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**BIRTHING AMERICA'S KWEER:
MOTHERLESS CHILDREN PREACH
THE GOSPEL OF MERCY**

The quintessential source of music is the orphan's ordeal—an orphan being anyone denied kinship, social sustenance, anyone who suffers, to use Orlando Patterson's phrase, "social death." . . . Song is both a complaint and a consolation dialectically tied to that ordeal, where in back of "orphan" one hears echoes of "orphanic," a music that turns on abandonment, absence, loss. Think of the black spiritual "Motherless Child." Music is wounded kinship's last resort.

—Nathaniel Mackey

It is no surprise that W. E. B. Du Bois—one of America's best-known orphans¹—uses refrains from spirituals as epigraphs in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (1920) to make his enduring metaphors of the color line and double consciousness both plain and timeless. Taking Du Bois's prescient cue, one that virtually every major African American thinker before and since him has seized, I posit in this essay a meditation on the righteous indictment and radical kindness that these earliest African survivals² simultaneously enact, wherein a third source of insight on the ontological quandaries of blackness may be explored. For the past fifteen years, scholars such as E. Patrick Johnson and Sharon P. Holland have challenged us to mine this source, which inculcates aspects of black folks' love quotients that Du Bois's metaphors could not name. It is the quare: multivalent and

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measured, capable of modulating from aside to polemic as needed; it speaks when commanded to remain silent and quiets when commanded to confess and perform. Its performance captivates as repetition, irony, and a revisionist hermeneutic of mercy defy expectations, moving auditors of the elegiac spirituals to tears even today, an extended moan or wail harkening the anguish of the motherless children who created them. Thus, these songs have lain the foundation for what I call the great American *kweer*,³ a too-long-dead word pronounced the same as its fraught allomorph *queer* that I resurrect here because it encompasses more of "the strange meaning of being black," the liminal space Du Bois and other orphans know intimately, than its descendant ever could. For inside *kweer* lies another allomorph, *choir*, and by invoking the galvanizing power of collective performance in song, *kweer* allows scholars to ponder the quare as a more expansive path to enter conversations about black art that includes all who bear the diasporic burden of attenuating the legacies of chattel slavery on Americans' intimate choices across a spectrum of racial, sexual, and gender identities. This meditation on the quare aims to complicate decades-old conversations in Afro-pessimism about whom chattel slavery renders victim and whom it empowers to dominate. In liminal moments of performance, I argue, the quare sets free all orphans—the descendants of African slaves and those who cling to Europe's feudalism in denial that they, too, are lost Africans—to travel metaphysically and spiritually across time and space and temporize the ache of physical pain and unimaginable grief. Herein lies this *kweer*'s redefinition of mercy, a sonic dreamscape that exposes the absurdities of the racial hierarchies to which America remains enslaved while prophesying how it might become "one nation [of sundry nationalities] under [a syncretic conception of] God."

In his 1993 essay "Sound and Sentiment, Sound and Symbol," Nathaniel Mackey, as cited in this essay's epigraph, illuminates how the orphaned black child's strange (read: quare) metaphysical state compels African American verse. Taking a closer look at the lyricism in African American poetics—those that follow traditional forms and those, like the spirituals, that blur generic lines between narrative/prose and high lyric/lineated verse—allows scholars to hear the orphaned child's singular sound. This gift of the quare has haunted the colonies that would comprise the United States since the advent of the failed chattel slavery project in South Carolina in 1526 and race-based discrimination in the 1660s, especially in the wake of Bacon's Rebellion in 1676.⁴ Whereas Du Bois's

spiritual-grounded metaphors of the color line and double-consciousness advanced the conversation on a truly free America by bounds, the polyvalence of the quare goes even deeper to demonstrate that blackness—the most feared, abjected ontological state—is the home America cannot live without and is ashamed to love, so much so that the abjection of that love of these beautiful, dark, mirrored selves manifests as hate. Home, then, quite simply, is wherever blackness is free to define itself, sing of itself, love and manifest itself without equivocation—rather than simply be commodified for consumption and entertainment. The nameless architects of the spirituals intuited this truth. These *kweer* pioneers who knew a home before America aimed from the outset to plot a linguistic, choral path back there, through the fungible sound of the quare orphan. Their songs demonstrate on Earth the atonement awaiting those in the fledgling nation-state who heed the call to abandon the dying project of saving the human and live forever in the imaginative black space of the Spirit.

