymphas was baptized. Nymphas who was owned by Rev. Storer, minister of First Church in Charlestown (Boston), had a child, also named Nymphas, with Jenny, an enslaved woman who was owned by Samuel Perry. Although owned by different parties, Nymphas and Jenny managed to build a relationship that resulted in the birth of a child that they obviously considered a blessing, as evinced by his baptism. Likewise, Phillis, an enslaved woman belonging to John Alfred, Jr., united with First Baptist Church, in the Charlestown section of Boston^[51]. She and her entire family, which consisted of four children—Avda (sp), Lieu, Phillis, and Dina, were baptized on June 30, 1751.⁴² As a result of this initiative, this family unit of a single mother and her children became part of a larger community, in which it may have been possible to forge relationships outside of their small kinship unit^[52].

Free blacks also baptized their offspring. Lucy and Abijah Prince had their children baptized shortly after birth:

“Caesar, born January 14, 1757 was baptized on February 13, 1757; Duroxa, born June 1, 1758 was baptised on July 30, 1758; Drusilla, born August 7, 1760 was

⁴¹ First Church (Charlestown, Boston, Mass.) Records. Volume 1, RECORD BOOK, 1641-1771, MHS, 353.

⁴² Ibid, 183.

baptised on September 7, 1760; Festus, born December 12, 1763 was baptised on January 29, 1764; Tatnai, a son, born September 2, 1765 was baptised September 22, 1765; and Abijah, born June 12, 1769 was baptised on August 6, 1769.”⁴³

The ceremonies were presided over by the Reverend Jonathan Ashley, minister of the First Church of Christ in Deerfield, Massachusetts. In addition to having their children baptized, Lucy and Abijah Prince paid to register the births of their offspring. On October 31, 1765, the Princes “paid ten shillings – the equivalent of five days’ work – to officially register the births of the five children.”⁴⁴ This is significant because birth registration was not required at the time. In fact legal registration of births was not commonplace until the late nineteenth century. Nevertheless, Lucy and Abijah Prince knew that birth registration could serve as incontrovertible proof that their children were born free.

Evidence of slavery’s negative impact on black family and community formation is apparent in colonial newspapers. Published notices are rife with evidence of enslaved women’s relationships.^[53] Amid a notice for the sale of various and sundry properties was a listing for the sale of a black family, including “a likely Negro Man bred to the Cooper’s Trade; a likely Negro Woman his Wife, with a young Child at her Breast.” The sale of this black family is buried within an announcement offering a variety of miscellaneous items. The “highest Bidder” could purchase a “Sperma-Ceti Manufactory,” which included approximately four acres of land, a wharf and other buildings, machines and tools. One could also buy “a curious Fire-Engine,” a horse, salt, spun cotton, pot ashes, 5000 feet of boards, a 2-volume dictionary set, a used anchor, lead, candle boxes, and slaves, either in a family unit or as individuals.⁴⁵ Another notice informed potential

⁴³ Proper, 25.

⁴⁴ Gerzina, 122.

⁴⁵ *Boston Post Boy*, May 21, 1759.

buyers of the sale of an enslaved woman and her young child, is further evidence of the brutal reality black females faced as they sought to create and sustain kindred relationships: “To be Sold, A Negro Woman, about 21 or 22 Years old, and a female Negro Child about 3 Years old, at a very reasonable Rate.”⁴⁶ [The^[54] sale of enslaved women, together with young infants, was frequently advertised in Massachusetts’ newspapers. A notice published in 1739 offered “a very likely young Negro Woman, with her Child (a Boy) of bout 3 Weeks old.”⁴⁷ Similar notices were printed throughout the mid-eighteenth century.⁴⁸ [55]

The dissolution of black families as a result of forced sale was not uncommon. Black women were sold away from their families for a variety of reasons. In some cases black females were separated from their families because slaveowners determined that they could no longer be employed profitably or productively: “A Likely Negro Wench to dispose of, who understands Houshold Business, and something of Cookery: Also Four of said Wench’s Children, viz. three Girls and one Boy. All which are to be sold for no other Reason but Want of Employ.”⁴⁹ [Black women were also sold when owners determined that their reproductive capacity caused inconvenience.]^[56] Such was the case for “A likely healthy Negro Woman with two Children, a Boy and Girl, the Boy is above two Years and an half old, and has had the Small Pox, as has also the Mother, who is a good Cook, and can do all kinds of House Work, but breeds too fast for her present

⁴⁶ *Essex Gazette*, December 21, 1773.

⁴⁷ *New England Weekly Journal*, March 20, 1739.

⁴⁸ For examples of advertisements announcing the sale of enslaved women and their infant children, see *Boston Evening Post*, April 17, 1749; *The Boston News-Letter and New-England Chronicle*, July 10, 1766; and *The New England Chronicle*, May 2, 1776.

⁴⁹ *Boston Evening Post*, March 22, 1762.

Owner.”⁵⁰ [57] White female servants who conceived and bore children during the term of indenture routinely received harsh punishment for what was considered a violation of contract but, different from black women, their offspring could not legally be sold into a lifetime of bound, unremunerated servitude.

Black women were also forced to endure the heart wrenching experience of having their children sold away by slave owners who wanted to avoid the additional costs associated with their upbringing: “To be Sold, A Negro Wench that’s 23 Years old, understands Town or Country Business; a very likely Male Child, two Years and an half old. The Wench will be sold with or without the Child.”⁵¹ While advertisements for the sale of enslaved women and children were a regular feature of newspapers, it was also common for the progeny of enslaved women to be “given away like puppies.”⁵² One extraordinary notice promoted the sale of “A Likely Negro Wench, about 28 Years old, that understands her Needle, is a very good Cook, and can do any Kind of Household Business—is a considerable Breeder, for which Reason only she is to be sold. ALSO, A Negro Child of 3 Years old, to be sold with or without the Wench—and a fine young Male Child to be given away.”⁵³ Notices offering black infants “to be given away” were routinely published in newspapers.⁵⁴ [58] Newspapers were littered with advertisements, such as the one for “A Strong healthy Female Negro Child of nine Months old, to be given away to any Person who lives up in the Country: and a Negro Woman who is a

⁵⁰ *Boston Post Boy*, August 4, 1766.

⁵¹ *The Boston News-Letter and New-England Chronicle*, July 21, 1763. Also see *New England Weekly Journal*, April 9, 1733 for an example of notices offering the sale of enslaved women, with or without their children.

⁵² Greene, “Slave-Holding New England and Its Awakening,” 502.

⁵³ *The Boston News-Letter and New-England Chronicle*, May 16, 1763.

⁵⁴ See notices in *Boston Post Boy*, January 18, 1762, February 14, 1763, March 14, 1763, and December 11, 1769, for examples.

very good Cook to be hired out by the Year.”⁵⁵ Such notices are remarkable because they reveal both the value and the disposability of black life in New England. One unusual advertisement even offered “A Healthy strong Negro Woman, to be given away.”⁵⁶ Such notices offering adults “to be given away” were rare but advertisements offering young black children to any person willing to take them were a common feature of newspapers.

The death of an owner could also precipitate a sale, as evident in the case of Juno Larcom. Larcom, an enslaved woman who lived in Beverly, experienced how easily New England owners could sunder the slave families in their charge. The death of her master and the ensuing financial difficulties of his heirs led to the sale of her three children, as well as her husband.⁵⁷[59] The newspaper advertisement for “A likely Negro Woman, about thirty-eight Years of Age, brought up in this Town, and can do all Sorts of Houshold work” provides further evidence. Black females often faced sale “not for any Fault that she is to be disposed of, but in order to settle an insolvent Estate.”⁵⁸ Some sales, however, were motivated purely by profit, which was probably a driving force behind the sale of “a young Negro Woman, with or without a young Male Child,” together with “choice Wines, West-India Rum, and Brandy.”⁵⁹[60] Just as in the slave societies of the Southern and Caribbean colonies, those who sold slaves in Massachusetts, whether for “want of employ,” for having children too easily or often, to settle an estate, or merely to turn a quick profit, were willing to undermine and destroy the mother-child bond in order to facilitate a purchase.

⁵⁵ *Boston Evening Post*, March 5, 1744.

⁵⁶ *Boston Post Boy*, March 14, 1763.

⁵⁷ Piersen, 93.

⁵⁸ *Boston Evening Post*, April 20, 1767.

⁵⁹ *Boston Evening Post*, June 13, 1763.

Although slavery threatened to damage and destabilize the bonds between black mothers and their offspring, enslaved women's ties to their children are also evident in published fugitive notices. [The record is littered with enslaved women who ran away with children in tow.]^[61] One unnamed fugitive ran away from her owner with four small children, two girls and two boys: "three of them are Molatto's, and the youngest a Negro that sucks or is lately weaned."⁶⁰ Another unnamed "negro servant woman" of about 20 years old ran away from her owner, with her eighteen month old daughter. Given the publication date, it is difficult to deduce the status of this anonymous female fugitive with any certainty but it is likely that she was enslaved. The abovementioned runaway was bred on the island of Barbados and was described in the advertisement as "a smart likely girl, about five feet five inched high, slim built, speaks but little, has a sore on her right arm which appears to be a scald." While little description of the runaway's racial characteristics or color was mentioned, her toddler was referred to as "almost white."⁶¹ The child mentioned in this notice was almost certainly the product of an intimate interracial relationship between the fugitive mother and a white man.

Such [notices provide evidence] ^[62]of the strong bonds that existed between many enslaved mothers and their children. One can only speculate about what might drive the mother of a small child to attempt escape with a toddler in tow, since such an undertaking could be especially hazardous. Small children could not walk very far or fast, and might need to be carried for long distances. They also lacked sufficient impulse control to be quiet in dangerous situations, which might lead to easy capture. Obviously, this mother was willing to risk recapture and punishment to escape the yoke of bondage. The

⁶⁰ *The Boston News-Letter*, October 7, 1706.

⁶¹ *Massachusetts Spy: Or, Worcester Gazette*, August 11, 1785.

advertisement provides clues, however, about possible relationship ties, beyond those of this fugitive woman to her little daughter. The notice suggests that the runaway had “made an acquaintance with a negro man from the eastward,” and was in all probability headed back to Barbados.⁶² The implication is that this female fugitive had relationships with blacks outside of the household where she served, and that those relationships might provide support for her aspirations to return to her community of origin in the West Indies.^[63] The long held view of slavery in New England as kinder than in the Southern and Caribbean colonies is undermined by evidence that slave mothers sought to preserve relationship ties by fleeing from Massachusetts to Barbados. Although slavery severely threatened the bonds between enslaved mothers and their offspring, black women fought to affirm and maintain relationships with their children.

V. Black Women, Kinship, and Friendship in Eighteenth Century Massachusetts

Enslavement was not at all conducive to black women’s impulses to nurture and sustain extended kinship and friendship ties. Nevertheless, some black women found ways to nourish connections with relatives and friends. Elizabeth “Mum Bett” Freeman was born a slave around 1742. She and her sister, Lizzy, grew up in Claverack, New York, about 20 miles south of Albany. Pieter Hogeboom, her Dutch owner, gave Mum Bett and Lizzy to John Ashley upon his marriage to Hogeboom’s daughter, Annetje. John Ashley moved Annetje and the enslaved sisters from upstate New York to his residence in Sheffield, Eighteenth century Massachusetts.

The relationship between Mum Bett and Lizzy was a strong one. Although enslaved, Mum Bett acted as protector to Lizzy, her “sickly timid” sister, “over whom

⁶² Ibid.

she watched as the lioness does over her cubs.”⁶³ Mum Bett suffered a deforming injury as a result of her attempts to shield Lizzy from the more brutal aspects of slavery. One day Annetje Ashley, mistress in the Ashley household, became enraged at Lizzy when she took scraps from the family batch of bread to make a wheat cake for herself. Annetje declared Lizzy a “thief,” and “seized a large iron shovel...hot from clearing the oven, and raised it over the terrified girl.”⁶⁴ While Annetje owned Lizzy and Mum Bett, which gave her the power of life and death over her chattel, Mum Bett refused to allow Annetje to assault her sister with potential deadly force. Rather Mum Bett “interposed her brawny arm, and took the blow” meant for her sister. Annetje wielded the hot shovel with sufficient power to burn Mum Bett’s arm, through the skin and muscle, right down “to the bone.”⁶⁵ Mum Bett’s action to shield her sister from gross physical abuse reveals the depth of affection and support that attended black women’s familial relationships.

Elizabeth “Mum Bett” Freeman willingly took the blow that was intended for her weaker, sicker, more timid sister. Mum Bett bore the brunt of Annetje’s wrath, which created a “frightful scar she carried to her grave.” Mum Bett was deeply bound to her sister by cords of love, responsibility and protection. Furthermore, by intervening in Annetje Ashley’s attempt to brutalize Lizzy, Mum Bett was able to shift the balance of power in the relationship with their mistress: “Madam never again laid her hand on Lizzy. I had a bad arm all winter, but Madam had the worst of it. I never covered the wound, and when people said to me, before Madam ---, ‘Why Betty! What ails your

⁶³ Catharine Sedgwick, “Slavery in New England,” *Bentley’s Miscellany* 34 (1853), 417-424, www.salemstate.edu/imc/sedgwick/slavery.html, 2.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

arm?’ I only answered—‘ask madam.’”⁶⁶ Elizabeth “Mum Bett” Freeman exposed her scar, and in so doing unmasked the cruelty of her mistress. By bringing the violence of slavery to light, Elizabeth “Mum Bett” Freeman was able to insure her sister’s safety from a volatile mistress. The complexity of Freeman’s various relationships within the Ashley household is clearly revealed upon consideration of this vicious encounter with her mistress. Black women’s vulnerability to white women’s violent outburst reveals the ways that domestic slavery in Massachusetts was similar to plantation slavery in the antebellum south.⁶⁷ Domestic slavery always held the potential for triangulating [64]black women’s relationships. Elizabeth Freeman’s decision to stand between her sister on the one hand and her mistress on the other unveils how deeply slavery’s tangled roots were embedded in New England soil.

Phillis Wheatley maintained a long, cherished friendship, with Obour Tanner, an enslaved woman in Newport, Rhode Island. Tanner “a lifelong friend and soul mate” to Phillis Wheatley, was enslaved to the family of James Tanner in Newport, Rhode Island.⁶⁸ Their relationship was a source of comfort, strength, encouragement and support. The value and importance of their relationship is evident in the letters Wheatley penned to Tanner. It was Tanner who preserved seven of Wheatley’s letters that survive to this day. Phillis Wheatley and her enslaved friend, Obour Tanner, maintained faithful correspondence over many years, despite living in different colonies. Following the death of her mistress, Phillis wrote to thank Obour for the consolation their friendship provided: “Your tenderness for my welfare demands my gratitude Assist me, dear Obour...while he

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Thalvolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household*. New York: Cambridge University Press (2008), 5.

⁶⁸ Robinson, 314.

strikes one Comfort dead he raises up another.”⁶⁹ Wheatley’s letters to Obour exist as a testament to black women’s desire to create, nurture and maintain relationships beyond the bonds of blood and beyond the limits of their owners’ households. The deep, abiding relationship between Phillis Wheatley and Obour Tanner stands as a testament to the value of black women’s friendships^[65], which were not luxuries but necessities for those fortunate enough to experience them.⁷⁰ Enslaved women in New England, like their counterparts on Southern plantations in the antebellum era, developed female networks that offered an alternative reality to the brutality of slavery.⁷¹

Notices for black female fugitives also shed light on enslaved women’s relationships. In a number of cases, fugitive women ran away alone, but they often fled to reconnect with relatives and friends. Some fled to former residences, presumably to reconnect with relations in those places. Such was the case of Sarah Shelter, a runaway who was “about 19 years of age, and about 5 feet high.” The notice stated that Sarah’s master “supposed” that she had “gone to Providence or Concord, at both of which places she has formerly resided.”⁷² This suggests that Sarah Shelter fled bondage in an attempt to reunite with people she knew in the past. We can only speculate about the relationships Sarah had forged during her time in Providence and Concord. Nevertheless, it is possible to infer that whatever human ties bound Sarah Shelter to the places she had formerly resided were strong and compelling enough to precipitate her flight. Another black

⁶⁹ Phillis Wheatley, “Letter from Phillis Wheatley to Obour Tanner, 6 May 1774.”

⁷⁰ Erica Armstrong Dunbar, *A Fragile Freedom: African American Women and Emancipation in the Antebellum City*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press (2008), 147.

⁷¹ White, 122-123.

⁷² *Continental Journal*, September 12, 1782.

female fugitive, also named Sarah, ran away from her owner and was “supposed to be harboured by some free negro in Boston.”⁷³ [66]

One frustrated slaveowner stumbled upon a lively slave frolic during his quest to apprehend his runaway slave woman:

“Last Friday Night a Gentleman of this Town went over to *Roxbury* to look for his Negro Woman, who had been gone from him a few Days; and hearing a Noise in the Tavern, he went in, (past Nine o’Clock) and found about a Dozen black Gentry, He’s and She’s in a Room, in a very merry Humour, singing and dancing, having a Violin, and Store of Wine and Punch before them.”⁷⁴

This portrait of community life among blacks enslaved in Boston adds a layer of complexity to this analysis. According to the published report all of the participants in this nocturnal entertainment were owned by “Gentlemen in this Town,” which prompts speculation about white owners’ complicity with and support for illicit gatherings among Boston’s enslaved population: “‘tis much to be wondred at, how they can be absent from their respective Families without their Masters Knowledge: And ‘tis yet more to be wondred at, if they obtain their Masters Leave to attend these Nocturnal Frolicks.”⁷⁵ Beyond speculation about whether enslaved women and men participated in such activities with their owners’ permission or in defiance of their owners’ wishes, the question of how slaves could possibly afford significant quantities of alcoholic beverages given their limited, or non-existent, resources begs consideration. Clearly some tavern owners were willing to accommodate enslaved blacks’ desires to congregate in leisure time activities. One is left to speculate about exactly how enslaved women and men managed to plan, execute, and participate in pleasurable evenings of dancing, drinking,

⁷³ Ibid, September 25, 1777.

⁷⁴ *Boston Evening Post*, January 14, 1740.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

and general merriment, given the restrictions on black mobility in Massachusetts. A law enacted in 1703, banned Negro, Mulatto, and Indian slaves from being abroad after nine o'clock at night. Slaves were also forbidden to be absent from their owner's home without permission.⁷⁶ Massachusetts' law also outlawed the sale of liquor to slaves. Tavern owners were forbidden to serve Negroes, except by special permission of their owners.⁷⁷ Clearly some tavern owners disregarded the statute. The adage "where there is a will, there is a way" might be the most accurate and appropriate response to questions of slave agency and resourcefulness.

In some cases black women found ways to establish meaningful connections with white owners and patrons. These interracial relationships provided emotional sustenance and social validation for black women in eighteenth century Massachusetts. In fact, some white owners considered their slaves more than servants. Slaves were often viewed as members of the family. The journal of Esther Edwards Burr confirms this idea. Esther Edwards Burr was the third of eleven children born to Sarah Pierrepont and Jonathan Edwards, a prominent New England minister and theologian. At the age of 20, Esther married Aaron Burr, a Presbyterian minister, who later founded and became the second president of Princeton University. Burr's journal is unique in that it was written as a running correspondence with her beloved, long-time friend, Sarah Prince Gill. Burr began her journal in 1754 and exchanged it periodically with Gill. Unfortunately Gill's journal did not survive. Burr's journal is significant because it provides vital details about elite

⁷⁶ *Acts and Resolves, Public and Private, of the Massachusetts Bay*. 5 vols. Boston: Wright and Potter (1869-1886), vol. 1, 535.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 154.

white women's lives from a woman's perspective. Burr's journal is full commentary on everyday events, from the mundane to the exceptional.