No other group has had a more consistent, effective means of exposing America's mendacity and simultaneously modeling radical kindness and empathy than black girls and women, often at once orphaned by the slave trade and forced prematurely to serve as the nascent nation-stater's mothers, both to black and brown children rendered motherless and white children who often failed to act to end their black mothers' (and siblings') suffering. While misogyny relegated their voices to brush arbor, field, and tavern choruses, these black mothers packed into each of their lyrical adaptations of Judeo-Christian dogma a message that aimed to liberate their children—those they bore and those who owned them, whom they also reared—from chattel slavery's physical and psychological chains. From those whose names gained acclaim, such as Massachusetts Colony barmaid Lucy Terry Prince and wunderkind poet Phillis Wheatley Peters, to the thousands of others in the nameless slave *kweer*, call-and-response exhortations in verse and song denounce their European American masters, likening them to Thutmose II, the Egyptian pharaoh whose enslavement of "the children of Israel" led to his demise. At the same time, these songs expose the hypocrisy of these American pharaohs' purported fight for freedom from tyranny while exacing unimaginable horrors on their darker mothers, brothers, sisters, and children. The "man from Galilee," Jesus of Nazareth, had been born, like these *kweer* witnesses, on the other side of the ocean, not far from their homes in West Africa, and they have sung about kinship to the oppressed incessantly ever since, tempering pain with a "sometimes" or an "ain't got long to stay here," even

bragging about their special relationship to an intrinsic wealth beyond human measures of financial and cultural currency and an immorality that surpasses the West's limited conceptions of moralism and the divine. The youngest *kweer* members among us today tout *nigga*, *swag*, and *black girl magic* as honorifics, hoping to transform millennia-old racist tropes into self-affirming declarations of spiritual independence and intraracial pride.

In doing so, they follow Wheatley Peters's use of *sable* in *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, immortalizing in September 1773 the wisdom that the nameless balladeers calling out the hubristic failings of white nationalist terrorism had divined in spirituals since they learned the language (and Calvinist narratives) of their oppressive pharaohs and turned them into melodic, merciful indictments. They also unconsciously call as witness another Massachusetts genius orphan from Senegambia, West Africa, who had made an indelible mark in New England, nearly a decade before Wheatley Peters would land on a Boston auction block, with a folk ballad so vivid even a child could learn and repeat it. She called herself Lucy Bijah, taking as her surname the first name of the black man who bought her freedom, fathered her six children, and secured an expansive Vermont farm for their family. However, white historians enshrined her story and her song with the name her master and her husband's master had given the couple, "Bars Fight"—Lucy Terry Prince's stark, haunting song recounting Canadian Abenaki Indian soldiers' August 1746 murder of six British immigrant invaders at the behest of their French's enemies—outlived the King George's War battle it describes by a century before it was published in print, thirty-four years after its lyricist's 1821 death, and fifty-four years after the tragic passing of Wheatley Peters.

This essay focuses on the exegetic protest and radical redefinition of mercy that the spirituals birthed and that Terry Prince and Wheatley Peters gave the masses. It traces the roots of the quare to the advent of the African American elegiac tradition and to its black mothers in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a tradition whose origin story has until now been androcentric and linked to Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* (1789), David Walker's *Appeal* (1827), and Frederick Douglass's *Narrative* (1845). Close readings of these earlier African American women exegetes, however, demonstrate how they endow Calvinist evangelical conceptions of mercy with African syncretic sensibilities and become lead singers in a *kweer* whose echoes keep reemerging in the popular