Like many white women of her social standing, Esther Edwards Burr frequently had domestic help, including enslaved blacks. In an entry dated February 12, 1755, Burr wrote: "To my very dear Miss Prince. I have not been able to write since I sent away No 10. by reason of illness in my famaly. Old Mingo has been very ill with a sort of Plurasy but is recovering very fast."⁷⁸ It is worth noting that Burr follows her report about sickness in her family with a statement about Old Mingo, a slave in her household. The recovery of Old Mingo's health is of particular concern to Burr, for she considers Old Mingo a member of the family. Burr's family was plagued with a variety of illnesses over the course of the next two years. On January 12, 1757, she wrote that her family had "not been well one day since we came. As soon or before one is well another is taken--My Wench is very sick indeed and poor I hurried to Death."⁷⁹ Within weeks Burr would write about the deteriorating condition of this same female slave "that has been sick all Wint[er]" and "has been gone some distance to a Doct this Month." Burr described the impact of this latest round of illness in her family: "I badly lot on it for help, besides a vast deal of Compa[ny] and sickness in the FAMaly, but I'll not ware you o[ut] with a detail of my domestick troubles."⁸⁰ Burr's relationship with the enslaved women and men who served in her household was complex. While she counted on their labor for the smooth operation of her household, it is evident that Burr also cared deeply for her

⁷⁸ Burr, 90. "Old Mingo" was probably a nickname for the Burr's slave Harry.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 239.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 254-255.

slaves' wellbeing. In Burr's mind, her slaves were more than servants; she considered them members of the family.^[67]

Just as white slave owners were tied in "tense and tender" ways to enslaved females within their households, black women also had complicated ties to their white owners.⁸¹ Phillis Wheatley's relationship with the Wheatley family, particularly her mistress Susanna, provides another example black women's complex yet meaningful relationships with whites. Susanna Wheatley was a good Christian woman, who just happened to be in the market for a new slave. While at the slave market, a slender, frail, female child aroused Susanna's sympathy. Susanna saw evidence of the girl's suffering – she was half naked and shivering with cold – but Susanna also saw possibilities. The child's modesty and delicacy was attractive to Susanna. Here was someone Susanna could mold to suit her needs perfectly. Susanna purchased the little African girl, and promptly christened her Phillis Wheatley – Phillis after the ship that brought her to Boston and Wheatley to signify ownership. Susanna had every intention of shaping and grooming the child to her liking.

Phillis Wheatley's purchase as a young child resulted in a "familial" relationship with Susannah and John Wheatley. Such relationships were not uncommon when slaves were purchased as children.⁸² Phillis' deep personal ties to Susannah are evident in her correspondence. On March 21, 1774, Phillis Wheatley wrote the following concerning her relationship with Susanna Wheatley:

⁸¹ Ann Laura Stoler, "Tense and Tender Ties: The Politics of Comparison in North American History and (Post) Colonial Studies." *The Journal of American History* 88 (2001): 829-865.

⁸² Piersen, 26.

“I have lately met with a great trial in the death of my mistress, let us imagine the loss of a Parent, Sister or Brother the tenderness of all these were united, in her, -- I was a poor little outcast & stranger when she took me in, not only into her house but I presently became, a sharer in her most tender affections, I was treated by her more like her child than her servant.”⁸³

Susanna Wheatley was much more than Phillis’ mistress. Susanna was family: a parent, sibling, patron, and beloved friend all at once. Within a short time, Phillis Wheatley lost nearly all of her Wheatley relations. Susanna Wheatley died in 1774; both John Wheatley and their daughter Mary died in 1778. Nathaniel, Mary’s twin brother, moved London in 1773, and died there in 1783. With their deaths Phillis lost not only the encouragement, patronage, and support she had come to rely on since her arrival in Boston, but her family--the only family she had known since childhood.

Phillis Wheatley developed and nurtured significant relationships with other whites, as well as the Wheatley family. She was acquainted with and enjoyed the favor of English aristocrats, whose “Benevolent conduct,” together with their “unexpected, and unmerited civility,” filled Wheatley with gratitude and amazement.⁸⁴ Her correspondence with Mr. John Thornton, Esquire, a prominent London merchant, reveals how the deep and abiding chords of friendship could unite blacks and whites in eighteenth century Massachusetts. Wheatley commended Thornton for his great “tenderness and affection.” He was “a welwisher” [well wisher] to her soul. This held great significance for Wheatley, who believed that “friends of soul bear [some] resemblance to the father of

⁸³ Wheatley, “Letter from Phillis Wheatley to Obour Tanner, 21 March 1774,” Miscellaneous Bound Manuscripts, MHS.

⁸⁴ Phillis Wheatley, “Letter from Phillis Wheatley to Obour Tanner, 30 October 1773,” Miscellaneous Bound Manuscripts, MHS.

spirits and are made partakers of his divine Nature."⁸⁵ Phillis Wheatley found in John Thornton just such a friend of the soul^[68]. Phillis Wheatley made earnest attempts to recreate a family for herself, through marriage and childbearing as well as through relationships with the Wheatley family and other sympathetic whites but her efforts yielded little fruit^[69].

Chloe Spear also managed to forge bonds of friendship with sympathetic whites. Mr. Adams, a friend of her owner when the family she served moved from Boston into Adams' home in Andover, Massachusetts, befriended Chloe, serving as her confidant, tutor, and a source of moral support.⁸⁶^[70] There is further evidence that older slave women also enjoyed intimate, companionable relationships with their white owners, as was the case with Jenny Cole. After her master's demise, Cole "lived to be eighty-five and after the minister's death spent twenty-eight years in greater ease with his widow. A few days before Jenny died, a visitor to the Ashley house found Jenny Cole and Dorothy Ashley happily chattering like old friends while they sewed."⁸⁷ Nevertheless, blacks lamented slavery's devastating effect on relationships. Even the strongest personal bonds could be destroyed when slaves "were unjustly dragged by the cruel hand of power from our dearest [friends]."⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Phillis Wheatley, "Letter from Phillis Wheatley to John Thornton, 21 April 1772," in Kenneth Silverman, "Four New Letters by Phillis Wheatley," *Early American Literature*, 8:3 (Winter, 1974), 263-264.

⁸⁶ A Lady of Boston [Rebecca Warren Brown?], *Memoir of Mrs. Chloe Spear, a Native of Africa, Who was Enslaved in Childhood, and Died in Boston, January 3, 1815...Aged 65 Years*. Boston: James Loring (1832). *Documenting the American South*, <http://www Docsouth.unc.edu/neh>, 36-37.

⁸⁷ Gerzina, 129.

⁸⁸ "Petition for Freedom."

Free black women also managed to sustain strong friendship ties to whites. When Catherine Sedgwick was distraught over her own mother's death, former slave Elizabeth "Mum Bett" Freeman responded with a query: "Don't you think I am grieved?" With this question, Freeman revealed the intensity of her own friendship with Pamela Sedgwick, a white woman. Freeman compared her grief to that of the deceased's daughter, which suggests that her relationship to the Sedgwick family was more nuanced and complex than that of an ordinary employee and her employers. Regarding her relationship with Pamela Sedgwick, Freeman remarked, "Our hair has grown white together."⁸⁹ With this declaration, Freeman revealed that her relationship with Pamela Sedgwick was one of longstanding and held deep meaning. Elizabeth Freeman, a former slave, considered Pamela Sedgwick, a privileged white woman, her peer^[71]. They had grown up into young womanhood together, worked together, raised children together, and aged together. While death might separate them physically, the emotional connection between them could not be so neatly or easily severed^[72].

Sometimes the depth and importance of black women's relationships was most evident after a loss. The death of Elizabeth "Mum Bett" Freeman's beloved granddaughter resulted in great anguish. Catharine Maria Sedgwick, daughter of Freeman's patron and employer Theodore Sedgwick, bore witness to Freeman's grief: "I remember Mumbet walking up and down the room with her hands knit together and great tears rolling down her cheeks."⁹⁰ The depth of Freeman's attachment and devotion to her

⁸⁹ Catharine Sedgwick, *The Power of Her Sympathy: The Autobiography and Journal of Catharine Maria Sedgwick*, edited by Mary Kelley. Boston: The Massachusetts Historical Society (1993), 71.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 71.

granddaughter, who “died without an instant’s warning,” was expressed physically through pacing, hand wringing, and weeping over the loss.

The will of Catherine Cornwell, a free black woman from Boston, provides evidence of close, enduring ties black women forged with friends and family.⁹¹ Clearly Cornwell had concerns for the future. Although she considered her self “of sound mind,” Cornwell also reflected upon “the uncertainty of this life,” and wanted to insure that any earthly remains would serve to bless those closest to her. Cornwell’s last will and testament is evidence of her hopes that her friends and relatives could enjoy a more prosperous future after her demise. Dated February 8, 1752, Cornwell’s final testament reveals that she had acquired personal assets over the course of her lifetime. The document also makes it clear that she expected the bonds created through those relationships most meaningful to her to endure beyond her natural lifetime. Her bequests, then, represent tangible efforts to maintain and strengthen relations with loved ones. According to Cornwell, it “Pleased God” to bless her with “Worldly Goods,” acquired over the course of her lifetime. This suggests that Cornwell was able to move beyond mere subsistence. She anticipated that something would be left in her estate after debts and funeral expenses were discharged. Cornwell named her “True and Trusty friend Scipio Fayrweather” executor of her estate. Cornwell also bequeathed ten percent of her estate, along with her bed and bedding to the “True and Trusty” Fayrweather. Cornwell’s remaining “Goods mony or Effects” were to be equally divided among her five children: two sons, Juby and Cornwell, and three daughters, Rose, Catherine, and Margreet[73].

⁹¹ “Will of Catherine Cornwell, 8 February 1752,” Mary Hartford Papers, Jeremy Belknap Papers, MHS.

Cornwell's will makes it clear that black women in eighteenth century Massachusetts valued their relationships with friends and relatives.

Likewise, Chloe Spear, who though enslaved as a youth was by the time of her death a free black woman, bequeathed her personal assets to relatives and friends. Spear's husband and children preceded her in death. To her sole survivor—a grandson—Spear left \$500. Spear's will also bestowed upon “five persons of colour, all members of the same church, \$50 each; and to three of them, all her wearing apparel, beds, bed and table linen, and several smaller legacies to others.”⁹² Spear's relationships extended beyond family and personal friends to include meaningful connections forged with organizations whose mission she believed in. Spear endowed her church with the sum of “\$333,33 cents, the interest to be applied to the sick and poor, particularly to the members of colour.” Spear bequeathed the remainder of her estate to the “Baptist Missionary Society.”⁹³ With these gifts, Spear sought to insure that her commitment to racial and social uplift would continue beyond her lifetime. When the opportunity to honor the bonds of family and friendship by leaving a tangible legacy of support presented itself, free black women like Catherine Cornwell and Chloe Spear took steps to do so.

VI. Black Women and Black Community Formation in Eighteenth century Massachusetts—Challenges and Opportunities

Black women in eighteenth century Massachusetts strived to participate in relationships that were fulfilling and loving, despite the disruptions of slavery. Slave family ties were fragile because they lacked the external support of law and social custom. The possibility of forced separation through hiring or sale was always a threat.

⁹² A Lady of Boston, 89.

⁹³ Ibid, 89-90.

The humanity of slave owners could be easily subsumed by the need or desire for more cash. Enslaved women and men could conceive children but they had no legal rights to their offspring. Children born of slave unions belonged to their enslaved mothers' owners. The historical record is littered with the debris of severed relationships: children wrenched from the love and care of their mothers, marriages destroyed in the financial interests of owners, and familial relationships undermined by sale. Black women in eighteenth century Massachusetts had to face not only the awful possibility of sale for themselves and their loved ones but also the humiliation and heartbreak of children being given away like so much refuse^[74].

Black life in eighteenth century Massachusetts was “embittered” by the deplorable circumstances that undermined every aspect of African American relationships. Slavery was inherently incompatible with the ideals espoused by Puritans. Petitioners exposed the hypocrisy and inhumanity of Puritan slavery with a series of scathing comments. Slavery prevented black couples from performing marital obligations to spouses. Slavery undermined parental authority. Furthermore, slavery compromised and demonized ^[75]relations between “master” and “slave”: “How can the master be said to Beare my [Burden] when he [Bears] me down, with the [heavy] [chains] of slavery and [oppression] against my will?”⁹⁴ Slavery’s detrimental effects on black families provided a powerful foundation upon which African Americans argued for their freedom during the Revolutionary War era in Eighteenth century Massachusetts.

Even in freedom, black women in eighteenth century Massachusetts struggled to create and maintain familial ties. Some, like Lucy Terry Prince, were successful in

⁹⁴ “Petition for Freedom.”

building lasting marriages and rearing offspring who survived into adulthood. Others, such as Phillis Wheatley, were less so. Black women encountered serious challenges in their quest to forge human connections while entangled with the yoke of bondage. And it is evident that slavery limited the development of black families and communities in eighteenth century New England.⁹⁵ Such a view, however accurate, obscures the resourcefulness of black women, which is evident in their ability to make meaningful connections in the face of constant threat. Black women's love for their families persisted despite the threat of separation from children, spouses, friends, and community. The dehumanizing institution of chattel slavery failed to extinguish black women's need for and desire to form meaningful attachments with other human beings. Black women married, conceived and bore children, and nurtured connections with friends and kin. Their ability to forge and maintain caring relationships served to mitigate some of the more demoralizing effects of slavery. In their determination to recreate families and to sustain mutually affirming, supportive relationships black females established a basis for social interaction and personal fulfillment.

⁹⁵ Chan, 136.

Chapter Four:
Black Women, Literacy, and the Public Sphere in Massachusetts

I. Introduction

From its colonial beginnings as a Puritan settlement, education played a central role in Massachusetts' development as a "city on a hill"—a shining example of God's chosen place, populated with God's chosen people. Puritans believed only those who knew the will of God could have any hope of faithfully carrying out the divine charge. Thus, the ability to read scripture proved central to the Puritan's understanding of Christian doctrine, faith, and practice. The Puritans demanded a learned population, as well as an educated clergy, and by the close of the eighteenth century most white men and many white women in Massachusetts could read. Black females encountered a different reality. Enslaved females who arrived in Massachusetts on slave ships faced the daunting task of learning to comprehend and speak English, and a number did so with a remarkable degree of fluency. Although pathways to literacy were limited and fraught with challenges, some black women achieved degrees of literacy far beyond oral language acquisition by learning to read and write. In the eighteenth century no legal barriers prohibited slaveholders from teaching slaves to read anywhere in the colonies. In 1740 writing instruction was banned in South Carolina. Likewise Georgia law forbade teaching slaves to write in 1755. By contrast, no such laws were enacted in Massachusetts.¹

This chapter explores the ways that African American women laid a foundation for wider engagement with the public sphere across lines of race, class and gender,

¹ E. Jennifer Monaghan, *Learning to Read and Write in Colonial America*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press (2005), 243.

through the acquisition of various literacy tools and skills during the eighteenth century. With this chapter I seek to reframe our understanding, not only of the early American public sphere, but also of the political dimensions of life in eighteenth century New England by focusing on the experiences of African American women who were English speakers, readers, and writers. According to Steven Hahn, such an examination requires a “broad understanding of politics and the political that is relational and historical, and that encompasses collective struggles for what might be termed socially meaningful power.”² Thus, I hope to uncover the way that black women’s experience of speaking, reading, and writing reveals their understanding of and participation in public discourse and political activism.³

II. Reading

Any discussion of literacy among enslaved females must have as its foundation an understanding of the fact that Africans who were brought to the Americas forcibly were not native English speakers. Rather, these African migrants represented a diverse number of linguistic backgrounds including but not limited to Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, and Fula. Furthermore, enslaved Africans, unlike other immigrants to the English colonies, encountered a hostile social environment. The retention of native names, languages, and cultural expressions was largely forbidden to enslaved Africans. Even when it might have

² Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (2003), 3.

³ Joanna Brooks, “The Early American Public Sphere and the Emergence of a Black Print Counterpublic.” *The William and Mary Quarterly*. 62:1 (January 2005), 67-92. Brooks discusses African American engagement with and critique of the early American public sphere. Brooks maintains that literary production enabled African Americans not only to participate in the public sphere but also to create a counterpublic based on principles of black self-determination and self-reappropriation, as well as criticism of dominant political interests.

been possible for enslaved Africans to communicate in their native tongues, white owners feared that the ability of slaves to communicate freely with one another would lead to rebellion. Thus Africans who were enslaved in eighteenth century Massachusetts encountered an antagonistic environment in which they were forced to acquire at least the rudimentary skills necessary for communication in a foreign language—English. It is remarkable then, given the tumultuous events that resulted in lifelong forced servitude in New England, that many enslaved females achieved some degree of fluency in English. Slave-for-sale advertisements from Boston’s colonial newspapers contain evidence of enslaved females who attained the ability to comprehend and speak English. One colonial Boston newspaper advertised the sale of “A Negro Woman Educated among the English and Speaks good English, aged about 30 years, to be sold, Inquire at the House of Mr. *Edward Richards* in Love Street Boston, at the North End, and know further.”⁴ Another publication announced the sale of “a likely Negro Woman of about 20 years of Age, has been in the Country about 5 Years, speaks good English, has had the Measles, and can do all sorts of Houshold Work, fit for Town or Country, Service.”⁵ A notice in the *Boston Evening Post* read: “To be SOLD, A Very likely Negro Woman, well season’d to the Country, who speaks good English, and can do all manner of Houshold Business very well. Also a very likely handy and good Tempered Negro Girl, about 14 Years old, well season’d to the Country, and in perfect Health.”⁶ It is worth noting that the abovementioned advertisement markets one female’s language ability while making no mention of language acquisition or skill in the other.

⁴ *The Boston News-Letter*, May 25—June 1, 1713.

⁵ *The Boston Gazette*, September 22—September 29, 1735.

⁶ *Boston Evening Post*, May 17, 1736.

Evidence of English language acquisition can also be found in advertisements for fugitive black women: “RAN-away from Mrs. *Eleanor Pullen*, on Monday the 9th of this Instant *April*, a Negro Woman named *Cuba*, about 36 Years of Age...and speaks good English.”⁷ These notices are evidence that white slaveowners viewed an enslaved female’s ability to speak good English as a marketable asset. Clearly, English language fluency was a desirable skill that made enslaved women more profitable to owners looking to capitalize on their investment. Thus black females who “attained the English Language” possessed a valuable trait that could make them as attractive at sale, as those who were “handy,” “good tempered,” and “in perfect health[76].”