music of the day: the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries' minstrel tunes and gutbucket blues; the latter century's jazz, Motown, Muscle Shoals, Ala., and Philadelphia soul; and hip-hop, in all its iterations over the past half-century, East Coast to West to Dirty South, gangsta to "conscious." The *kweer*'s/quare's disruptive irreverence, game-changing word-play, and infectious moans, wails, and sonic affect dominate the airways today as the sound of "the trap," the colloquial name for urban and rural spaces where fugitivity breeds a creativity that thrives despite the state governance that ghettoizes black lives and subjectivities. These spaces—collectively functioning as Édouard Glissant's "womb abyss" to "generate the clamor of [black] protest" (6) that Fred Moten, Christina Sharpe, Alexander G. Weheliye, and others underscore as central to black constructs of potentiality—are as complex as any plantation was and as the plantation's reincarnation in America's prisons remain today. The storytelling that emerges from this bass-heavy music that features digitized and Auto-Tuned wails and moans are as astute in their transmutation of trauma for multiple audiences as any slave narrative, and I aim to show that these early black women exegetes' daring statements were just as risky in speaking truth to systems of white nationalist power, making it possible that all subsequent performers' wails and moans might be found and resonate with various audiences at the same time. Here I will explore how the quare as subversive protest song unfolds in irony, repetition, teleological juxtaposition, italicization, and even braggadocio in (1) the spirituals "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child" and "Hush. Hush. Somebody's Calling My Name"; (2) "Bars Fight," Terry Prince's account of indigenous warriors' brutal murder of would-be colonizers and their choice to show mercy to a white male child; and (3) Wheatley Peters's "To Maccenas" and sermonette "On Being Brought from Africa to America." These works birthed an ever-evolving liberation theology that the growing *kweer*—enslaved then, freer now—uses to expose the glaring white lies at the heart of Western religions' dogma as these canonical forebearers indoctrinate their perceived masters into African syncretic spiritual practices that fundamentally change those religions.

THE SLAVE KWEER: CHORAL WITNESSES ENACT

THE QUARE IN IRONIC REFRAINS OF PROTEST

The African *kweer* began moaning its complaints amid a torturous journey with other foreign cargo on ships ironically named the *Good Ship Jesus*, the *White Lion*, *Esperanza*, *Mercy*, and the like. From the beginning,

then, this *kweer* served as European colonizers' Greek chorus in the Americas, exposing the "queer institution" of chattel slavery and the pernicious mendacity of the United States' well-spun origin tales of revolution against an oppressive monarchy. Central to white American Christians' move from silent deference to God to heartfelt, open expression of faith during the Second Awakening were these momentary effusions that morphed into "ring shouts" and hollers in private worship services in brush arbors, plantation fields, and slave quarters. Excluded from white American churches, the enslaved were able to revel in African rituals they enjoyed in their native lands and meld them with their growing faith in a Christian Master, the liberator of Israelite Jews and so-called Gentiles like themselves, who would deliver them from the predations they faced from earthly masters.

The earliest written record of the slave songs, now canonized as "the Negro spirituals," is Isaac Watts's 1842 *Religious Instruction of the Negroes in the United States*. Yet these progenitors of African lyric poetry and elegiac protest in the Americas went undertheorized until late in the last century.⁵ Lauri Ramey compels deeper inquiry into the slave *kweer*'s exegesis of Protestant Scripture in song and defiant reclamation of their African worship practices in dance. Ramey rehistoricizes the marriage of secular and sacred imagery in African American poetry and makes space for a focus on resistance and protest in these songs. She characterizes them as "an extraordinary expansion of mind and an unbounded vision of time, place, and identification brought 'home' to the speaker, even if the speaker cannot travel 'home'" and as "a combined act of refusal and self-constitution" (58). This *kweer*'s use of "home," then, relocates the Puritanical, hypermasculine God's consciousness from Europe to Africa, where Christianity's predominant predecessor, Islam, and its sovereign, Allah, flourished for centuries, alongside a pantheon of genderqueer African and Afro-diasporic gods and goddesses. This *kweer* transformed quiet asceticism to proselytizing, especially against American laws reifying chattel slavery that conflict with freedoms the Christian God should afford all believers.