Lucy Terry Prince, who was enslaved in Deerfield, Massachusetts, bears the distinction of being the first African American to produce literature in England’s North American colonies. Her poem, “The Bars Fight,” recounts the dramatic events surrounding the last Indian raid of Deerfield, Massachusetts, which occurred on August 25, 1746. Prince was a young woman of twenty-two when a group of white settlers were attacked by Native Americans. The ambush, which resulted in the deaths of three white men and one white boy, the capture of another white boy and the severe injury of a white girl, took place in an area of Deerfield known as “The Bars.” Her poem has been described as the most accurate historical account of the Deerfield massacre.⁸ While Lucy Terry Prince distinguished herself as an accomplished storyteller, poet, and “singer of history,” there is no evidence that she ever learned to read or write herself. Nevertheless, Prince’s mastery of oral language skills provided the basis for her engagement with other

⁷ *Boston Post-Boy*, May 7, 1744.

⁸ Proper, 5.

settlers—black and white, female and male, bond and free—who lived with the ever-present threats and hazards of life on the colonial frontier.

Many enslaved women lived and died illiterate but the inability to read or write did not signify any lack of intelligence. Of Elizabeth “Mum Bett” Freeman it was said: “She was born a slave and remained a slave for nearly thirty years: She could neither read nor write; yet in her own sphere she had neither superior nor equal.”⁹ Freeman gained a reputation for keen intellect and astute judgment when “she chanced at the village “meeting house” in Sheffield, to hear the Declaration of Independence read.”¹⁰ Later Freeman was said to put forth a convincing argument for her humanity and her freedom: “Sire,” said she, “I heard that paper read yesterday, that says, “all men are born equal, and that every man has a right to freedom. I am not a dumb critter; won’t the law give me my freedom?”¹¹ Despite her inability to read or write, Freeman used her command of the English language together with her formidable intellect and abilities of persuasion as a basis for political action. Freeman’s facility with English enabled her to communicate her aspirations for freedom clearly and forcefully. Thus Freeman was able to present a compelling rationale for her right to liberty as part of a broader discourse about independence.

Though uncommon, some enslaved females managed to go beyond speaking ability by learning to read. In contrast to the southern colonies, no laws prohibited the instruction of slaves in colonial New England.¹² In fact, reading instruction and Christian indoctrination were very closely tied in New England during the colonial period. Even so,

⁹ Sedgwick, 6.

¹⁰ Ibid, 4.

¹¹ Ibid, 4.

¹² Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England*, 327.

enslaved women who wanted to learn to read had to overcome the limits of their servile status in order to acquire literacy skills. This fact is illuminated in the *Memoir of Mrs. Chloe Spear, a Native of Africa, Who was Enslaved in Childhood and died in Boston, January 3, 1815...Aged 65 Years*. A white female abolitionist amanuensis published the *Memoir*, which recounts Spear's journey from illiterate slave to property owner and learned Christian, almost twenty years after Spear's death.¹³ The *Memoir* reveals one enslaved woman's desire to read at a time when "slaves were considered property, and their owners thought themselves under no more obligations to instruct them, otherwise than to do their work in such a manner as best to subserve their own interests."¹⁴ Given such an attitude on the part of many white slave holders it is not surprising that Spear was not taught to read by her owner, Captain John Bradford (1762-1827), a merchant, who was depicted in the memoir as a harsh master.

The desire to read surfaced during Spear's childhood years as a slave in a Boston household. Her longing for an education emerged as she pursued routine domestic tasks,

¹³ Rebecca Warren Brown (1789-1855) wrote a number of works, many of them for children, under the pseudonym *A Lady of Boston*. Her works included "The School, or, A Present from a Preceptress to Her Pupils on the First of January 1813"; "Isabel and Louisa, or, Some Account of Two Little Girls Who Lived in Boston" (1813); "Tales of the Fireside" (1827); "The Faithful Servant, A Moral and Religious Story for Children" (1828); "Tales of the Emerald Isle" (1828); "Memoir of Mrs. Chloe Spear, a Native of Africa, Who was Enslaved in Childhood, and Died in Boston, January 3, 1815" (1832); "Stories about General Warren" (1835); and "The Two Sisters, or, Love and Pride: a True Story of the Revolution" (1855). Her own considerable achievements as an author were overshadowed by her association with a number of distinguished male relatives who were physicians in Boston. Her father John Warren, a surgeon, was a founder of Harvard Medical School; her uncle, General Joseph Warrant, was also a doctor. Rebecca's older brother, John Collins Warren, was a founder of Massachusetts General Hospital and performed the first operation using ether as an anesthesia in 1846. In 1814 Rebecca married John Ball Brown, who would later distinguish himself as a specialist in orthopedic surgery. Details of Rebecca Warren Brown's biography, together with a portrait by Chester Harding, are available at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

¹⁴ *A Lady of Boston*, 20.

such as childcare: “When, (as she was accustomed to do,) she went to conduct the children of the family to, and from school, she discovered that the[y] were obtaining something of which she remained ignorant. This excited an inclination to learn to read.”¹⁵ After witnessing the educational opportunities available to white children, Spear was determined to find an instructor. Learning to read was no easy task for an enslaved girl in Boston. Nevertheless, “an expedient was devised that promised success,” when Spear enlisted the support of a sympathetic white educator.¹⁶ Spear expressed her desire to learn to read only “After becoming a little acquainted with the school-mistress, who...manifested some sympathy for the enslaved youth.”¹⁷ The assistance of a white female schoolteacher enabled Spear to partake of some of the same educational opportunities that were available to white children. That Spear was aided in her quest to acquire the tools of basic reading literacy by a benevolent white woman is consistent with the patterns of early education that existed in colonial Massachusetts.

Throughout the eighteenth century white women engaged in teaching as a means of shoring up limited household finances, or in the case of single females, as a means of self-support. The state of early education in Massachusetts was remarked upon by Hannah Adams of Medford, Massachusetts: “The country schools, at that time, were kept but a few months in the year, and all that was then taught in them was reading, writing and arithmetic. In the summer, the children were instructed by females in reading, sewing, and other kinds of work.”¹⁸ Adams, a distant cousin of John Adams, was

¹⁵ A Lady of Boston. 22.

¹⁶ Ibid. 23.

¹⁷ Ibid. 22.

¹⁸ Hannah Adams, *A Memoir of Miss Hannah Adams, Written by Herself with Additional Notices by a Friend*. Boston, MA: Gray and Bowen (1832), 3.

plagued with poor health as a child. Thus Adams, who was largely self-taught, spent her early years reading: “As I was too feeble to engage in any laborious employments, I found considerable leisure for reading.”¹⁹ Even so Adams never achieved fluidity of speech, which she attributed to the limited educational opportunities available to females during the period: “The disadvantages of my early education I have experienced during life; and, among various others, the acquiring a very faulty pronunciation; a habit contracted so early, that I cannot wholly rectify it in later years.”²⁰ After the failure of her father’s business Adams herself embraced the role of teacher: “I had the satisfaction of teaching the rudiments of Latin and Greek to three young gentlemen, who resided in the vicinity. This was some advantage to me. Besides, it was a pleasant amusement.”²¹ In addition to teaching Adams distinguished her self as the first American woman to make her living as a writer.

Primary schools sponsored by towns in New England did not teach rudimentary literacy skills. Rather, town schools required that children already possess basic reading skills before enrollment.²² While some children may have acquired such skills at home from their mothers, many learned to read at dame schools. By the middle of the eighteenth century, dame or “reading” schools were quite common in Massachusetts. Dame schools were run by women and conducted in their homes for the purpose of teaching young children of both sexes to read. According to E. Jennifer Monaghan, “Dame schools were often little more than the equivalent of nursery schools, but the

¹⁹ Ibid, 8.

²⁰ Ibid, 3.

²¹ Ibid, 12.

²² Joel Perlmann, Silvana Siddali, and Keith Whitescarver, “Literacy, Schooling, and Teaching among New England Women, 1730-1820. *History of Education Quarterly*. 37:2. Special Issue on Education in Early America (Summer, 1997), 126.

ostensible purpose was always to teach reading.”²³ Dame schools reflected the division of literacy instruction by sex in colonial New England: “Women introduced children to reading; men did the same for writing. The word *penmanship* is well chosen, for men were judged to be the sex ideally qualified to teach handwriting as a part of boys’ preparation for work. The corresponding utilitarian skill for girls was sewing.”²⁴

Early in the eighteenth century some towns in Massachusetts began to pay the women who ran dame schools directly. This was in contrast to earlier practices in which parents made such payments. Thus a formerly private, domestic establishment eventually came to be considered a public venture as a result of the growing need to subsidize the education of poor children in the community. Marblehead, Massachusetts, became one of the first towns to engage in this practice in 1700. Salem and Charlestown followed in 1712 and 1729, respectively.²⁵ Financial support from towns, rather than from individual families, may have served to bolster the economic prospects of white women who served as teachers.

For Spear, learning to read required a significant investment of valuable resources in terms of time and money. After having secured the help of a sympathetic teacher, Spear had to acquire supplies and carve out time for lessons and practice: “How to accomplish her object, was a question which required consideration. She was aware that it would not do to make known her wishes at home, and she could not attend at the regular school hours, both for want of time, and because the children would expose the

²³ Monaghan, 30.

²⁴ Ibid, 30.

²⁵ Perlmann, et al., 126.

fact to their parents.”²⁶ Spear had to find time for instruction that would not conflict with her domestic duties. Spear also had to pay a fee for reading instruction: “I ask de Mistress how much she hab week to teach me such time I get when school out, and my work done? She say, “five copper,” so she would chalk down mark, how many day I go, till make a week. She say too, I mus bring book.”²⁷ Spear not only had to find resources to pay for her “learning”; she also had to find both means and opportunity for purchasing a book that could serve as a suitable primer. The *Memoir* recounts: “To these conditions she agreed, as she occasionally received small presents of money from [visitors] at the house of her master.”²⁸ Spear managed to acquire a significant sum of cash from guests who came to her owner’s home. Thus Spear had the means to fund her aspiration. It was Spear’s desire, initiative, and resourcefulness, which led to her pursuit of knowledge. Thus, learning to read provided an avenue whereby Spear could resist the limits of slavery while asserting claims to self-fulfillment.

Spear took her savings to a local bookseller with the intention of buying the required text but when queried by the bookstore owner as to “what money she had brought...he found it to be a twenty-cent piece.”²⁹ Spear had resources to purchase the necessary supplies, however she did not know which book to buy or the value of the money she possessed. This left her vulnerable in the marketplace:

“Delighted with the prospect,” of buying a book “she hastened to a bookseller's shop, and desired him to sell her a book. He asked, ‘what book?’ She answered that she did not know; she wanted a book...Whether the bookseller willingly took advantage of her ignorance, or whether he supposed she was sent to purchase a

²⁶ A Lady of Boston, 22-23.

²⁷ Ibid, 23.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

book of that value, we cannot decide; but he gave her a Psalter, which contained the Psalms, Proverbs, and our Lord's Sermon on the mount.”³⁰

Spear’s educational venture was not without potential hazards. Enslaved women who entered the marketplace did so as disadvantaged persons of low social, economic, and political status, and thus were vulnerable to unscrupulous merchants.

Spear also risked punishment from her master. She was well aware that her owner would be displeased by both her desire to learn to read and any actions taken to fulfill that longing. Spear’s master was convinced that “it made negroes saucy to know how to read.”³¹ Yet Spear learned to read, despite threats from her owner who “angrily forbade her going again to the schoolmistress for instruction, even under penalty of being suspended by her two thumbs, and severely whipped.”³² Notwithstanding her owner’s threats and objections, Spear managed to acquire the basic tools of reading literacy: “She learned her letters, and became quite interested in attempting to spell.”³³ For Chloe Spear, learning to read required resourcefulness, tenacity, and courage.

For black females like Chloe Spear, the need for bravery and discretion attended the quest for literacy. From the beginning Spear was forced to conceal her desire to read. Later she had to hide her growing reading ability. Circumstances forced Spear to secrete the *Psalter* she purchased for use as a primer in her pocket. Spear’s owner eventually discovered her clandestine activities: “Her master discovered the book in her hand, and inquired what she was doing. She told the truth, and this led to a full disclosure of the

³⁰ Ibid, 23-24.

³¹ Ibid, 26.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid, 25.

case.”³⁴ Spear’s owner forbade the continuance of her studies as a result. Thus, Spear’s honest disclosure did not lead to a positive outcome. Rather her confession resulted in censure and terror, for the master’s threats were “truly an afflictive stroke to poor Chloe.”³⁵ Nevertheless, Spear’s determination to learn to read is clear: “She felt an ardent desire to learn to read, and [that] she was unreasonably opposed in this undertaking.”³⁶ Spear faced significant challenges in pursuit of her educational objective.

Notwithstanding her resolve, Spear “was obliged to submit as well as she could” to her master’s order, and to “altogether to desist from going to school.”³⁷ Spear’s submission, however, should be read in light of her active resistance to her owner’s command. While Spear had to suspend her pursuit of formal instruction she continued to learn independently. Yet again, Spear hid the forbidden book, this time under her pillow, and studied it “when not likely to be detected.” Armed with the book she purchased with her own money and the knowledge of the alphabet she was able to acquire during the brief period of study with the schoolmistress, Spear “used to labour over it, and strive to remember what she had learned, and to find out as much as she could herself.”³⁸ This suggests that Chloe Spear’s skill as a reader was largely “self-taught,” because she received only limited support from others who had already mastered the tools of literacy.³⁹ As a student, Spear may have lacked support and resources but she

³⁴ Ibid, 25.

³⁵ Ibid, 26.

³⁶ Ibid, 29.

³⁷ Ibid, 26.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ The phrase “self-taught,” in regard to African American’s quest to acquire literacy skills and establish avenues for community education and empowerment is fully developed and explored in Heather Andrea Williams, *Self-Taught: African American*

compensated for those deficiencies with diligence, perseverance, and sustained effort. Spear acted to conceal or reveal her desire to read to whites, depending on the circumstances. Spear disclosed her longing to read to a white schoolmistress, even as she hid the desire to read from her owner.

Armed with fierce determination and the occasional support of sympathetic whites, Chloe Spear acquired basic reading skills. During the American Revolution, Bradford, who was by then serving as the Continental agent for Massachusetts, moved his family and his female slave, Chloe, from Boston to Andover. It was there that Chloe Spear met and befriended Mr. Adams, the white man who owned the house where Chloe came to reside with her owner. Adams proved to be sensitive to Spear's moods and understanding of her plight, both of which were "connected with the trials of her involuntary servitude."⁴⁰ Upon observing Spear's in a melancholy, gloomy state, Mr. Adams asked, "What is the matter Chloe, are you sick?" Spear's response, "O Sir, my mind sick," reveals that her distress was related to her thwarted literacy aspirations^[77]. Spear determined that Adams was sympathetic to her unfortunate condition. Spear enlisted Adams as a spiritual guide and religious instructor. Adams "kindly offered to teach her further, and for this purpose gave her permission to go into his room after her master's family had retired, and her work was finished." Spear accepted his offer and "deprived herself of sleep after working hard in the day, that she might gain an object so desirable in her esteem."⁴¹^[78] Thus, Chloe Spear was once again aided in her quest to learn to read by a white mentor.

Education in Slavery and Freedom. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press (2005).

⁴⁰ A Lady of Boston. 35.

⁴¹ Ibid, 36-37.

Despite the limitations and challenges along her path to reading literacy, Spear persisted in her mission to acquire the tools and skills necessary to become a reader. It is not clear that Spear ever achieved writing literacy. In fact the evidence suggests that her oral and reading language skills remained limited despite her efforts: “Her language was extremely broken; so much so, she could never pronounce many words which are in common use.”⁴² Furthermore, “With all her efforts, she was never able to read very correctly.”⁴³ Nevertheless, Spear’s efforts to learn to read and to make use of the tools of literacy for her personal edification and spiritual advancement were not in vain: “She made out the Bible, and some other good books, with such accuracy as to derive from them much satisfaction, and spiritual improvement.”⁴⁴

Spear was described as “favoured by the munificent Author of her existence, with superior intellectual powers, which, if cultivated, would have raised her above many of a different complexion.”⁴⁵ God had endowed Chloe Spear, an enslaved female with extraordinary mental potential and acumen. Spear took the initiative and developed her God-given capacity beyond the limits that were commonly proscribed for bondservants. Spear’s accomplishment of reading literacy, despite the objections of her owner, is evidence of her “superior intellectual powers,” as well as her ingenuity and tenacity. Spear identified and mobilized internal as well as external resources in her quest to learn to read. The desire to read gave Spear the strength and fortitude to defy her owner who strictly forbade her instruction. Spear’s disobedience should be read as resistance to slavery’s dehumanizing effects. Thus, Chloe Spear may be seen as representative of

⁴² Ibid, 73.

⁴³ Ibid, 84.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 84.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 22.

African American women's determination to appropriate and harness the tools of reading literacy as a means of autonomy and self-empowerment[79].

III. Writing

Writing provided the means for political engagement, as well as, self-expression for black women in eighteenth century Massachusetts—one of the few avenues for such activity open to females of African descent. Such was the case for Phillis Wheatley, whose natural inquisitiveness together with her tremendous intellectual capacity formed the basis for her acquisition of the highest degree of literacy available in colonial New England. Within four short years of her traumatic, transatlantic voyage from the shores of Africa to domestic slavery in Boston, she had learned to speak, read, and write English with an astonishing degree of fluency and skill. Wheatley's "extraordinary" writings offer a lens through which it is possible to examine the political motivations, aspirations, and engagements, of African American women in the eighteenth century, despite the limits imposed by systematic social, economic, political and legal disenfranchisement.⁴⁶

Wheatley addressed a number of important political events, personalities, and issues in her writings. Thus, Phillis Wheatley's speech fluency, together with her acquisition and mastery of the tools reading and writing literacy represent more than a significant personal achievement. Wheatley's skill and facility as a writer, though atypical for enslaved women in her time, can still be interpreted as political activity.

Wheatley began her life in slavery in the Wheatley home, which was located on the northeast corner of King Street and Mackerel Lane, in the heart of colonial Boston. The household consisted of John and Susanna Wheatley, their son Nathaniel, his twin

⁴⁶ *Provident Gazette*, September 25, 1773. Phillis Wheatley is described as having an "extraordinary poetical genius."

sister Mary, and a handful of black servants⁴⁷ After little more than one year of living and working in the Wheatley household Phillis was fluent in English. In regard to Phillis Wheatley's rapid mastery of her new language, her owner attested the following:

"Without any Assistance from School Education, and by only what she was taught in the Family, she, in sixteen Months Time from her arrival, attained the English Language, to which she was an utter Stranger before, to Such a Degree, as to read any, the most difficult Parts of the Sacred Writings, to the great Astonishment of all who heard her."⁴⁸

Initially, Phillis Wheatley received instruction from her owners' teenaged daughter Mary, but Phillis soon surpassed the Wheatley's daughter in aptitude and interest. The Wheatleys made provisions for Phillis to receive advanced instruction in classical subjects and she quickly mastered math, physics, astronomy, and Latin but she excelled in writing: "As to her WRITING, her own Curiosity led her to it; and this she learnt in so short a Time, that in the year 1765, she wrote a Letter to the Rev. Mr. Occom, an Indian Minister, while in England."⁴⁹

Despite her tremendous intellectual capacity, Phillis Wheatley was plagued with poor health throughout her life. Rather than being prized as many slaves were for physical strength, stamina, and prowess, Wheatley was valued for her intellectual and political acumen. When the first Stamp Act riots erupted in Boston in 1766, the worst disturbances of pre-Revolutionary Boston exploded right outside her door. Two years later, in 1768, Wheatley wrote a poem blessing the English King after he repealed the

⁴⁷ Robinson, 12. Robinson identifies the northeastern intersection of King Street and Mackerel Lane as today's Kilby Street.

⁴⁸ John Wheatley, *Preface; Poems on Various Subjects Religious and Moral*, by Phillis Wheatley. Denver: W. H. Lawrence and Co. (1887), 8. Phillis Wheatley's acquisition of English language fluency and reading literacy skills are discussed here.

⁴⁹ Ibid. John Wheatley references the non-extant 1765 letter from Phillis Wheatley to Samsom Occom here.

legislation that had sparked such bitter debate and unleashed violence among colonials.⁵⁰ In writing the phrase, “Your Subjects hope/The crown upon your head may flourish long,” Wheatley, an enslaved woman, identifies herself not as chattel but as a royal subject. With the words, “May George below’d of all the nations round/Live and by earths and heavens blessings crown’d/May heaven protect and Guard him from on high/And at his presence every evil fly,” Phillis Wheatley, an enslaved female, claimed the right to pronounce approval upon the actions of a crowned monarch as her own.

Wheatley also addressed the theme of liberty in her writings. In her poem, “America,” Wheatley reveals her understanding of the importance of freedom for all Americans, especially those of African descent: “Thy Power, O Liberty, makes strong the weak /And (wond’rous instinct) Ethiopians Speak”⁵¹ For Wheatley, liberty was an empowering force that fortified the oppressed to such a great extent that even enslaved Africans who had no political rights in the colony could raise their voices and express their views. Wheatley’s conception of liberty extended from the individual to the commonwealth. True freedom would spur colonial growth until it rivaled that of the empire: “Arise my sons with one consent arise/Lest distant continents with vult’ring eyes/Should charge America with Negligence/ They praise Industry but no pride commence/To raise their own Profusion, O Brittain See/By this New England will increase like thee.”⁵²

Freedom was clearly a preoccupation in Wheatley’s writings, as evinced in the opening lines of one of her last published poems: “LO! Freedom comes. Th’ prescient

⁵⁰ Kuncio and Wheatley, 292.

⁵¹ Ibid, 293.

⁵² Ibid.

Muse foretold, /All Eyes th' accomplish'd Prophecy behold." Published in the aftermath of the American Revolutionary War, the poem proclaims: "So Freedom comes array'd with Charms divine, /And in her Train Commerce and Plenty shine." Thus freedom is more than a moral or spiritual virtue. Freedom has tangible, material benefits. In the wake of true liberty, "Commerce and Plenty Shine." Freedom has social and political advantages as well: "To every Realm shall *Peace* her Charms display, /And Heavenly *Freedom* spread her golden Ray."⁵³ While freedom may have its origins in a higher realm than that inhabited by mere mortals, Wheatley's poems projected her belief that freedom would cast a glow on every dimension of human experience—social, economic, spiritual and political. For Phillis Wheatley, writing was a way to assert and declare her value in a world that was hostile to blacks.⁵⁴ Thus signifying "the conviction of the enslaved that literacy could bring power."⁵⁵

IV. The Politics of Literacy: Black Women and the Public Sphere

The *Memoir* of Chloe Spear's life reveals that the desire to learn to read and the acquisition of reading skill provided a basis for free African American women's engagement with the public sphere in eighteenth century Massachusetts. Spear met and married her husband Cesar around the time of the American Revolution, while both were still enslaved.⁵⁶ The details of Chloe Spear's manumission are limited but "Such was her fidelity in the family that her master gave her a certificate of manumission, which was to

⁵³ Phillis Wheatley, "Liberty and Peace." Boston: Warden and Russell (1784).

⁵⁴ Robinson, 126.

⁵⁵ Monaghan, 242.

⁵⁶ Annie Haven Thwing, *Inhabitants and Estates of the Town of Boston, 1630-1800, and The Crooked and Narrow Streets of Boston, 1630-1822* (cd rom). Boston: New England Historic Genealogical Society and Massachusetts Historical Society (2001). Includes detailed information from the marriage record of "Cesar, Servant to Nathan Spear & Cloe Servant to Capt. Bradford Negroes" married by Rev. Samuel Stillman October 17, 1776.

take effect at a specified period not very distant; but soon after by a law of the Commonwealth, all the slaves in the State were manumitted.”⁵⁷ Whatever the exact circumstances of her emancipation, in 1798, Cesar and Chloe purchased a small boarding house for seven hundred dollars, which consisted of half of a three-story dwelling and included a small yard on White Bread Alley in Boston’s North End. They had not lived there long when Cesar became seriously ill. He died in 1806.

In addition to owning property, Spear was regular in her attendance of public worship services in Boston. Initially she was a member of the New North Congregational Church but Spear left the church because the congregation did not sponsor evening meetings. Later, Spear joined Second Baptist Church in Boston, which came to be known as the Baldwin Place Baptist Church. Once a member of Second Baptist, Spear began to attend the evening lectures presented by the Pastor—The Reverend Thomas Gair. Spear seized every opportunity to engage Gair in discussions about religion.⁵⁸ Spear was a member of Second Baptist for more than two decades.⁵⁹ However, she was not the first person of African descent to unite with Second Baptist. By the mid-eighteenth century there were black members of the congregation:

“September 4, 1744, Mr. Ephaim Bosworth’s negro man, Cuffee, whose character, as given to the church by his master and mistress, was well approved of, and much to our liking, he, the said Cuffee, being called forth, made a full, clear and satisfactory declaration of the work of grace wrought in his soul, and, by the unanimous concurrence of the church was received, baptized, and taken into full communion this day.”⁶⁰

⁵⁷ “Biography of Mrs. Chloe Spear: Ordinations,” *The Massachusetts Baptist Missionary Magazine*, 4:5 (Mar 1815), 157.

⁵⁸ *A Lady of Boston*. 49.

⁵⁹ “Biography of Mrs. Chloe Spear,” 157.

⁶⁰ Thomas Ford Caldicott, *Concise History of the Baldwin Place Baptist Church, Together With the Articles of Faith and Practice; Also... Calendar of the Present Members*. Boston: W. H. Hutchinson (1854), 21.

Later, the Sunday School of Second Baptist gained the following distinction: “The first class of colored children ever brought under Sabbath School instruction in Boston, was taught in this school. The youngest pupil of the class, was after a few years, made, as their is good reason to believe, a subject of saving grace, was subsequently baptized and added to the church.”⁶¹ It is not surprising, then, that Spear found a spiritual haven within that congregation.

The desire to grow intellectually and spiritually emboldened Spear to engage in discussion with her pastor, the Reverend Thomas Gair, a learned white clergyman. Gair, a native of Boston, served a short tenure as the fourth pastor of Second Baptist Church. Gair was a popular minister and the congregation grew under his leadership: “Such was the success of Mr. Gair’s ministry that it was necessary to enlarge the meeting-house for the accommodation of the increasing congregation.”⁶² After only two years with the congregation, Gair succumbed to a fever and died at the age of thirty-six. Dr. Thomas Baldwin, a native of Canaan, New Hampshire, succeeded him. Spear’s status as both property owner and church member, together with her ability to read, provided the foundational for her engagement with a wider public sphere in Boston.

Following her husband’s death, Chloe Spear opened her home regularly to persons of like-minded faith. It seems that Spear had greater freedom to use her house as a religious meeting place after she was widowed. Spear’s industry and determination were revealed through her efforts to use the home she worked to purchase with resources gleaned from the fruit of her own labor as a domestic worker and laundress as a space for

⁶¹ Ibid, 32.

⁶² Ibid, 27.

public engagement and discourse: “Her doors were opened for religious meetings, and many, not only of her own colour, but also of her other friends, found it pleasant and profitable, to visit their widowed sister Chloe, and hold converse with her upon those things which relate to another and better world.”⁶³ Apparently Spear hosted whites as well as blacks at gatherings in her boarding house, thus creating a space for interracial dialogue and fellowship.

Discussions at Spear’s home often focused on spiritual topics, such as personal piety and eschatology. Among the individuals entertained at these gatherings was another beloved pastor—The Reverend Doctor Thomas Baldwin: “Dr. Baldwin, the honoured successor of Mr. Gair, in the oversight of the church used to esteem it a privilege to participate in exercises of this nature, under her peaceful roof.”⁶⁴ Spear also hosted white women and her public engagement as host to other faithful pilgrims reflected the racial conventions of her day: “Occasionally, pious ladies, of the first respectability, were pleased to make her an afternoon visit; when, with her accustomed modesty, she would wait on them, and then take her own tea by herself.”⁶⁵ Racial hierarchies often circumscribed black women’s engagement in public discourse and activity. Spear opened her home to whites. She extended hospitality and offered refreshments to whites. She even took the liberty of discussing religious topics with white women and men who shared her faith but Spear was careful in so doing not to violate the racial boundaries of the society in which she lived. Spear did not eat at the same table as the whites she

⁶³ A Lady of Boston. 71-72.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 72.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

received as visitors in her home. Rather, she ate alone.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, the ability to read and discuss scripture, together with the desire to promote interracial spiritual discourse, provided Chloe Spear both the impetus and the occasion to engage in public religious dialogue with clergy and laypersons alike^[80].

Likewise, Phillis Wheatley's gifts as a writer provided unprecedented access to an international public. While a number of Wheatley's individual poems were printed in New England newspapers, Wheatley was unsuccessful in securing a Boston publisher. She submitted numerous proposals to Boston newspapers but each of her proposals was rejected.⁶⁷ Wheatley was forced to look beyond America's shores in her efforts to publish a volume that would accomplish two important objectives at once. Publication would provide the means to extend her engagement with a larger public, thereby expressing her personal and political sentiments to a wider audience. Publication would also open an avenue for financial support that could lead to economic independence and autonomy.

Wheatley's writings brought her to the attention of important international figures, among them Selena Hastings, the Countess of Huntingdon. Wheatley's first letter to "her Ladyship" was penned in response to the death of the noted British evangelist, George Whitefield. Whitefield, in addition to making a name for himself as a revivalist during the Great Awakening, was the Countess's personal chaplain. Wheatley wrote to Hastings to her condolences and to promote her poetry:

"Most noble Lady,
The Occasion of my addressing your Ladship will I hope, apologize for
this my boldness in doing it. it is to enclose a few lines on the decease of your

⁶⁶ Ibid, 71-72.

⁶⁷ *Boston Censor* (February 29, March 14, and April 11, 1772); *Boston's Evening Post and General Advertiser* (30 October; 6, 27 November; 4, 11, 18 December, 1779); *The Boston Magazine* (September, 1784), p. 488.

worthy chaplain, the Rev'd Mr. Whitefield, in the loss of whom I sincerely sympathize with your Ladship: but your great loss which is his Greater gain, will, I hope, meet with infinite reparation, in the presence of God, the Divine Benefactor whose image you bear by filial imitation. The Tongues of the Learned are insufficient, much less the pen of an untutor'd African, to paint in lively character, the excellencies of this Citizen of Zion! I beg an Interest in your Ladship's Prayer and am,
 With great humility your Ladship's most obedient Humble Servant
 Phillis Wheatley⁶⁸

Wheatley's elegy to Whitefield described the impact the celebrated preacher had on those who heard his fiery sermons: "He freely offer'd to the num'rous throng/That on his lips with list'ning pleasure hung." Wheatley's poem also reflected an egalitarian perspective in which Whitefield's message contained edification for every segment of colonial society:

"Take him, ye wretched, for your only good," "Take him ye starving sinners, for your food;" "Ye thirsty, come to this life-giving stream," "Ye preachers, take him for your joyful theme;" "Take him my dear Americans, he said," "Be your complaints on his kind bosom laid;" "Take him, ye Africans, he longs for you," "Impartial Saviour is his title due;" "Wash'd in the fountain of redeeming blood," "You shall be sons, and kings, and priests to God."⁶⁹

Wheatley's verse urged all to heed and embrace the message Whitefield espoused, whether wretched sinners, reverend clergy, colonial subjects, or enslaved Africans. All could be transformed by the impartial message of salvation, through which everyone, including oppressed blacks, could be elevated to the status of "sons, and kings, and priests to God."

⁶⁸ Phillis Wheatley, "Letter from Phillis Wheatley to the Countess of Huntingdon, October 25, 1770," in Phillis Wheatley, Susanna Wheatley, and Sara Dunlap Jackson, "Letters of Phillis and Susanna Wheatley," *The Journal of Negro History*, 57:2 (Apr., 1972), 212.

⁶⁹ Wheatley and Jackson, *Poems on Various Subjects Religious and Moral*, 21-22.

Wheatley continued her correspondence with the Countess of Huntingdon, writing to announce her arrival in London. Wheatley was eager to finally meet her benevolent supporter during the visit but was frustrated in her plans:

“It is with pleasure I acquaint your Ladyship of my safe arrival in London after a fine passage of 5 weeks in the Ship London with my young master...have brought a letter from Rich.d Carey Esqr. but was Disappointed by your absence of the honour of waiting upon your Ladyship with it. I would have inclosed it, but was doubtful of the safety of the conveyance.”⁷⁰

Wheatley coveted the Countess’s acceptance, as well as her support: “I should think myself very happy in seeing your Ladyship, and if you was so desirous of the Image of the Author as to propose it for a Frontspiece I flatter myself that you would accept the Reality.”⁷¹ The tone of Wheatley’s correspondence was humble and self-effacing in some respects and bold in others. Wheatley clearly understood the value of flattery—both to her patrons and to herself. The same Phillis Wheatley, who described herself as “Your Ladship’s most obedient Humble Servant” and “an untutor’d African,” took the liberty to send her unsolicited work to a peeress of the realm. Wheatley also prized the encouragement she received from the Countess and wrote that “Being encourage’d by your Ladyship’s Indulgence, I the more feebly resign to the world these Juvenile productions.”⁷² Additionally, Wheatley’s correspondence expressed her gratitude to the Countess of Huntingdon. The support of an elite white patroness was of inestimable value to the black poetess: “I...am not insensible, that under the patronage of your Ladyship...my feeble efforts will be shielded from the severe trials of uppity

⁷⁰ Wheatley, Wheatley, and Jackson, 214.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid, 215.

Criticism.”⁷³ The potential for white backlash against Wheatley’s literary pursuits constituted a serious threat. Nevertheless, Wheatley clearly understood the ways that the patronage of elite whites could serve as a buffer against racist censure and dismissal. Wheatley’s “feeble” resignation, thus, seems more posturing than fact. Her work was published in London a few short months later. Although Wheatley did not ever meet her patroness in person, her correspondence with the Countess of Huntingdon reveals the ways that writing literacy provided access to an international community of elite whites, whose support, encouragement, and acceptance validated Wheatley’s talent and personal worth without regard to her chattel status. The dedication of Wheatley’s published volume reads: “To the Right Honorable the COUNTESS OF HUNTINGTON The following POEMS Are most respectfully inscribed, by her much obliged, very humble, and devoted servant.”⁷⁴ Wheatley knew when and how to be respectful, humble, and self-effacing in dealing with her white patrons but there was another side to her personality: “she was also an ambitious and worldly-wise woman, acquainted with notables of her time, and capable of unabashedly representing her own interests.”⁷⁵

Concerning her time in London, Wheatley wrote: “I was reciev'd in England with such kindness Complaisance, and so many marks of esteem and real Friendship, as astonishes me on the reflection.”⁷⁶ While in London, Wheatley was acknowledged as a celebrity. She visited and was visited by a host of famous personalities:

“I was no more than 6 weeks there. -- Was introduced to Lord Dartmouth and had near half an hour's conversation with his Lordship, with whom was Alderman

⁷³ Ibid, 214-215,

⁷⁴ Wheatley and Jackson, *Poems on Various Subjects Religious and Moral*, 3.

⁷⁵ Isani, “255.

⁷⁶ Phillis Wheatley, “Letter from Phillis Wheatley to David Wooster, 18 October 1773,” Hugh Upham Clark collection, MHS.

Kirkman, -- Then to Lord Lincoln, who visited me at my own Lodgings with the Famous Dr. Solander, who accompany'd Mr. Banks in his late expedition round the World.”⁷⁷

William Legge, second earl of Dartmouth, was a man of powerful religious conviction. In 1766, he met Samson Occom and the school Occom worked to found would be named Dartmouth College, after the earl. It is likely that Wheatley spent at least some of her audience with Lord Dartmouth in London discussing evangelical religion. Wheatley’s meeting with Lord Dartmouth, Secretary of State for the American Department in London, represented quite an achievement for an enslaved female. Wheatley had written a poem in his honor, which was included in her published volume. Once again, Wheatley’s preoccupation with freedom is clearly evident in her writing. Concerning Lord Dartmouth she wrote:

“HAIL happy day, when, smiling like the morn,
Fair *Freedom* rose *New-England* to adorn:
The northern clime beneath her genial ray,
Dartmouth, congratulates thy blissful sway:
Elate with hope her race no longer mourns,
Each soul expands, each grateful bosom burns,
While in thine hand with pleasure we behold
The silken reins, and *Freedom's* charms unfold.”⁷⁸

For Wheatley, however, freedom was not merely the right of high-ranking colonial officials. Wheatley thought freedom’s “charms”—of grievances finally redressed, of hope restored—should be extended to oppressed women and men for whom slavery was not simply metaphor or rhetoric:

“No more, *America*, in mournful strain
Of wrongs, and grievance unredress’d complain,
No longer shall thou dread the iron chain,
Which wanton *Tyranny* with lawless hand

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Wheatley and Jackson, 66.

Has made, and with it meant t' enslave the land.”⁷⁹

According to Wheatley, chattel slavery was literally the “iron chain” created by a “lawless hand” of “wanton *tyranny*.” Wheatley’s verse subtly indicted those American colonials who mourned and complained, likening their predicament as British subjects to “slavery.” Wheatley’s poem, then, may be read as the powerful testimony of one who possessed intimate knowledge of slavery’s tyranny and chains.

Wheatley’s poem contained other insights gleaned from her personal experience of bondage:

“Should you, my lord, while you peruse my song,
 Wonder from whence my love of *Freedom* sprung,
 Whence flow the wishes for the common good,
 By feeling hearts alone best understood,
 I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate
 Was snatch'd from *Afric's* fancy'd happy seat:
 What pangs excruciating must molest,
 What sorrows labor in my parents' breast?
 Steel'd was that soul, and by no misery mov'd,
 That from a father seiz'd his babe belov'd:
 Such, such my case. And can I then but pray
 Others may never feel tyrannic sway?”⁸⁰

Wheatley’s verse was as much an appeal for justice as it was a commendation of Dartmouth. Within its stanzas Wheatley revealed her deep desire that other persons of African descent would “never feel the tyrannic sway” of being stolen from kin, culture, and community. For Wheatley, freedom from slavery embodied “the common good” that could be best understood and appreciated by those denied its benefits. Wheatley’s “love of *Freedom*” was rooted in her experience of capture, removal from her native land, and forced migration to Massachusetts. That same “love of *Freedom*” grew to maturity during

⁷⁹ Ibid, 66-67.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 67.

Wheatley's life of bondage in New England. In Wheatley's view, the freedom Lord Dartmouth's political ascension represented must be extended to those most debased by the colonial social, economic, and political order.