Through this lens, "Sometimes, I Feel Like a Motherless Child" and "Hush. Hush. Somebody's Calling My Name," like all other spirituals and African American elegies, become sonic vestiges of orphaned blacks' innate contravention against the mendacity of American racism. They eschew maudlin readings, and their words empower performers to conjure the ghosts of lost mothers' presence for predominantly white

audiences who eschew the pain these forebears' black and white children experience in their absence. Thus, the very meaning of being black shifts through black maternity and the quare. To be quare, as African American poetics has always been, is to be defiantly multigeneric, multimedia, multicultural, spiritually syncretic, and harmonious in a host of minor keys. In every written word, foremothers' cries come forth to carry us home to ourselves, our bleeding hearts longing to be rocked free of fear of white supremacist aggression, abuse, and theft. In this way, the simplicity of these spirituals' lyrics belie more complex messages. As easy to remember as any nursery rhyme, they remain ideal clarions, respectively, to expose chattel slavery's cruelty in destroying familial relationships ("Sometimes") and mobilize slaves planning to flee to freedom in the North or Canada ("Hush, Hush."). With the anaphora of "Sometimes," singers (and auditors) aim to mitigate—if not outright reject—the pain of feeling (or, in fact, being) bereft of a mother, a condition that seems at times permanent and implacable. Those who inhabit spirituals in performance most affectively know that this feeling of loss is not a perpetual emotional and metaphysical state; it does, in fact, pass, maybe even as acutely and quickly as the last breaths of these mothers, who can be conjured at any moment with incantatory, choral song. Thus, these spirituals' anaphoras and epistrophes convey slaves' and their descendants' revisionist relationship with orphanhood and Calvinism, whose tenets, duplicitously used to justify their enslavement, ironically undergird their subjugation to unimaginable physical suffering and their newfound understanding of spiritual liberation.

This syncretism of African and European beliefs and practices also pulses through "Hush, Hush, Somebody's Calling My Name." The spiritual's title refrain alone illumines two points of protest. The first exploits the forceful command of silence that Africans no doubt heard not long after their whimpers, screams, and cries began to unsettle those who failed to understand that, unlike animals, they were not chattel, not without voices to express their pain, anguish, and rage. To silence those who silence slaves in the name of their God with the same command that stifles slaves' cries to pre-Christian gods and ancestors is the most daring protest. It becomes all the more powerful once one considers the word's origins. Shortly after the Spaniards' failed attempt to occupy South Carolina in 1526 with their African cargo, the British inculcated *Hush* into English as a verb meaning "to impose silence upon" (*OED*), so it was likely common speech in the decades before Sir John Hawkins, a cousin

of Sir Francis Drake, would bring the first Africans to the Caribbean on what is now known as the *Good Ship Jesus*, in 1562. No doubt, the British immigrants who in 1619 traded goods for the twenty African orphans on a Dutch ship, the *White Lion*, spewed it at these inhabitants of England's first successful colony who were refused a path to citizenship. They, in turn, also read the word surreptitiously in the works of William Shakespeare, John Milton, and Alexander Pope, in the monologues of characters invoking a higher power than those oppressing them. As they do in each Negro spiritual, then, the *queer's* linguistic mirroring enacts a caesura as they shift focus, beginning with human limitations or unwillingness to show mercy and moving to divine intervention. They subvert biblical teachings of obsequience to earthly masters and appeal directly to the source to whom their oppressors must answer.

ALL IS FAIR IN WAR: WHEN "AWFUL CREATURES"

SHOW NO MERCY, SAVE ONE WHITE BOY

The quare begins to unfold in North America as soon as generals of developed Western nations' armies attempt to use those marked with blackness—including indigenous actors conflated with Africans because of their intimacies before Europeans' arrival—as soldiers in their territorial wars. These actors exercise the subjectivities they have enjoyed in the Americas before the dominion of whiteness and embrace fugitivity in resistance to Europeans' nationalist agendas. The earliest extant lyrical ballad in the slave *queer* canon and in African American literature, Terry Prince's "Bars Fight," offers a stark chronicle of these indigenous actors' savvy. In *The Black Aesthetic Unbound: Theorizing the Dilemma of Eighteenth-Century African American Literature* (2008), April C. E. Langley charges scholars to reexamine this ballad and its composer through this prism of protest, underscoring that "the Puritan-based ideologies of late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century captivity narratives of conversion are conspicuously absent" from it (157). The poem as published in 1855 is twenty-eight lines:⁸