For his part, Lord Dartmouth recognized and affirmed Wheatley's talents by making several recommendations for her enrichment: "The Earl of Dartmouth made me a Compliment of 5 Guineas, and desir'd me to get the whole of Mr. Pope's Works, as the best he could recommend to my perusal, this I did, also got Hudibrass, Don Quixot, & Gay's Tatler -- was presented with a Folio Edition of Milton's Paradise Lost, printed on a Silver Type."⁸¹ Wheatley also met Dr. Daniel Solander, the famed Swedish botanist, and Sir Joseph Banks, an English naturalist and patron of the sciences, while in London. In 1768, Solander and Banks participated in an expedition to Tahiti led by James Cook. Wheatley also made the acquaintance of "Mrs. Palmer a Poetess," and "an accomplishd Lady," during her London visit. Like Wheatley, Alicia Tindal Palmer was a writer, although Palmer's work had not yet been published when Wheatley met her in London.

Granville Sharp, the noted English author and abolitionist, accompanied

Wheatley:

"To the Tower & Show'd the Lions, Panthers, Tigers, &c. the Horse Armoury, small Armoury, the Crowns, Sceptres, Diadems, the Font for christening the Royal Family. Saw Westminster Abbey, British Museum Coxe's Museum, Saddler's wells, Greenwich Hospital, Park and Chapel, The royal Observatory at Greenwich, &c. &c. too many things & Places to trouble you with in a Letter"⁸²

Phillis Wheatley met many prominent people and visited a number of popular sites during her visit to London. It was Wheatley's skill and talent as a writer, together with her gift for self-promotion that facilitated public interaction with an international

⁸¹ Wheatley, "Letter from Phillis Wheatley to David Wooster, 18 October 1773."

⁸² Ibid.

community of men and women of letters. Preparations were underway to present Wheatley to the King and Queen of England as soon as the Court resumed but plans for her London launch were cut short by news of Susanna Wheatley's illness.

Phillis Wheatley's writings brought her to the attention of an international community of letters, as evinced by the fact that several British newspapers and magazines reviewed her book. On September 16, 1773, the *London Chronicle* announced Wheatley's publication:

Dedicated, by permission, to the Right Hon. the
Countess of Huntingdon.
This Day was published,
Price 2 s. sewed, or 2 s. 6d. neatly bound, adorned
with an elegant engraved likeness of the Author,
A Volume of POEMS, on various Subjects,
RELIGIOUS and MORAL.
By PHILLIS WHEATLEY,
Negro Servant to Mr. John Wheatley of Boston.⁸³

In all, nine British publications reviewed Wheatley's work.⁸⁴ This was remarkable given the fact that Wheatley was no longer in London when the reviews were published. It is also worth noting that all of the reviews were positive.⁸⁵ Positive reviews, however, did not shield Wheatley or her talents from evaluation based on prevailing racial stereotypes. One review opined:

“The Negroes of Africa are generally treated as a dull, ignorant, and ignoble race of men, fit only to be slaves, and incapable of any considerable attainments in the liberal arts and sciences. A poet or poetess amongst them, of any tolerable genius, would be a prodigy in literature. Phillis Wheatley, the author of these poems, is this literary Phaenomenon... The pieces, of which this little volume consists, are the productions of her leisure moments. And though they are not remarkably

⁸³ *London Chronicle*, 34 (Sept., 16-18, 1773), 277.

⁸⁴ See Isani, 144-149, for a compilation of British reviews of Wheatley's book.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 145.

beautiful, they have too much merit to be thrown aside, as trifling and worthless effusions.”⁸⁶

Another review stated:

“These poems display no astonishing power of genius; but when we consider them as the productions of a young untutored African, who wrote them after six months casual study of the English language and of writing, we cannot suppress our admiration of talents so vigorous and lively. We are the more surprised too, as we find her verses interspersed with the poetical names of the ancients, which she has in every instance used with strict propriety.”⁸⁷

One review expressed grave concern that such a gifted young woman was still a slave:

“Youth, innocence, and piety, united with genius, have not yet been able to restore her to the condition and character with which she was invested by the Great Author of her being. So powerful is custom in rendering the heart insensible to the rights of nature, and the claims of excellence!”⁸⁸ Another chided the practice of slaveholding in Massachusetts and campaigned for Wheatley’s freedom: “The people of Boston boast themselves chiefly on their principles of liberty. One such act as the purchase of her freedom, would, in our opinion, have done more honour than hanging a thousand trees with ribbons and emblems.”⁸⁹ Friends and patrons that Phillis Wheatley met in London many of whom had abolitionist sentiments, also agitated for her freedom. Within weeks of her return, Wheatley, with the support and influence of friends she had made while in London, secured her freedom. For Phillis Wheatley, freedom was an outgrowth of extraordinary personal achievement, coupled with international patronage and support. Even before Phillis Wheatley’s chattel status was ameliorated, the poetess used her writing skill to

⁸⁶ Ibid, 145-146.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 146-147.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 146.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 148.

participate in public discourse about political issues in interracial and international contexts.

Within such a context the ability of a black woman to acquire the highest skills of literacy reveals important dimensions of black women's aspirations for freedom, self-determination, and community building that have heretofore not been fully considered. Phillis Wheatley's deep engagement in the process of cultural production is evident in her letters, poems, and elegies. Therefore Wheatley's writing and publishing may be viewed, not only as self-expression but as community building and sustaining.

In particular, Wheatley's correspondence with Obour Tanner is evidence of African American women's efforts to create and maintain community through writing. Of Wheatley and Tanner's correspondence, only seven letters have survived and those were all penned by Wheatley; none of Tanner's missives to Wheatley have been recovered. Nevertheless, this body of correspondence is significant because its survival calls into question long held images of Phillis Wheatley as totally isolated from other blacks. Wheatley's letters to Tanner also serve as a model for the opportunities and limitations for formation of an early black women's writing community:

"As a broken, one-sided narrative in which letters are often sent back, delayed, or not received, large gaps in time--sometimes as much as four years--mark the desire for response with an ever-present deferral. Hand delivered by a third party (usually male), they are prone to violation and interception. Perhaps more importantly, each letter is sent "saved by" someone, and "in care of" which marks the problematics of ownership for black women slaves, a qualification which framed even their most intimate attempts to communicate with each other. The sense of surveillance which collapses the distinction between public and private confers on this collection of correspondence "the sense of an audience larger than the letter's recipient"."⁹⁰

⁹⁰ Katherine Clay Bassard, "The Daughter's Arrival: The Earliest Black Women's Writing Community," *Callaloo* (19:2), Emerging Women Writers: A Special Issue. (Spring, 1996), 515-516.

The challenges and potentials to African American women's attempts to forge community through writing were myriad and daunting. Among the challenges were the real possibilities for "delay," "violation," "interception," or failed delivery altogether. Despite these challenges, the survival of Wheatley's letters to Tanner provides powerful evidence of black women's desire to connect with each other intimately over time and space. Phillis Wheatley could not "assume a large, literate audience of black women as readers" of her letter, poems or elegies. Nevertheless Wheatley's letters to Tanner strongly suggest her hope and belief in the potential that a community of literate black women who could read and write would "revive in better times." Thus the prospect of an ever-expanding band of literate sisters was foundational for Wheatley's literary production.⁹¹

The ability to speak English constituted the acquisition of a valuable skill for countless enslaved females. The ability to read gave free black women like Chloe Spear an opportunity to meaningfully engage in an interracial public sphere. The ability to write provided Phillis Wheatley with access to an international public sphere while she was still enslaved. Writing was also a vehicle to self-advocacy that ultimately led to Wheatley's freedom. Chloe Spear and Phillis Wheatley represent the possibilities available to black women in eighteenth century Massachusetts to acquire and use the tools of literacy to contest the debilitating effects of race, gender and class oppression. Black women's acquisition and use of the tools of literacy also signals their desire to create community through engagement with a broad public sphere. Despite the daunting limitations to literacy acquisition imposed on black women in eighteenth century

⁹¹ Ibid, 515.

Massachusetts, the desire for liberty, equality and self-determination is evident in their mastery of speaking, reading, and writing skills. Literate black women used their skills to participate in public discourses about freedom—an issue of ultimate concern to blacks in Massachusetts, and throughout the North American colonies. Black women also employed literacy in an effort to justify their claims upon the language of liberty while still “entangled with the yoke of bondage.”

Chapter Five:

God is No Respector of Persons: Black Women, Slavery and Religion in Massachusetts

*Good Offices to be done for oppressed and afflicted Slaves. These have often occur'd, without my making in these Records any Mention of them.*¹

Cotton Mather

*Though despis'd on earth on account of our colour, we have this Consolation, if he enables us to deserve it. "That God dwells in the humble & contrite heart."*²

Phillis Wheatley

Although prominent, prolific ministers such as Cotton Mather may have neglected to keep detailed accounts of religious encounters with enslaved blacks, colonial records are not completely devoid of evidence concerning black women's religious experiences. While Mather viewed enslaved persons as subjects for whom he might condescend to do "good offices," black women viewed themselves as spiritual agents whose faith provided the blessed consolation and assurance, "That God dwells in the humble & contrite heart." For black women, the eternal God of Hebrew patriarchs and Christian apostles lived not only in high and holy places, but also abided with the spirits of the lowly and penitent. In colonial Massachusetts, few could be considered lowlier than enslaved women. Despite their triply disadvantaged status as females in a thoroughly patriarchal society, blacks in a world of white privilege, and servile laborers in a community dominated by elites, African American women laid claim to Christian faith and used religion to assert their rights as persons created in God's own image, which served to counteract the demoralizing effects of chattel slavery and challenge slavery on spiritual grounds.

¹ Cotton Mather, *Diary of Cotton Mather*, vol. 2, American Classics Series. Boston: The Society (1911), 769.

² Robinson, 327. Wheatley references Isaiah 57:15 in her letter to John Thornton: "For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones." (*King James Version*)

Social relations in eighteenth century New England conformed to hierarchical principles that had their basis in Christian doctrine, teaching and practice. Thus, it was divinely ordained that some individuals would occupy an elevated station in the world and some could rightfully be called the elect of God. This election was made evident and reinforced by both scripture and custom. In the New England Puritan mind, God ordained social relations to conform to a certain hierarchy, with male masters as head of households, communities, congregations, and even the colony itself. All others were to be subordinate, then, to the authority of privileged, propertied men, as divinely ordered by scripture, law, and custom. Elite males occupied the top tier in a society that ranked individuals according to racial, gender, and class standing. Black females inhabited the lowest rung. To profess Christian faith, then, was to accept and uphold social status quo in most instances.

However, enslaved women and men did not necessarily equate the spiritual mastery of Jesus Christ with the authority of their earthly masters. Thus blacks' embrace of Christian faith may be viewed as an avenue of resistance to slavery. For slaves, Jesus Christ—the true Lord and Master of all—ruled not only black believers but also the whites that enslaved them. African American women who accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, were baptized into the faith, and became members of Christian congregations, used religion to assert their rights as persons created in God's own image, to counteract the demoralizing effects of chattel slavery, and to challenge slavery on spiritual grounds. Religion, then, gave black women access to an experience of soul freedom that contrasted sharply with the experience of bondage and oppression.

Colonial records recount the occurrence of slave baptisms in Massachusetts as

early as the first half of the seventeenth century: “A Negro maid belonging to Mr. Stoughton of Dorchester, Massachusetts, who being well affirmed by divers years experience for sound knowledge and true godliness was received into the church and baptized.”³ Cotton Mather himself made a brief reference to the baptism of an enslaved woman: “Being to baptize two Negro’s; I would make it an occasion to glorify the great Savior of all men, in several Instances; especially in such Admonitions to that black Part of the Flock, as my be needful for them.”⁴ Lucy Terry Prince was baptized at the First Congregational Church of Deerfield, on June 15, 1735.⁵ Later “She was admitted to the fellowship of the church—full communion—on August 19, 1744, when she was about nineteen.”⁶

Black women’s baptism and church membership was not confined to Dorchester and Deerfield. Colonial church records reveal other instances of enslaved women’s participation in congregational life in Massachusetts. “Elizabeth Woodby, A Negro,” was received into covenant at Second Church in Boston on December 13, 1725.⁷ Likewise “Maria a Negro Woman belongs to Mrs. Miars” and “Tano a Negro Woman belonging to Mrs. Hochman” were baptized at Second Church in 1728, together with Johny, a free Negro.⁸ On February 17, 1750, “Esther Negroe Servant of Estes Hatch” was baptized at

³ John Winthrop, *A Journal of the Transactions and Occurrences in the Settlement of Massachusetts and the other New England colonies, from the year 1630-1644* (1790), 219.

⁴ Mather, *Diary of Cotton Mather*, vol. 2, 43. Here Mather refers to the baptism of James and Ruth, two slaves whose names appear in the records of Second Church (Boston), vol. 2A, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Mass.

⁵ Proper, 15.

⁶ Gerzina, 81.

⁷ Baptisms and Admissions, 1717-1741, Second Church (Boston, Mass.) records, vol. 5, MHS.

⁸ *Ibid.*

King's Chapel in Boston. Estes' baptism was a private affair on account of her "being dangerously ill."⁹ Binah and Bess, both "Negroe Servants of James Gordon" were also baptized as adults at King's Chapel on February 12, 1752. Their owners, James and Elizabeth Gordon, and Christian Wainwright—all members of King's Chapel, sponsored Binah and Bess's baptisms.¹⁰ Baptism and church membership quite possibly provided enslaved black women with a sense of involvement in the wider spiritual community, which may have served to counteract some of the more demoralizing effects of chattel slavery.

Enslaved women and men who embraced Christianity in eighteenth century Massachusetts did so within the context of a contentious theological discourse. Slavery had its adherents and detractors, each of whom justified their beliefs on religious grounds. Enslaved women in eighteenth century Massachusetts encountered a particular form of Christianity that was rooted in Puritanism, a brand of reformed Protestantism that emerged from the impulses of English settlers intent upon "purifying" the Church of England. The Puritans who settled in New England were largely Congregationalists. As such, they embraced a system of church governance that placed local congregations at the center of religious, political, and social life. Thus the English colonies of North America generally, and New England in particular, developed into "the most thoroughly Protestant, Reformed, and Puritan commonwealths in the world."¹¹ The Puritans who settled Massachusetts came with a clear mission: to cleanse the "visible church," and

⁹ Register of Baptisms, 1703-1843, King's Chapel (Boston, Mass.) records, vol. 39, MHS.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*. New Haven: Yale University Press (1972), 124.

thereby created religious communities that would conform to an eschatological vision of divine sovereignty and order. Their goals included, first and foremost, purging the church of “popish” elements and establishing practices of worship and church order consistent with biblical principles. They also sought to implement and teach reformed doctrine. Finally, these Puritans wanted to revive a commitment to deep personal piety in clergy and laypersons alike.¹² This threefold commitment to polity, theology, and piety made the Puritans of Massachusetts evangelical in their spiritual outlook and perspective. Their plan was the reclamation and salvation of God’s chosen people, one soul at a time.

Most Puritans considered Christian faith to be a “decisive, renovating commitment.”¹³ Such commitment found its clearest articulation and expression in their conviction that individual congregations should consist solely of men and women who could give conclusive evidence of complete conversion from the ways of the world. This personal transformation would be manifest through a life of humility, grace, and good works, in accordance with divine law and principles.

While New England’s Puritans held a deep sense of commitment to purifying the church, most saw little need to purge their communities of the practice of slave holding or slave trading. In fact, many justified slavery on religious grounds. New England Puritans invoked the Mosaic Law from the Old Testament to defend their practice of a form of slavery in which bondwomen and bondmen were considered members of the master’s household and family: "Abraham...had some Hundreds of Servants belonging to his [Household]: He obtained, that the Slaves of his [Household] should Know the Way of

¹² Ibid, 125. Here Ahlstrom presents a fuller discussion of the contours of the Puritan mission in the English North American Colonies.

¹³ Ibid, 128.

the Lord: He then Commanded, that they should Keep that Way."¹⁴ By linking the practice of household slavery in New England to the biblical narrative of Abraham, the great patriarch who was known as the father of the faithful, Puritans were able to trace the practice of slave holding back to biblical antecedents. New Testament writings were also used as a basis for justifying slavery. Galatians 6:5-8 was one of the scriptures Puritans could use to justify their God-given right to hold certain women and men in perpetual servitude:

“Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ; Not with eyeservice, as menpleasers; but as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart; With good will doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men: Knowing that whatsoever good thing any man doeth, the same shall he receive of the Lord, whether he be bond or free.”¹⁵

Thus the practice of chattel slavery in Massachusetts was undergirded and sustained by biblical principles.

Most Puritans had little difficulty with slavery, which was sanctioned by religious statutes as well as colonial law. In the Puritan mind, God had given the heathens—Negroes as well as Indians—to them as part of their inheritance. Furthermore, many Puritans viewed the enslavement of Africans as an act of mercy by which the souls of slaves could be saved from eternal damnation, for “without some degree of acquaintance with the doctrine of the Gospel, eternal misery in another state of existence was inevitable.”¹⁶ According to Lorenzo Greene, “Slavery was a sacred privilege the

¹⁴ Cotton Mather, *The Negro Christianized*. Boston (1706), 9.

¹⁵ Cotton Mather, *A Good Master Well Served*. Boston: Green (1696), 3.

¹⁶ Samuel Dexter, “Letter of Samuel Dexter to Dr. Belknap,” *Collections*, Fifth Series, III, 384, MHS.

Almighty was pleased to grant His Elect, and they quoted extensively from the Bible in support of their position.”¹⁷ Thus, Puritans used scripture together with a sense of divine election to bolster claims that Christianity and slavery were compatible.

By the early eighteenth century, this position would receive clear, strong articulation in the writings of Cotton Mather, who saw no conflict between the practice of slavery and Christianity. A prominent Puritan minister, Cotton Mather was a descendant of notable Puritan clerics. His father, Increase Mather, as well as his maternal and paternal grandfathers, John Cotton and Richard Mather, were all Puritan ministers. Born in Boston in 1623, Cotton Mather attended Boston Latin School and Harvard College. After graduating from Harvard, Mather joined his father as assistant pastor of North Church.¹⁸ In 1685, Cotton Mather became full pastor of the congregation. An influential religious leader, Cotton Mather was a friend to several of the judges responsible for hearing the Salem Witch Trials (1692-1693), among them Samuel Sewall, an opponent of slavery. Mather was also a prolific writer who authored numerous books and pamphlets, several of which addressed the relationship between Christianity and slavery.

Mather was one of a number of elite white Christian men who engaged in a contentious discourse concerning the relationship between slavery and religion. Mather held a hierarchical view of society in which order was more valuable than equality. Mather articulated three levels of society: conjugal, parental, and herile. Within and between each of those levels there were higher and lower orders—husbands above wives,

¹⁷ Lorenzo Greene, “Slave-Holding New England and Its Awakening,” 500.

¹⁸ North Church, also known as Old North Church, was originally a congregational church but in 1802 it became a Unitarian congregation, and eventually came to be known as Second Church, Boston. In addition to Increase and Cotton Mather, the congregation counted Ralph Waldo Emerson among its prominent ministers. In 1970 the congregation merged with Boston’s First Church.

parents over children, and masters superior to slaves: “The Domestical Society is of Three Sorts; There is a Conjugal Society, or that between the Husband and the Wife; there is a Parental Society, or that between the Parent and the Child; and there is last, and lowest of all, an Herile Society, or that between the Master and the Servant.”¹⁹ This arrangement, in Mather’s view, conformed to the biblical statutes outlined in both the old and new testaments. Thus, it was God’s will that every level of society should conform to the laws of holy scripture and the practices of biblical faith. Slaves, then, were not outside of God’s plan for human salvation and redemption. Indeed, “Who could tell but that this Poor Creature may belong to the Election of God.”²⁰ Slaves, then, were not irredeemable—completely beyond the purview of God’s mercy and grace. Rather, slaves were members of the family of faith and the household of God, despite their menial status.