August 'twas the twenty-fifth,
Seventeen hundred forty-six;
The Indians did in ambush lay,
Some very valiant men to slay,
The names of whom I'll not leave out.
Samuel Allen like a hero fout,

And though he was so brave and bold,
 His face no more shalt we behold.
 Eteazer Hawks was killed outright,
 Before he had time to fight,—
 Before he did the Indians see,
 Was shot and killed immediately.
 Oliver Amsden he was slain,
 Which caused his friends much grief and pain.
 Simeon Amsden they found dead,
 Nor many rods distant from his head.
 Adonijah Gillett we do hear
 Did lose his life which was so dear.
 John Sadler fled across the water,
 And thus escaped the dreadful slaughter.
 Eunice Allen see the Indians coming,
 And hopes to save herself by running,
 And had not her petticoats stopped her,
 The awful creatures had not caught her,
 Nor tommy hawked her on the head,
 And left her on the ground for dead.
 Young Samuel Allen, Oh lack-a-day!
 Was taken and carried to Canada.

Although Terry Prince's rhyming couplets certainly are devoid of conventional lyricism and narrative pique, the ballad's historical account offers telling insights on the politics of the day, and its resonance with Terry Prince's audience is evinced in its critical reception and publication nearly a century after she first performed it and nearly thirty years after her death. It documents the vulnerabilities of European Americans' fledgling pseudo-nation-state as she underscores the porosity of the borders of what would become the United States, pointing the African American imagination to Canada, which scholar Rinaldo Walcott calls "the most queer of diaspora spaces."⁹

"Bars Fight," which we should consider the first blues ballad, also introduces two aspects of the quare in the African American elegiac tradition at once. The first is the infectious cadence of blacks' lyricism in song, which Houston A. Baker Jr., in *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*, characterizes as a "matrix," "womb," and "code radically conditioning [black] America's cultural signifying" (3-4, 5). Simultaneously,

"Bars Fight" captures the authority that the black mother's voice commands to at once affirm Puritans' sense of moral superiority in the wake of a white family's massacre *and* to show nonwhite warriors' simultaneous capacity for both unflinching brutality and extreme empathy. In truth, the "very valiant men" Terry Prince extols in line 4 had no fighting chance on that Deerfield lea; thus, there lies in the ballad's title alone an obvious and desperate need for whites to endow themselves with agency over their fate, even when there clearly is none. In addition, what is unmistakable is that Terry Prince's voice and words were so powerful and indelible that their haunting resonance lived on in cultural memory and were passed down through two generations as a folk standard. What has gone too long unnoted about "Bars Fight"—given its prominence in concurrent Negro spirituals and in succeeding works by black male and female writers—is its countergaze on the vulnerability of white flesh as narratives of the circum-Atlantic slave-trading project and white supremacy proliferate. Terry Prince offers a rare perspective on racial stratification and racism as these concepts are being reinvented and revised in the Americas.

Blending the precolonial documentarian-journalist impulse with the African griot storytelling tradition into which she was born in her native Guinea, Terry Prince is, of course, absent from the poem's narrative itself. Yet her very absence has a palpable presence. Through her ballad's omniscient third-person point of view, she becomes the mythical voice carrying the multicultural, multiracial memory of a major event in the Canadian/French and British/American wars for colonized, not-yet-American soil. She is without question the first superstar soloist in the slave *kweer* tradition. She clearly comforts a community upended by trauma in "Bars Fight," calling each victim's name so that their suffering is not forgotten. Her insistence on calling attention to each individual in line 5 implicitly acknowledges their suffering and the pain each of their loved ones will endure. This choice contrasts the ironic ubiquity and impersonality of white male patriarchy and violence that Terry Prince had witnessed on her journey from West Africa to the land that would become the United States of America. She knows the confusion of being forced to answer to a name her mother and father did not give her, the pain of that original name being sublimated or forgotten, the trauma of being forced, in this new space, to accommodate others by pretending to ignore the physical scars and psychic keloidosis that comes with this level of abuse, loss, and erasure. Here, in this moment and throughout