On a more practical level, because New England slavery was largely domestic in nature, with small numbers of slaves living in white domiciles, slaves were often an intimate part of their masters’ households and families. It was the duty, then, of God-fearing slave owners to treat their slaves humanely: “Feed them, and Cloath them, and afford convenient Rest unto them, and make their Lives comfortable.”²¹ It was also the responsibility of Christian masters to evangelize their slaves. In his argument for the just treatment of slaves in terms of their physical needs, Mather also urged slave owners to attend to their slaves’ spiritual well-being: “Tis Just and Equal that you should Acquaint

¹⁹ Mather, *A Good Master Well Served*, 5.

²⁰ Mather, *The Negro Christianized*, 3.

²¹ *Ibid*, 5.

them, as far as you can, with the way to Salvation by JESUS CHRIST.”²² Thus white slaveholders had a Christian obligation to evangelize their slaves.

Mather invoked foundational principles of biblical law to support his claims:

“One table of the Ten Commandments, has this for the Sum of it; *Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thy self*. Man, Thy Negro is thy *Neighbour*. . . Yea, if thou dost grant, *That God hath made of one Blood, all Nations of men*, he is thy *Brother* too. Now canst thou *Love* thy Negro, and be willing to see him ly under the Rage of Sin, and the Wrath of God?”²³

The parable of the *Good Samaritan* from the Gospel of Luke provided the basis for Mather’s exegesis. Puritan slaveholders, therefore, had a Christian duty to rescue the souls of their slaves from the threat of eternal damnation. Through his invocation of Mosaic Law and Christian parable Mather sought to convince Christian slaveholders of their responsibility to instruct their slaves in the ways of salvation.

For Mather, the Christianization of enslaved Africans offered a dual benefit. Converted slaves would be better servants and they would also be more accepting of their chattel status within Puritan New England society: “We the Miserable Children of Adam, and of Noah, thankfully Admiring and Accepting the Free Grace of God, that Offers to Save us from our Miseries, by the Lord Jesus Christ, freely Resolve, with His Help, to become the Servants of that Glorious LORD.”²⁴ As a result, owners of converted black bondswomen and men stood to profit because Christianized slaves would be under obligation to two masters—one human, one divine. Thus Christianized slaves would be more obedient, honest and harder working: “Were your Servants well tinged with the Spirit of Christianity, it would render them exceeding Dutiful unto their Masters,

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid, 5-6.

²⁴ Cotton Mather, *Rules for the Society of Negroes*. Boston, B. Harris (1693).

exceeding Patient under their Master, exceeding faithful in their Business, and afraid of speaking or doing any thing that may justly displease you."²⁵ Mather believed that Christianized slaves would be well controlled under the dual mastery of earthly owners and a heavenly God.

In addition to becoming more dutiful in the execution of their labors, Christianity would also render enslaved converts more content with their servile status. Mather urged Puritan slave owners to instruct their slaves in the following manner: "Tell them; That if they Serve God patiently and cheerfully in the Condition which he orders for them, their condition will very quickly be infinitely amended, in Eternal Happiness."²⁶ To this end, Mather developed a catechism for slave converts to the faith, through which bondwomen and bondmen who embraced Christian faith were instructed in response to the following queries:

"Q. If you Serve JESUS CHRIST, what must you do?

A. I must Love God, and Pray to Him, and Keep the Lords Day. I must Love all Men, and never Quarrel, nor be Drunk, nor be Unchaste, nor Steal, nor tell a Ly, nor be Discontent with my Condition."²⁷

"Q. What is the Fifth Commandment?

A. Honour thy Father and Mother.

Q. What is the meaning of it?

A. I must show all due Respect unto Every One; and if I have a Master or Mistress, I must be very dutiful unto them."²⁸

Such instruction was consistent with New Testament writings, which exhorted:

"Servants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh; not with eyeservice, as menpleasers; but in singleness of heart, fearing God; And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men; Knowing that of the Lord ye shall receive the reward of the inheritance: for ye serve the Lord

²⁵ Mather, *The Negro Christianized*, 21.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 32.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 39.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 41.

Christ.”²⁹

However, these *Rules for the Society of Negroes* suggests that Christianity some times failed to make slaves more docile and obedient. Thus, Mather’s publication of nine *Rules* (one less than the Decalogue of Moses, more commonly known as the Ten Commandments) represents an attempt to order and control the religious gatherings of African American Christians. Two additional important inferences may be drawn from the publication of Mather’s *Rules*: first that African Americans in Boston gathered independently for Christian worship as early as the last decade of the seventeenth century, and second that African Americans were literate.

Mather’s *Rules* opened and closed with instructions for the gathered *society* of African American Christians. Rules one, two, eight, and nine outline the frequency and content of black religious meetings, and appropriate conduct within the meetings. They also stress the importance of faithful attendance and instruction in the catechism. Black religious meetings were to be conducted for two hours on Sunday evenings: “Meetings may Begin and Conclude between the Hours of Seven and Nine,” so that slaves would not “be unreasonably absent from the Families whereto we pertain.”³⁰ The question of absence from religious meetings is further addressed in rule eight, which states:

“None of our Society shall be *Absent* from our Meeting without giving a *Reason* of the Absence; And if it be found that any have pretended unto their *Owners*, that they came unto the *Meeting*, when they were otherwise and elsewhere Employ’d, we will faithfully *Inform* their Owners, and also do what we can to Reclaim such Person from all such Evil Courses for the Future.”³¹

²⁹ Colossians 3:22-24 KJV (King James Version).

³⁰ Mather, *Rules*.

³¹ *Ibid.*

Clearly absenteeism and truancy were issues that white slaveholders were forced to contend with, whether their slaves had confessed Jesus Christ and joined a religious society, or not.

Rules three through seven focused on regulating black behavior beyond the meeting. Slaves were admonished to “at all times avoid all Wicked company” and “receive none into our meeting but such as have sensibly reformed their lives from all manner of wickedness.” In addition, the *Rules* forbade drunkenness, swearing, cursing, lying, stealing, insubordination, fornication, and aiding or abetting runaway slaves. “Exemplary Testimonies of his becoming a *New Creature*” were required for readmission to the society following a period of suspension for unseemly conduct. Intoxicated, disorderly, dishonest, and disobedient members of the society were forbidden attendance at weekly religious gatherings for “at least one fortnight,” upon the first offense. Fornicators were shut out for six months. Recalcitrant or recidivist offenders, and members who assisted or harbored fugitive slaves, faced permanent exclusion from the community.³²

The *Rules* also urged Christianized slaves to embrace the involvement, and interference, of white religious leaders: “We will, as often as may be; Obtain some Wise and Good Man of the English in the Neighbourhood, and especially the Officers of the Church, to look in upon us, and by their Presences and Council, do what they think fitting for us.”³³ According to Mather’s rules African American Christianity was not held to be synonymous or congruent with black aspirations for independence or self-governance. Rather, these guidelines equated slaves’ profession of Christian faith with black

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

submission to what amounted to a system of spiritual “patrols” buttressed by the external scrutiny of whites on the one hand and black self-monitoring in accordance with white principles on the other. It is not clear whether such instruction, which circumscribed the temporal limits of black worship, was intended solely to contain black spiritual enthusiasm, prevent the possibility of slaves’ malingering under a guise of religious fervor, or insure that black women and men were available to attend to the domestic comfort of their white owners on the Sabbath.

Mather’s *Rules* instructed that prayers, psalms, and sermons should confirm and conform to the *Assembly's Shorter Catechism*, which was based on the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*. Originally compiled in 1647, at the height of the English Reformation, the *Assembly's Shorter Catechism* was created so parents and clergy could train their children to be good Protestants. It contains over one hundred questions and answers about God, sin, human nature, and other doctrinal subjects as well as questions to teach and explain the Lord's Prayer. The *Assembly's Shorter Catechism* became a popular work among Protestant missionaries. More than half a century after publication of the *Assembly's Shorter*, Mather outlined three expositions or summaries of religious doctrine for enslaved converts in *The Negro Christianized*, which was also based on the *Westminster Shorter*.³⁴ According to Mather, corporate prayers, conducted in an orderly fashion, would open and close the religious gatherings of black worshipers, with singing and a sermon in between.

The necessity of *rules* to govern the social conduct of Christianized African Americans in New England suggests white anxiety about unruliness among black

³⁴ Ibid. Also see Mather, *The Negro Christianized*, 33ff.

converts. One may infer from such rules that Christianity did not always make enslaved Africans better, more obedient servants. Perhaps slave converts took the liberty of self-expression in ordering worship as they chose. Some may have gathered without the express permission of their owners. Others stayed later and longer than their white masters and mistresses deemed necessary. Christian faith was no antidote for black insubordination. Such was the case with Peter, a slave belonging to Justice Thomas Wells of Deerfield, who confessed the sins of “lewdness and drunkenness and stealing” and was later restored to membership.³⁵ Likewise Flora Nedson, an enslaved woman in Ipswich, confessed to the congregation at Chebacco: “I have sinned against Heaven and in your sight and am not worthy to be reckoned among the Sons and Daughters of God.”³⁶ While the exact nature of Flora’s transgression is not known, she apparently violated Puritan notions of proper Christian conduct. Thus, the power of the Gospel, while sufficient to save black souls, was not quite strong enough to regulate the behavior and control the bodies of black Christians, some of whom continued to drink, curse, lie, steal, and engage in illicit sexual relations, even after they professed Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

Mather’s writings articulated a view of slavery that was compatible with Christian history, theology and practice. Furthermore, Mather rejected the arguments of those who claimed that emancipation was a likely, inevitable consequence of slave conversion. Mather invoked a theology of slaveholding as a divinely ordained right, and justified holding Africans in bondage on the basis of biblical principles as well as social custom and hierarchy. The fact that Mather was both a Christian minister and a prominent slave

³⁵ George Sheldon, “Negro Slavery in Old Deerfield,” *New England Magazine* (1893), 52.

³⁶ “Flora Nedson’s Confession Narrative,” Box 1, folder 1b, John Cleaveland Papers, PL.

owner certainly shaped his views on the subject.

While Cotton Mather pronounced slavery compatible with Christianity and urged slaveholders to evangelize their slaves, Samuel Sewall held a contrasting view. In Sewall's opinion, Christianity was incompatible with the practice of slavery. Born in Hampshire, England, in 1652, Sewall immigrated to Massachusetts with his parents, Henry and Jane Sewall, in 1661. He attended Harvard University intending to study for the ministry but pursued business instead and graduated in 1671. Sewall entered local politics and eventually became an assistant magistrate. It was in this capacity that Sewall served as one of the judges for the Salem Witch Trials. Sewall would later apologize for his involvement in the trials. In 1700, Sewall published *The Selling of Joseph*, which criticized slavery in the colony. For Sewall slaveholding and slave trading were against God's will. The fact that Africans were not Christian did not provide a sufficient moral or spiritual basis to justify slavery. Sewall used the bible to argue against the inhumane practice of capturing, trading, and holding blacks in perpetual bondage.

Samuel Sewall's views on slavery and the appropriate Puritan response were markedly different from those like Cotton Mather who viewed Christianity and slavery as compatible. In *The Selling of Joseph: A Memorial*, Sewall argues that the practice of trading African slaves for profit and holding Africans in perpetual bondage is inconsistent with Christian faith. Sewall draws upon the Old Testament account of Joseph, a descendant of the Hebrew patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who was cruelly betrayed and sold into Egyptian bondage by his jealous elder brothers. Sewall interprets Joseph's capture and sale into slavery as a barbaric and unjust act, and draws an analogy between this biblical narrative and the plight of African slaves in colonial New England.

Therefore, in Sewall's eyes the injustice of Joseph's capture and sale by his brothers could not be minimized or overcome by the fact that Joseph eventually prospered in bondage and managed to achieve greatness in the land of his captivity. Joseph's journey from domestic servitude to government elite did not constitute full compensation for the crimes committed against him. In Sewall's estimation, "The extraordinary and comprehensive Benefit accruing to the Church of God, and to *Joseph* personally, did not rectify his brethren's Sale of him," despite the fact that Joseph's sale and capture provided the grounds for the salvation of his people.³⁷ Joseph's family was saved from famine, and the household of faith experienced deliverance from spiritual bondage as a legacy of Joseph's servitude, but even these benefits did not justify slavery on moral or spiritual grounds, since "*Joseph* was rightfully no more a Slave to his Brethren, than they were to him: and they had no more Authority to *Sell* him, than they had to *Slay* him."³⁸ Implicit in Sewall's argument concerning the sale and subsequent enslavement of the biblical patriarch, Joseph, is a critique and condemnation of Puritans who justified the capture, buying and selling of Africans in New England on religious grounds.

Sewall acknowledged white apprehensions about the prospect of black freedom. Still, Sewall was convinced that Africans, like all human beings, possessed an innate desire to be free, despite his belief that Africans were ill suited to take full advantage of liberty's fruits: "Few can endure to hear of a Negro's being made free; and indeed they can seldom use their freedom well; yet their continual aspiring after their forbidden Liberty, renders them Unwilling Servants."³⁹ In response to arguments in favor of slavery

³⁷ Sewall, 14.

³⁸ Ibid, 8.

³⁹ Ibid, 10.

based upon biblical accounts that Abraham, the great biblical patriarch, “*had Servants bought with his Money, and born in his House,*” Sewall voiced the following conviction: “Until the Circumstances of *Abraham’s* purchase be recorded, no Argument can be drawn from it.”⁴⁰ Sewall believed that New Englanders would be better off meeting their labor needs with indentured servants rather than enslaved Africans: “It would conduce more to the Welfare of the Province, to have White Servants for a Term of Years, than to have Slaves for life.”⁴¹ Thus, he cautioned Puritan slave owners that the practice of holding and trading slaves was potentially perilous to *soul liberty*—the conviction that each individual had the right to make her or his own decisions in religious matters—which the Puritans deeply cherished: “For men obstinately to persist in holding their Neighbours and Brethren under the Rigor of perpetual Bondage, seems to be no proper way of gaining Assurance that God has given them Spiritual Freedom.”⁴² Despite his devotion to a faith that viewed Africans as pagan heathens, Sewall was nevertheless able to affirm that the men and women that many New England Puritans purchased and employed so freely were also “the Offspring of GOD, and their Liberty is...*Auro pretiosior Omni.*”⁴³ Sewall’s bold assertion that Africans, like Puritans, held their liberty to be “more precious than all gold,” threatened to undermine the biblical and theological underpinnings that justified slavery in the province, and contrasts starkly with Cotton’s Mather’s insistence that slavery was consistent with Puritan religious faith and practice.

Likewise, Elihu Coleman, a Quaker from Nantucket, was an early public critic of the practice of slavery in New England. Coleman wrote with the hope that his remarks

⁴⁰ Ibid, 15.

⁴¹ Ibid, 10.

⁴² Ibid, 16.

⁴³ Ibid, 9.

“may serve as a Text for some to preach themselves upon.” He was well aware of the “Ferment or Stir that such Discourse as this may make among some, who (like Demetrius of old) may say, By this Craft we have our Wealth.”⁴⁴ In this manner, Coleman links the divine mission of spreading the gospel to preaching against slavery.” Coleman further observed: “those people that dwell nearest the truth, and are most engaged in it, and are more concerned for the spreading of it than for anything in this world beside, cannot allow of this practice, they seeing it to be oppression and cruelty.”⁴⁵ Devout Christian ministers and leaders had an ethical responsibility and a spiritual obligation to “preach themselves upon,” and speak against the inhumane, ungodly practice of slavery.

Coleman attributed his anti-slavery views to divine revelation:

“For the Lord made me sensible in that convincing day, that he would not allow of sin, although it might be in Jacob, and that transgression in Israel should not go unpunished, and that he would yet again search Jerusalem as with candles, and bring to light the hidden things of dishonesty.”⁴⁶

Coleman did not dispute or negate New Englanders’ understanding of themselves as God’s chosen people. By invoking the terms “Jacob,” “Israel,” and “Jerusalem,” he draws a connection between New England colonists and divine election. However, Coleman reminds his fellow believers that God’s chosen are not exempt from divine judgment. Israel was punished for its sins—the holy city, Jerusalem, destroyed and its people scattered—and judged harshly as a result of its unrighteousness and disobedience. Coleman also used the bible to answer proslavery objections to his argument. To the objection that blacks were heathens—“Infidels and Strangers”—he cited from the Old Testament: “I’ll Answer as it is written in Exod. 22. 21. Ye shall neither vex a Stranger,

⁴⁴ Elihu Coleman, *A Testimony Against That Antichristian Practice*. Boston (1733), iii.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, vii.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, vi.

nor oppress him, for ye were Strangers in the Land of Egypt. and Exod. 23. 9. Also thou shalt not oppress a Stranger, for ye know the Heart of a Stranger, seeing ye were Strangers in the Land of Egypt."⁴⁷ In this way, Coleman used the bible to underscore the plight of enslaved Africans, while reminding white Christians of their Christian obligation to treat others the way they wished to be treated. To the objection that blacks were inherently ignorant and thus inferior, he remarked: "Therefore none can have any Plea for making of them Slaves, for their being either ignorant or wicked; for if that Plea would do, I do believe they need not go so far for Slaves as now they do."⁴⁸ White pride, self-interest, and laziness were the roots of the enslavement of Africans, argued Coleman. These immoral values would erode Christian virtue if unchecked. Slavery flourished because some shunned the Protestant work ethic. Coleman urged the following consideration:

"Now I would have all to consider of this Practice of making Slaves of Negroes, or others that we can get the Mastery over, to see upon what Foundation it stands, or to see what's the Original of it, whether or no Pride and Idleness was not the first rise of it, that they might go with white Hands, and that their Wives might (Jezebel like) paint and adorn themselves, and their Sons and Daughters be brought up in Idleness, which may be very well termed the Mother of all Vice."⁴⁹

Coleman was deeply critical of white men who owned slaves and condoned slavery in an effort to avoid soiling their hands with honest labor, their vain, shallow wives, and their indolent offspring. Slavery was not compatible with Christianity. Indeed, slavery was sinful: "I would not be guilty of so great a Sin as this seems to be. And I do believe many would see it so, were they not blinded by Self-Interest."⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Ibid, 7.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 9.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 8.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 16.

Elite male citizens of colonial Massachusetts articulated inconsistent ideas about the relationship between Christianity and slavery. Some, most notably Cotton Mather, viewed the two as well suited, while others, namely Samuel Sewall and Elihu Coleman, argued against the practice of slaveholding and slave trading. It was within the context of such inconsistent and incompatible theological arguments concerning slavery that enslaved women found ways to embrace and express a distinct form of Christianity that diverged from the beliefs held by elite whites.

While prominent white men articulated conflicting ideas concerning the relationship between religion and slavery, black women embraced and expressed a form of Christian faith that diverged from the beliefs held by many elite whites. Although black women experienced religion as both constructive and constraining, they were able to use their faith as a resource in the quest for personal empowerment and community affirmation. Thus, it was in the context of pro- and anti-slavery Christian discourses that black women found ways to assert spiritual agency.

Black women's conversion to Christian faith in the midst of these competing discourses suggests that they used religion to assert spiritual and temporal agency, despite their chattel status in colonial Massachusetts. Phillis Cogswell an enslaved female who lived in Ipswich, bore public witness of her conversion from sin to salvation before the Congregational Church of Chebacco (later called the Fourth Church), during the height of the Seacoast Revival, a resurgence of religious enthusiasm in New England that followed the Great Awakening by two decades. The Chebbaco Church welcomed African Americans from the outset: four of its first twenty-two members were enslaved blacks.

From its formation in 1746, the Chebacco Church was influenced by the fervor of the Great Awakening, which had an indelible impact on Puritanism in New England. The Awakening caused a schism within Protestants in New England and many Congregational churches were divided among Old Light rationalists and New Light evangelicals. Old Light ministers interpreted Calvinism in a rationalistic manner and held that believing in orthodox theology was more important than righteous living, while New Light ministers emphasized conversion from sin and personal piety. The Great Awakening also sparked a renewal of religious zeal. Awakening preaching placed a great emphasis on emotion. Rational thought and philosophical argument mattered less than a pure and contrite heart, sincere faith, and staunch commitment to a regenerated life in Christ. The question of salvation and divine election were somehow subsumed in the experience of dramatic conversion. The Awakening also promoted religion as a “leveling” experience. Many preachers insisted on a radical equality before God, which served to embrace and empower dispossessed and oppressed persons, such as women, slaves, servants and other “lower” sorts. A number of New England clergymen were swept up in the spiritual intensity. But the Awakening was not simply for ministers. Others were roused from spiritual slumber—among them enslaved black women, who confessed their sins, embraced salvation, and experienced the grace that accompanied Christian conversion. No longer were they condemned to endure God’s wrath but instead they were pardoned to receive the free gift of God’s grace and love. A smaller revival, dubbed the Seacoast Revival, sparked the rebirth of religious ardor in Ipswich from 1763-1764.

According to her narrative, Phillis Cogswell had been exposed to the preaching and religious fervor of the “former Reformation”—the Great Awakening of the 1740s—but it would take twenty years for her spiritual concerns and apprehensions to fully surface. Cogswell thus declared that, “Seeing others under concern, bro't me under concern fearing I should be left while others were saved; but my concern seemed to be for awhile from an apprehension that I had no convictions.⁵¹” A significant interval of time lapsed between Cogswell’s introduction to Christianity and her conversion to the faith. It took more than two decades for the message of salvation to take root and bear fruit in her soul.

By the time of her testimony on April 22, 1764, Cogswell had already experienced a significant life change with the death of her owner, William Cogswell, a prominent resident of Ipswich. After William Cogswell’s death in 1762, Phillis and a “Negro girl Jude” became the property of his son, Jonathan.⁵² Jonathan Cogswell was a member of the Second Church of Ipswich, an Old Light congregation whose clergy and lay members were resistant, if not hostile, to the New Light theology of the spiritual awakenings of the eighteenth century. Old Light Congregationalists such as Nathan Bowen, an anti-revivalist layman who lived in Marblehead, Massachusetts, objected to the revivalism sweeping New England on the basis that individuals “of the meanest Capacity ie women & even Common negros” displayed the audacity of taking “upon

⁵¹ “Phillis Cogswell's Conversion Narrative,” box I, folder 1b, John Cleaveland Papers, PL.

⁵² “Will of William Cogswell, Feb. 12, 1762,” vol. 339, p. 7, ECPCFP; “Inventory of William Cogswell, Mar. 24, 1762,” vol. 339, p. 92, ECPCFP.

them to Exhort their Betters even in the pulpit, before large assemblies.”⁵³ Even “common Negroes” who did not take the liberty of exhorting their betters through preaching and other evangelical activities might take it upon themselves to testify to their conversion, as was the case with Phillis Cogswell.

A striking aspect of Phillis Cogswell’s conversion narrative is her many references to passages from the bible. A close examination of her use of scripture offer glimpses into enslaved women’s religious faith and practice. According to Cogswell’s account, ““one night when I came out of the Meeting-House, I sat down and tho’t how sad it was that I must leave the Meeting without receiving any Benefit.”⁵⁴ Even before experiencing the full measure of conversion from sin to grace, Cogswell possessed a sufficient knowledge of scripture, which she used to illustrate her understanding of the role of divine activity in the work of human salvation. “But those words coming to my mind, Paul may plant and Apollos water, but it is God that giveth the increase.”⁵⁵ Cogswell quoted the Apostle Paul who wrote: “I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase.”⁵⁶ One human may plant the seed of religious faith and another may water and nourish it but only God could cause the seed to take root and bear fruit, as it obviously did in Cogswell’s case.

Although saddened by the thought of leaving a revival meeting “without receiving any benefit,” Cogswell lulled herself to sleep with a religious song: “I went home and went to bed, and the last I tho’t of before I fell asleep was a couple of verses in the cradle-

⁵³ "Extracts from Interleaved Almanacs of Nathan Bowen, Marblehead, 1742-1799," *EIHC*, 91 (1955), 169.

⁵⁴ “Phillis Cogswell's Conversion Narrative.”

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ I Corinthians 3:6 KJV (King James Version).

hymn.”⁵⁷ She was probably referring to “Cradle Hymn by Dr. Isaac Watts, a noted hymnodist. It is likely that the first and eighth verses held particular meaning for this enslaved woman:

Hush, my dear, lie still and slumber;
 Holy angels guard thy bed;
 Heavenly blessings without number
 Gently falling on thy head.

Mayst thou live to know and fear Him,
 Trust and love Him all thy days;
 Then go dwell forever near Him,
 See His face, and sing His praise!⁵⁸

Yet even the words and melody of a familiar, beloved hymn, could not provide sufficient comfort and rest to a soul held in torment by sin. Cogswell reflected on her sinful condition: “in the night I awaked up and all my sins seem'd to be set in order before my Eyes, and they appeared as numerous as the Sands on the Sea Shore, and I cried out good Lord what must I do to be saved.”⁵⁹ Again, Cogswell’s knowledge of the Holy Scriptures, Old as well as New Testaments, is revealed by her appropriation of words and phrases from the bible: “And the Midianites and the Amalekites and all the children of the east lay along in the valley like grasshoppers for multitude; and their camels without number, as the sand by the sea side for multitude.”⁶⁰ It is clear that Cogswell was familiar with biblical stories from the Old Testament that chronicled Hebrew encounters with heathen nations. However she re-interpreted their meaning in light of her spiritual state. It was her

⁵⁷ “Phillis Cogswell’s Conversion Narrative.”

⁵⁸ Isaac Watts, *Divine Songs Attempted in Easy Language for the Use of Children*, 12th edition, Philadelphia (1750), 39.

⁵⁹ “Phillis Cogswell’s Conversion Narrative.”

⁶⁰ Judges 7:12 KJV (King James Version).

sins—not those of godless peoples, their offspring, and camels—that were as numerous “as the sand by the sea side for multitude.”

In accordance with the evangelical Christian theology that provided the basis for Protestant revivalism as evinced in the Great Awakening, Cogswell responded to a growing awareness of her sinful state with a fundamental question: “What must I do to be saved?”⁶¹ The biblical context for such a query is found in the story of Paul and Silas, whose imprisonment becomes an opportunity for their captors to be saved. In this case those who are bound are God’s chosen, and those in authority are in danger of eternal damnation.

Cogswell expressed the following sentiment concerning her spiritual state prior to conversion: “I tho’t with myself, I am weary and heavy-laden, I have a burden of guilt lying on me[,] Christ is all-sufficient to give rest-I may come; I will come to Christ for Rest, and my Burden was immediately taken away and I felt so light as if I could fly: Christ appeared lovely to my soul.”⁶² Her statement clearly referenced Matthew 11:28-30: “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” This passage may have held particular meaning in light of her status as a black female slave who was “heavy laden,” as a result of being overworked and under valued. Cogswell’s introspection is revealed in the simple phrase, “I tho’t with myself, I am weary and heavy-laden, I have a burden of guilt lying on me.” The source of the guilt that weighed

⁶¹ Acts 16:30 KJV (King James Version).

⁶² “Phillis Cogswell’s Conversion Narrative.”

so heavily on Cogswell is not clearly articulated in her narrative. This confession suggests that enslaved women like Phillis Cogswell had spiritual concerns beyond their chattel status. For enslaved women like Phillis Cogswell, Christianity provided a measure of relief from spiritual and temporal burdens.

Other enslaved women in eighteenth century Massachusetts embraced Christianity and used religion as a source of communal affirmation as well as personal faith. Flora Nedson (also known as Flory) had not been a member of the Congregational Church of Chebacco long before she backslid, which led to her full and public confession before the church and restoration to the faith community. While it is not clear exactly what the nature of her transgression was, Flora was sincere and contrite in her confession:

“I do therefore beg leave for your Satisfaction my own Humiliation & Abasement & the warning of others: to Confess and Lay open before you, what were the provocations I gave the Lord to leave me to fall in Temptation and Sin, what apprehension I have had and Tryals respecting my Fall, and the Satisfaction I have received that the Lord hath covered my sin with a mantle of his pardoning Love.”⁶³

Flora acknowledged that “spirituall Pride, Ingratitude, Unwatchfulness and Levity or Lightness” led to her fall into temptation and sin. Despite her lapse into unrighteousness “Confusion Shame Sin Impotency and Unworthiness...the Lord heard, to my Surprize & Astonishment, he ran to my Relief, he kissed me with the Kisses of his mouth and I found his Love to be better than wine.”⁶⁴ Flora used the bible, namely a verse from Song of Solomon, to support bolster her confession.⁶⁵ In so doing, she made a bold claim to divine love and acceptance. Flora concluded her plea to the congregation with the following words:

⁶³ “Flora Nedson’s Confession Narrative.”

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Song of Solomon 1:2 KJV (King James Version).

“O I beg you Prayers for me that I may bring forth much Fruit, meet of Repentance and be made to Discover to all in my futer Life Conversation Conduct and Behaviour, the Truth of what I have now been Declaring unto you. I beg your Forgiveness. I pray you to Restore me to your Charity and Fellowship and the Privileges that I have forfeited, by my Fall, I Desire your Prayers for me, that in Every Relation I might walk becoming one professing Godliness, & adorn the Doctrine of God my Saviour in all Things yea that I may be made more circumspect than ever heretofore in my Walk, so as to declare God’s Glory abroad.”⁶⁶

Religion gave Flora the confidence and audacity to claim righteousness before God and her fellow congregants, despite her transgressions. Flora’s statement prompted a special church meeting at which members of the congregation asked “several Questions upon her confession,” which satisfied them enough to restore her to the fellowship.⁶⁷ Phillis Cogswell and Flora Nedson provide examples of the ways that black women in colonial Massachusetts used religion to affirm their worth as human beings created in the image of God and to publicly witness to their value within the broader religious community.

Black women’s engagement with Christianity in eighteenth century

Massachusetts continued, even as the fervor of the earlier revivals waned. Another example of enslaved women’s embrace of Christianity is Phillis Wheatley. Phillis Wheatley came of age in a pious Puritan household, which was headed by a prosperous Boston merchant, John Wheatley. Both John and his wife Susannah were devout New England Congregationalists. Phillis followed the example of her owners’ piety and she joined Old South Congregational Church in Boston on August 18, 1771.⁶⁸ Wheatley’s mistress, Susannah, was especially fond of the passionate preaching of the prominent evangelical ministers of her day. Mrs. Susannah Wheatley particularly admired the

⁶⁶ “Flora Nedson’s Confession Narrative.”

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Robinson, 18.

eloquence of the Reverend George Whitefield, an enormously popular English pulpiteer, who took New England by storm during the Great Awakening. After his death in 1770, Wheatley penned an elegy to Whitehead that was printed in 1771 as "An Elegiac Poem On the Death of that celebrated Divine, and eminent Servant of Jesus Christ, the Reverend and Learned Mr. George Whitefield."⁶⁹ Susannah was also a patron of the Reverend Samson Occom, a converted Mohegan Christian minister from Connecticut.⁷⁰ Thus Wheatley became acquainted with Occom and they developed a lasting friendship.

Phillis Wheatley developed relationships with other prominent ministers, among them the Reverend Samuel Hopkins of Newport, Rhode Island, to whom she penned the following words:⁷¹

"Methinks Rev'd Sir, this is the beginning of that happy period foretold by the Prophets, when all shall know the Lord from the least to the great-est, and that without the assistance of human art & eloquence, my heart expanded, with sympathetic Joy, to see at distant time the thick cloud of ignorance dispersing from the face of my benighted Country."⁷²

Hopkins was among the group of prominent New England ministers who publicly denounced slavery, despite having been a slaveholder himself. He studied theology in Northampton, Massachusetts, with his brother-in-law, the noted cleric Jonathan Edwards, and served as Pastor of the North Parish in Great Barrington from 1743-1769. Like Edwards, Hopkins was a proponent of the New Light theology of the Great Awakening. New Lights grappled with such issues as the nature and necessity of spiritual rebirth, the

⁶⁹ Phillis Wheatley, "An Elegiac Poem On the Death of that celebrated Divine, and eminent Servant of Jesus Christ, the Reverend and Learned Mr. George Whitefield," (1771), http://www.masshist.org/database/viewer.php?item_id=783.

⁷⁰ Robinson, 12-13.

⁷¹ The Reverend Samuel Hopkins, also known as the younger, was named for his uncle, Samuel Hopkins, who was also a minister in New England.

⁷² Robinson, 330.

validity of mass conversions that occurred in the wake of revival fervor, the role of practices of faith, such as bible reading, prayer, and worship attendance in regeneration, and millennialism.⁷³ Hopkins was among those New Light clergymen who attempted to develop a systematic theological response to the critical issues that arose following the Great Awakening.

Later as pastor of the First Congregational Church in Newport, Rhode Island, Hopkins' theological, pietistic, and pastoral concerns centered on social reform. Thus, it was perhaps not altogether surprising that he embraced antislavery sentiments and promoted antislavery efforts from his New England pulpit. Hopkins even delivered his antislavery message to the Continental Congress:

“We naturally look to you in behalf of more than half a million of persons in these Colonies, who are under such a degree of oppression and tyranny, as to be wholly deprived of all civil and personal liberty, to which they have as good a right as any of their fellow men, and are reduced to the most abject state of bondage and slavery, without any just cause.”⁷⁴

Hopkins considered that it was the duty of “free Citizens and Christians...to endeavor, by lawful ways and means” to enable slaves “to share equally with us, in that civil and religious Liberty, with which an indulgent providence has blessed these States, and to which these brethren are, by nature, as much entitled to as ourselves.”⁷⁵

Hopkins' evangelical Calvinism found demonstration in his plans and efforts to develop, train, and send forth African American Christians back to Africa, with the

⁷³ Joseph A. Conforti, “Samuel Hopkins and the New Divinity: Theology, Ethics, and Social Reform in Eighteenth-Century New England,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Ser., 34:4 (Oct. 1977), p. 572-573, for a synopsis and synthesis of the theological issues addressed by New Lights such as Edwards and Hopkins.

⁷⁴ Samuel Hopkins, *Some Thoughts Concerning the Slavery of the Africans*. New York: R. Hodge (1785), 8.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 3.

express goal of converting Africans to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. Hopkins even appealed to Phillis Wheatley to join two black men he was training to undertake such an endeavor. Wheatley eventually responded to Hopkins' request. Their correspondence reveals interesting details about the relationship between Wheatley and Hopkins. It seems that Hopkins enclosed a missive—perhaps a flier or brochure—outlining his plans for a missionary venture to Africa in one of Obour Tanner's letters to Wheatley, along with an offering of 20 twenty pounds.

Hopkins was not alone in urging Wheatley to participate in the planned missionary venture. Wheatley's mistress, Susanna, and Wheatley's dear friend the Reverend Samson Occom, as well as John Thornton, a British philanthropist and patron, also urged her to consider returning to Africa to preach the gospel to the natives. Occom had already written to Susanna Wheatley, asking her to consider sending Phillis Wheatley back to Africa as a missionary:

“Please to remember me to Phillis and the rest of your Servants Pray madam, what harm would it be to send Phillis to her Native Country as a Female Preacher to her kindred, you know Quaker women are allow'd to preach, and why/ not others in an Extraordinary Case.”⁷⁶

While the Reverends Hopkins and Occom, and Mr. Thornton perceived tremendous benefit and little harm in Phillis Wheatley returning to Africa as a Christian missionary, Wheatley herself had other ideas.

Phillis Wheatley resisted any compulsion to participate in Hopkins' missionary endeavor, despite her strong evangelical leaning. Wheatley exhibited spiritual grace and self-possession in walking the fine line between her profession of evangelical piety and her insistence on remaining in America. Such a response represents a particularly

⁷⁶ Robinson, 112-113.

intriguing facet of Wheatley's relationship to Hopkins—her patron, supporter and a noted religious authority. While Wheatley's response expressed sympathy and support for Hopkins's missionary project, she was careful not to anger or offend a powerful and prominent white advocate.

It has been suggested that Wheatley "Seemed resolved even then to live out the rest of her life as a black American. In so deciding, she chose one of the few options available to liberty-seeking colonial blacks."⁷⁷ Wheatley deftly employed multiple rationales to explain and legitimate her decision not to embark on Hopkins' missionary venture. Wheatley's initial response to Hopkins cited her own poor health. Wheatley was plagued with asthma and other respiratory ailments throughout her life and she wrote of "being much indispos'd by the return of my Asthmatic complaint." She also invoked the poor health of her mistress, Susannah Wheatley, who was mortally ill and died not long after: "the sickness of my mistress who has been long confined to her bed, & is not expected to live ~~above~~ a great while; all these things render it impractical for me to do anything at present."⁷⁸

While the tone of Wheatley's letter may be interpreted as humble and self-depreciating, she still managed to assert her ability to promote such a worthy undertaking. Wheatley clearly identified with Africa, for she wrote: "my heart expanded, with sympathetic Joy, to see at distant time the thick cloud of ignorance dispersing from the face of my benighted Country."⁷⁹ Africa was her *benighted country*, the land of her

⁷⁷ Robinson, 113.

⁷⁸ Robinson, 330.

⁷⁹ Phillis Wheatley, "Letter to Samuel Hopkins, February 7, 1774," in John C. Shields, ed., *The Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*. New York: Oxford University Press (1988), 175-176.

birth and the place of her origin. However, her home—the sphere of her personal influence and the field for her chosen endeavors toward the goal of reaping a plenteous harvest of Christian faith—was America:

“Why do you hon'd Sir, wish those poor men so much trouble as to carry me so log a voyage? Upon my arrival, how like a Barbarian shou'd I look to the Natives; I can promise that my tongue shall be quiet for a strong reason indeed, being an utter stranger to the Language of Anamaboe. Now to be Serious, This undertaking appears too harzardous and [I am] not sufficiently Eligible to go-- And leave my British & American Friends.”⁸⁰

Evidently Wheatley held a confident, idealistic view of America. One scholar asserted that Wheatley “seems to have wanted to believe that it was divinely ordained for a free and especially Christian America to rise and loom on the world's horizon, a mighty example of the unfolding of God's will that all mankind be free.”⁸¹ While Phillis Wheatley pledged to use her influence in support of Hopkins’ planned missionary venture, it is worth noting that Wheatley displays a clear understanding of her personal interest and influence, despite her status as an enslaved black woman: “What I can do in influencing my Christian friends and acquaintances to promote this laudable design shall not be wanting.”⁸² Wheatley’s exchange with Hopkins suggests that there were limits to the power elite white men exercised over enslaved black women in colonial Massachusetts.