the remainder of her ballad, Terry Prince comforts the Europeans whom she witnessed terrorizing people who looked like her. The sole adjectival attributes that will forever be sung about the white men associated with this "tragic" moment in not-yet-American history is that they were "valiant" (line 4); the only indictment of the natives will be that of calling them "awful creatures" (line 24). On their face, those seem fairly kind to the white men and judgemental of the indigenous ones. However, Terry Prince needs neither to state the implicit ironies of indigenous people being used as stand-ins for French Canadian whites' violence against British American whites nor to shout about the violent perils to which her own station subjects her. Her embodiment in song—lost to history, effigied until now—represents the vulnerabilities her own black female flesh may suffer at any moment at the hands of the surviving "valiant" white men who need bodies to assault as vengeance for the loss of their slain brethren, daughter, and sons. Last, Terry Prince's is the first black voice that situates Canada as a strange (I dare say square) space, free of colonial violence. Eight-year-old Sam Allen is taken to Canada, and it is there, accounts allege, living among the Abenakis, that he implored to remain once his family's sentries found him. Terry Prince knows the irony of this account of a white boy of presumed sound mind finding in a matter of months more joy in Canada than he had known in Massachusetts among the family into which he was born. Her poem's final lines, then, tacitly raise the question: Why would little Sam beg to live among such "awful creatures"?

In her journey from Guinea through the Caribbean to Massachusetts, Terry Prince had learned intimately what trauma does to make one complicit to the will of perpetrators of violence as well as that one might find friends among alleged enemies, who are more like family members than those to whom you are linked by blood. Moreover, in her song, Terry Prince makes sure that no one forgets these complex possibilities, that they coexist with an apparent simplicity and that they swing in a pendulum on the "black rhythm" of her black female voice and flesh. Here in the closing couplet, then, the orphaned Terry Prince gives her audience—one might call them her surrogate children, white and non-white alike—much to disrupt their notions of subject/nonsubject positions while acknowledging their grief. What/who is white(ness) and black(ness)? What of the indigenous/"red" blood in this menagerie of violence? What of the in-between mixtures of mind and flesh and, most of all, myth and (re)imagination? Critics' reference to "Bars Fight" as a

jaunty doggerel over the years, then, points to the everyday appropriation of black performance that fails to plumb the depth of blues lyrics or the power they hold in performance.

FROM HER BULLY PULPIT OF THE PAGE,

AN AFRICAN PRODIGY REDEFINES MERCY

Despite the contravening evidence, little scholarship has placed Phillis Wheatley Peters in her rightful place as one of the first African American exegetes. In fact, for the past quarter-century Jarena Lee and Maria W. Stewart, born free, respectively, in New Jersey and Connecticut, have been regarded as black women pioneers in the preaching of the Gospel. Scholars Chanta Haywood, Marilyn C. Richardson, and Valerie C. Cooper¹⁰ have made compelling cases for this pair as exegetes whose narratives of conversion and inculcation into American Puritanism inspired other African Americans to join their faith. The fervor that drove these African American women to become witnesses, however, springs from a deeper well that preceded their ancestors' arrival on US soil. At least a decade before Lee began writing, it was palpable in print in the orphaned prodigy's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*.

Before Eguiano, Walker, Douglass, Du Bois, and other men, Wheatley Peters set the tone for subversive, woman-centered protest by foregrounding the haunting pain and transformative power of the black maternal voice as she affirmed her native land's life-giving soil and reflected on her lost mother's spiritual rites and communion with nature. All the more awe-inspiring is that, like Terry Prince, the harbingers of the spirituals, and others in the slave *kweer*, this orphaned child expressed her grievances alongside subtle, exegetical interventions in the Calvinism and Puritanism into which she was indoctrinated while simultaneously comforting European American immigrants mourning their children's deaths. Coupled with aligning her mother's likely Islamic and traditional African faith praxis with the West's Christianity, Wheatley Peters's phenomenological interdictions in *Poems on Various Subjects* underscore the role of the black maternal as a generative bridge between sociocultural divides created by varied religious ideologies. With a frame that takes into account evidence in "To Mæcenas" that Wheatley Peters traces her artistic kinship to African writers and visual artists, I focus primarily on italicizations in Wheatley Peters's "On Being Brought from Africa to America" that underscore linguistic choices central to her foundational protest against white supremacist views about blackness/the quare.