That enslaved women embraced Christian faith and employed religion to assert spiritual agency is evinced in narratives of conversion and confession, baptism and church membership, and personal correspondence. Thus, religion provided a basis for claims to full humanity as persons created in the image of God. Phillis Wheatley clearly

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Robinson, 114.

⁸² Shields, 176.

invoked this claim: “O Pray that I may be one also, who shall join with you in songs of Praise at the Throne of him, who is no respecter of Persons, being equally the great Maker of all.”⁸³ In Wheatley’s view God created all women and men, thus all persons were equal in God’s sight: women and men, black and white, slave and free. Religion also gave solace and strength, which served to counteract some of the more demoralizing effects of chattel slavery.

Black women also used religion as the foundation for challenging slavery on spiritual grounds. Wheatley’s correspondence also expressed powerful sentiments linking faith and freedom: “In every human Breast, God has implanted a Principle, which we call Love of Freedom; it is impatient of oppression, and pants for Deliverance – and by the Leave of our modern Egyptians I will assert that the same principle lives in us.”⁸⁴ This statement reflected her religious sensibility as well as her deep commitment to the principle of liberty as a basic human right. Phillis Wheatley invoked Divine providence in a different manner than slave owning Puritans. In her view God ordained freedom rather than slavery. According to Wheatley, God placed this “Love of Freedom” within every person. Such passion for freedom was “impatient of oppression.” Thus Phillis Wheatley used religion to contest slavery through an affirmation of her own humanity.

After manumission, Wheatley intoned the following sentiments in her only surviving prayer: “Oh my Gracious Preserver, hitherto thou hast brot [me,] be pleased when thou bringest to the birth to give [me] strength to bring forth living & perfect a

⁸³ Robinson, 327.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 332.

being who shall be greatly instrumental in promoting thy [glory].”⁸⁵ Apparently Wheatley penned this prayer on the eve of childbirth, a hazardous affair during the eighteenth century and particularly so for black women. Wheatley’s faith was a source of hope and fortitude in slavery and in freedom.

Religious faith allowed some black women to assert values that stood in direct opposition to the practice of slavery in colonial Massachusetts. While Phillis Cogswell and Phillis Wheatley may have been atypical for their time, they nevertheless serve as evidence that black women derived personal strength as a result of embracing religious faith. For black women who claimed Christianity as their own, God was no respecter of persons. Rather, God was a source of strength and comfort in the midst of difficulties. God was also a divine benefactor who implanted the love of freedom in every individual—whether female or male, black or white, enslaved or free. Black women’s faith served as a basis for their spiritual practice and religious community involvement. Black women in eighteenth century Massachusetts derived strength to live, labor, love, and learn, from their religious beliefs and gained confidence from the knowledge that they, too, were beloved children of God. Black female abolitionists of the nineteenth century, such as Maria Stewart, would build upon this legacy of faith that had its foundation in the experiences of enslaved women from an earlier era.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 346. According to Robinson, this prayer of Phillis Wheatley, dated June 13, 1779, was accidentally discovered in her bible.

Epilogue

For freedom did Christ set us free: stand fast therefore, and be not entangled again in a yoke of bondage.

Galatians 5:1 ASV (American Standard Version)

All the nations of the earth are crying out for liberty and equality. Away, away with tyranny and oppression!¹

Maria W. Stewart

Slavery died a slow death in Massachusetts but two court battles, both in response to the new Massachusetts State constitution, struck mortal blows to the institution. The first was *Brom & Bett v. John Ashley, Esq.* Elizabeth “Mum Bett” Freeman, an enslaved woman, and Brom, an enslaved man, together initiated a freedom suit against John Ashley. Upon learning of provisions for the rights to freedom and equality in the Massachusetts state constitution of 1780, Mum Bett approached Theodore Sedgwick, a noted attorney, and convinced him to take her case. Despite her status as an illiterate slave woman, Mum Bett managed to secure legal council. She also provided Sedgwick with a legal justification for her claim to freedom. Based on Mum Bett’s assertion that she and Brom were being illegally detained, Sedgwick filed suit against Colonel Ashley and his son. Sedgwick filed a *writ of replevin*, in which he declared that the enslavement of Mum Bett and Brom violated the newly enacted state constitution. Ashley, after his refusal to release or return the unlawfully detained property, namely Mum Bett and Brom, was ordered to appear in court. Sedgwick argued that slavery was incompatible with the recently ratified charter, which affirmed that “All men are born free and equal, and have certain natural, essential, and unalienable rights; among which may be reckoned the right

¹ Maria W. Stewart, “Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, The Sure Foundation on Which We Must Build,” in Maria W. Stewart and Marilyn Richardson, *Maria W. Stewart, America’s First Black Woman Political Writer: Essays And Speeches*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press (1987), 29.

of enjoying and defending their lives and liberties; that of acquiring, possessing, and protecting property; in fine, that of seeking and obtaining their safety and happiness.”² Sedgwick’s argument, which was based on a legal theory set forth by an enslaved black woman, was compelling and a jury ruled in favor of Mum Bett and Brom. Thus Mum Bett and Brom became the first enslaved African Americans to be freed under the Bay State’s new constitution.

Later, a series of trials related to Quock Walker further attacked the legal underpinnings of the practice of slavery in Massachusetts. Little is known about Walker, who was born a slave and sold to James Caldwell in 1754. Walker became the property of Nathaniel Dennison of Barre, Massachusetts, in 1763. Caldwell had promised to manumit Walker, but Dennison refused, so Walker fled to the home of his former master’s brothers. Dennison sought to reclaim Walker and beat him severely in the process. Three separate trials followed this incident: two civil suits and one criminal. In the first case, Walker claimed that he was a free man and sued Dennison for assault without right. The second case, which was filed by Dennison against Caldwell brothers for interfering with Dennison’s property, was tried simultaneously. The court ruled in favor of Walker and awarded £50 in damages. In an ironic turn, the court also ruled in favor of Dennison. Both cases were appealed to the Supreme Court. Dennison lost by default for his failure to appear; the Caldwell brothers won as the result of an argument based on the new State Constitution. In the third case, the attorney general for Massachusetts prosecuted Dennison for assault and battery. Dennison was convicted and ordered to pay 40 shillings in damages. The *Brom & Bett v. John Ashley, Esq.* decision,

² Massachusetts Constitution of 1780, article I, http://presspubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/bill_of_rightss6.html.

together with the Quock Walker trials, resulted in the legal abolition of slavery in Massachusetts in 1783.³ Mum Bett's suit was especially significant because unlike earlier freedom suits that were based on legal technicalities or individual circumstances Mum Bett "had no claim to freedom beyond the unqualified guarantee of natural rights as embodied in the Declaration of Sentiments of the 1780 state constitution."⁴ The legal hypothesis, which formed the foundation of her claim, had the potential to free not only Mum Bett and co-litigant Brom but all blacks enslaved in Massachusetts. Nevertheless, while slavery ended by legal statute in 1783, the practice of holding blacks in various forms of servitude continued for decades.

By the nineteenth century freedom was a reality for most African Americans in Massachusetts though the privileges of citizenship had yet to be realized. Black women's experience of multi-layered oppression—as females in a society dominated by men, as blacks in a world of white privilege, and as economically disadvantaged workers in an emergent free market capitalist system that derived profit from the economic exploitation of the laboring class—continued despite the legal dismantling of chattel slavery in the region. Thus, black women's struggle against the entangling forces of patriarchy, race

³ For full discussion of the details of litigation related to gradual emancipation legislation in Massachusetts, see Leon Higginbotham, *In the Matter of Color: Race and the American Legal Process: The Colonial Period*. New York: Oxford University Press (1978), 91-98; William O'Brien, "Did the Dennison Case Outlaw Slavery in Massachusetts?" *William and Mary Quarterly* 17 (1960), 219-41; Robert Spector, "The Quock Walker Cases (1781-1783): Slavery, Its Abolition and Negro Citizenship in Early Massachusetts," *Journal of Negro History* 53 (1968), 12-32; and Arthur Zilversmith, "Quok Walker, Mumbet, and the Abolition of Slavery in Massachusetts," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 25 (1968), 614-24.

⁴ Emily Blanck, "Seventeen Eighty-Three: The Turning Point in the Law of Slavery and Freedom in Massachusetts," *The New England Quarterly*, 75:1 (March 2002). Accessed January 4, 2006, <http://lion.chadwyck.com.proxy.libraries.rutgers.edu>, page 6 of 15.

prejudice, and inferior class status—a fight that started during the colonial period in Massachusetts—continued into the antebellum era.

In September 1832, Maria W. Stewart mounted a lecture platform in Boston and articulated a political argument before a “promiscuous” audience of both men and women, something no other American woman, white or black, had done before. The Grimke Sisters—Sarah and Angelina—who were often credited with being the first American females to lecture in public, did not do so until 1837. Maria Miller W. Stewart was born in 1803, orphaned by age five, and subsequently indentured to a white clergyman until she was fifteen. Stewart began supporting herself at age fifteen by working as a domestic servant. In this respect, Stewart’s experience harkened to that of black women and girls whose domestic labor contributed to the comfort and wellbeing of the white households in which they served. Later work as a published author, orator, educator, and nurse connected Stewart to highly skilled black female laborers, who gained expertise under bondage in an earlier era.

In 1826, she married James W. Stewart in Boston. The Rev. Thomas Paul, minister of the African Meeting House in Boston, presided over the ceremony. Maria was 23 years old when she married James, a shipping agent in Boston who fitted whalers and other shipping vessels and more than twenty years her senior. In addition to his success as a businessman, James Stewart was a veteran in the War of 1812 and had spent time in England as a prisoner of war. With the death of her husband in 1829, Stewart faced economic hardship. James last will and testament bequeathed an inheritance to his wife. However, the white executors of his estate defrauded Maria. Like black women in an earlier era, Maria Stewart seized opportunities to forge human connections. Nevertheless

black women's relationships remained threatened by intersecting forces of systematic race, gender, and class oppression after slavery's end.

Like Chloe Spear, Stewart was largely self-taught, having "had the seeds of piety and virtue early sown" early in her life. Stewart lamented being "deprived the advantages of education, though my soul thirsted for knowledge."⁵ Stewart attended Sabbath Schools from age fifteen to twenty. While other details related to Stewart's acquisition of literacy skills remain elusive, it is clear that Stewart eventually attained advanced speaking, reading, and writing skills. In this respect, Maria Stewart was like Phillis Wheatley. Both women used the ability to read and write to agitate for black freedom, independence, and full citizenship. In the first of her published speeches, Stewart proclaimed: "our souls are fired with the same love of liberty and independence with which your souls are fired."⁶ Thus Maria Stewart built upon a foundation laid by earlier generations of enslaved and free black women who used tools of literacy to engage the public sphere as a means for promoting the cause of black freedom.

Stewart found inspiration in the work of her friend and mentor, David Walker. But his untimely death just six months after her husband's precipitated a religious conversion. Stewart was convinced that she was called by God to be a warrior for freedom and for the cause of oppressed African Americans: "From the moment I experienced the change, I felt a strong desire, with the help and assistance of God, to devote the remainder of my days to piety and virtue, and now possess that spirit of independence that, were I called upon, I would willingly sacrifice my life for the cause of

⁵ Stewart and Richardson, 28-29.

⁶ Ibid, 40.

God and my brethren.”⁷ Maria Stewart, like African American women in preceding generations, found empowerment in her Christian faith. Stewart used her religious beliefs as a basis for challenging race, gender, and class discrimination, thereby asserting the human rights of blacks as persons created in God’s image:

“Many think, because your skins are tinged with a sable hue, that you are an inferior race of beings; but God does not consider you as such. He hath formed you in his own glorious image, and hath bestowed upon you reason and strong powers of intellect. He hath made you to have dominion over the bests of the field, the fowls of the air, and the fish of the sea [Genesis 1:26]. He hath crowned you with glory and honor; hath made you a little lower than the angels [Psalm 8:5] and according to the Constitution of these United States, he hath made all men free.”⁸

Stewart, by linking scripture to the Constitution, demonstrated that religion could be a powerful political tool and the bible a potent weapon, when wielded by disenfranchised people in the war against injustice.

Shortly after her spiritual awakening, Stewart became friends with William Lloyd Garrison, who advertised and published her writings in the *Liberator*, his abolitionist newspaper. Stewart was also active in institutions founded by free blacks in Boston, among them the Massachusetts General Colored Association, which sought the immediate abolition of slavery in the United States. During her career as an activist in Boston, which lasted from 1831-1834, Stewart published a political pamphlet (1831) and a collection of religious meditations (1832), delivered four public addresses (1831-1832), and had her speeches published in *The Liberator*. Stewart distinguished herself as the first American woman of any race to speak publicly on political themes and leave extant texts.

⁷ Ibid, 29.

⁸ Ibid, 29.

Stewart's speeches and publications were addressed to a black audience. In Stewart's view the condition of free blacks in the North and enslaved blacks in the South were inextricably linked: "Tell us no more of southern slavery; for with few exceptions, although I may be very erroneous in my opinion, yet I consider our condition but little better than that."⁹ Stewart also spoke out against the plans of the American Colonization Society (ACS), a group founded in 1816, in an effort to appease two white factions, each of whom held conflicting ideas about slavery. The ACS sought to satisfy philanthropists, clergy, and abolitionists who wanted to free African slaves and repatriate all blacks to Africa, as well as white slaveowners who feared free blacks and wanted to expel them from the United States. Neither group believed that blacks could assimilate into white society. Stewart publicly denounced the ACS's schemes: "Now that we have enriched their soil, and filled their coffers, they say that we are not capable of becoming like white men, and that we can never rise to respectability in this country. They would drive us to a strange land. But before I go, the bayonet shall pierce me through."¹⁰

Stewart was a black workingwoman, whose experiences ran the gamut from unskilled domestic labor to highly skilled occupations. Stewart was a black woman who valued relationships, as evinced in her marriage and wide circle of friendships. Stewart was a literate black woman who used her ability to speak, read and write in the service of black freedom. Stewart was also a woman of profound religious faith, whose Christian beliefs provided a foundation for activism. Stewart was a pioneering black female abolitionist, and a defiant champion of women's rights. Her speeches and publications, which were addressed to a black audience, were uncompromising and controversial. Her

⁹ Ibid, 45.

¹⁰ Ibid, 64.

bold political activism did not emerge or exist in a vacuum. Her activities on behalf of the African American struggle for liberty, independence, and full civil rights had deep roots in an earlier era. Stewart's demands for liberty, autonomy, and self-determination built upon earlier battles fought by black women in Massachusetts.

Black women in eighteenth century Massachusetts lived, labored, married, bore children, and forged ties with other enslaved females, as well as with their white owners and patrons. They reasoned, and some of them learned to read and write. Occasionally they embraced the faith of their Puritan masters and mistresses and in the process they sowed seeds whose fruit would eventually transform a theology of oppression into a philosophy of resistance that would bring an end to slavery and lead to a society ordered by the principles of justice.¹¹ Thus Maria Stewart's activism and achievement can be traced to an earlier history of African American women whose aspirations and struggles for freedom, equality and self-determination were largely unfulfilled. Stewart, together with other black abolitionist women, built their struggles for freedom upon the legacy of black females who longed for liberty though entangled with the yoke of bondage.

¹¹ Piersen, 149.

APPENDIX A. Advertisements For Sale

1. Number of enslaved females advertised for sale, 1700-1783

By Newspaper ¹

<i>Boston Evening Post</i>	301	(26%)
<i>Boston Gazette</i>	252	(22%)
<i>Boston Newsletter</i>	217	(19%)
<i>Boston Post Boy</i>	168	(15%)
<i>Continental Journal</i>	7	(<1%)
<i>Essex Gazette</i>	50	(4%)
<i>Essex Journal</i>	2	(<1%)
<i>Massachusetts Spy</i>	13	(1%)
<i>New England Courant</i>	4	(<1%)
<i>New England Chronicle</i>	8	(<1%)
<i>New England Weekly Journal</i>	103	(9%)
<i>Weekly Rehearsal</i>	25	(2%)

2. Date of earliest notice of enslaved females for sale in collection

Boston News-Letter, June 12-June 19, 1704.

3. Date of latest notice of enslaved females for sale in collection

Continental Journal, March 15, 178.

¹Total number of advertisements in research sample: 1150. Additional note: Ninety-one percent (91%) of the advertisements in the collection were published in five (5) newspapers: *Boston Evening Post*, *Boston Gazette*, *Boston Newsletter*, *Boston Post Boy*, and *New England Weekly Journal*.

Appendix B. Advertisements By Decade

1. Number of advertisements by decade ¹

1704-1710	13	(<1%)
1711-1720	45	(4%)
1721-1730	65	(6%)
1731-1740	191	(17%)
1741-1750	217	(19%)
1751-1760	188	(16%)
1761-1770	315	(27%)
1771-1780	113	(10 %)
1781-1783	001	(<1%)

¹ Note: 79% of Advertisements were published between 1731 and 1770.

Appendix C. Advertisements By Month

1. Number of Advertisements by Month of Publication

January	79	(7%)
February	95	(8%)
March	92	(8%)
April	126	(11%)
May	117	(10%)
June	90	(8%)
July	84	(7%)
August	75	(7%)
September	85	(7%)
October	103	(9%)
November	102	(9%)
December	102	(9%)

Appendix D. Age

Number of advertisements in which age is indicated ¹

564 (49%)

Under 5 years 56 (10%)

6-10 years 15 (3%)

11-20 years 179 (32%)

21-30 years 250 (44%)

31-40 years 59 (11%)

41-50 years 2 (<1%)

¹ Note: 76% of advertisements that indicate an age specify females between the ages of 11 and 30.

Appendix E. Skill, Language Ability, and Disease Immunity

1. Number of advertisements indicating skill:

Needlework/Seamstress/Tailor	34	(0.3%)
Spinning	14	(0.1%)
Knitting/Carding	7	(<0.1%)
Farming	7	(<0.1%)
Dairying	9	(<0.1%)
Washing	28	(0.2%)
Ironing	17	(0.1%)
Brewing	6	(<0.1%)
Cooking/Baking	91	(8%)
Family Work	10	(<0.1%)

2. Number of advertisements of enslaved females for sale indicating English language ability:

61 (5%)

3. Number of advertisements of enslaved females for sale indicating disease immunity:

Small Pox	123	(11%)
Measles	1	(<1%)
Both	6	(<1%)

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 Boston Public Library (BPL)
 Congregational Library (CL)
 Essex County Probate Court File Papers (ECPCFP)
 Essex Institute Historical Collections (EIHC)
 Massachusetts Archives (MA)
 Massachusetts Historical Society (MHS)
 Massachusetts State Library (MLS)
 Middlesex County Probate Court File Papers (MCPCFP)
 New York Public Library (NYPL)
 Phillips Library, Peabody Essex Museum (PL)

Newspapers

Boston Censor
Boston Evening Post
The Boston Gazette
The Boston Magazine
The Boston News Letter
Boston Weekly Post-Boy
Continental Journal
Essex Gazette
Essex Journal
The Independent Chronicle and the Universal Advertiser
London Chronicle
Massachusetts Spy
New England Courant
New England Chronicle (Boston)
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