Tracing the spirituals, the quare in Terry Prince and Wheatley Peters empowers scholars to chart subversive dissent in African American literature back to its advent in ways that deepen our understanding of post-structuralist discourse on black consciousness and black performativity. These readings trace an uncharted link between studies of the quare and the “countertradition” that scholars Jahan Ramazani and Max Cavitch so accurately name yet inadequately frame as, essentially, remixes of European verse with African “flava.” In *American Elegy* (2007), a definitive survey of the genre through the nineteenth century, Cavitch rightly identifies Wheatley Peters as initiating a “countertradition in U.S. literature” with *Poems on Various Subjects* (53), continuing the conversation begun by Ramazani in his 1994 text, *Poetry of Mourning*. Ramazani, like Cavitch, devotes one chapter to the foundational role of Wheatley Peters in the American and African American elegiac traditions and brackets the African American elegy in ironic quotations as, to the unsophisticated eye, “a contradiction in terms or a redundancy” (134). Noting the “politically coded” verse of Wheatley Peters, whom he calls “the mother of the African-American elegy,” Ramazani traces a traditional genealogy of black elegists “re[m]a[king] the Eurocentric genre in their own image” (135–136).

In the past decade, Tom O. McCulley and Vincent Carretta have brought Wheatley Peters’s work into queer discourse more directly. In “Queering Phillis Wheatley,” McCulley rejects reading her poems as subservient odes to benevolent enslavers, their friends and loved ones but reifies her accepting a position as an “othered other” (*New Essays* 201). He acknowledges the performativity at work in the voice she presents in her book, yet he reads her elegiac laments as earnest expressions of her limitations as a slave, missing their implicit ironies and satirical potential, given her role as an evangelical exegete. “To Maecenas,” for example, introduces the ironic juxtapositions that satirize white evangelicals’ sense of racial superiority. In this poem, Wheatley Peters not only posits herself as an intellectual, artistic peer (honoring patrons from the present day and distant past alongside Greco-Roman Muses, showing her agility with the rhyming couplet) but also flaunts her lineage as unapologetically African and equal under the auspices of the Christian God and the *accepted* pagan ones. With this poem and others in her only extant collection, Wheatley Peters also forces the nonblack world to face its foundational lie: Black voices, minds and flesh, all marked by the aggrieved maternal, are more, not less, capable of making impactful art of language. Racist

phenomenologies that assert the supremacy of white heterosexual male desire indict themselves with their myriad pocks. That too often blackness is presented as an isolated monolith, an Other, a magical/exceptional Negro “problem”—even by admirers like McCulley and Carretta, author of the definitive *Biography of a Genius in Bondage*—is a troubling trope that Wheatley Peters’s poetics flouts time and again.

Wheatley Peters single-handedly nullifies the now-infamous notions of blackness purported by Kant and others of the Enlightenment, situating her people as a “sable race,” a point of pride rather than shame and akin to the most prized fur being traded at the time. In the fifth stanza of “To Maecenas,” Wheatley Peters invokes the venerable Carthaginian Roman playwright Publius Terentius Afer, known in the canon as Terence, and aligns herself with a fellow African credited with writing the definitive early Latin translations of classic Greek plays. Their collective literary acumen, she implicitly states, calls into question the US chattel slave system, which attempts to reduce pre–Middle Passage African historicity to narratives of illiteracy and animality. In defining an Afro-diasporic imaginary that rejects subjugation to any other forces than those of the divine, Wheatley Peters points readers’ attention to the philosophies of African Greco-Roman slavery that her and Terence’s respective masters espoused. Like Terence and Terry Prince, Wheatley Peters was afforded an education, and in pointing to Terence’s oeuvre, she notes that all of the slaves and ex-slaves in his plays, particularly Syrus in *Heauton Timorumenos* (*The Self-Tormentor*) and Parmeno in *Eunuchus* (*The Eunuch*), recur as literary tricksters challenging the absurdity and intractability of white supremacy dating to antiquity in the face of prerequisite, precursory, and contemporaneous African subjectivities.

As African American writers have often done before white witnesses, Wheatley Peters frames herself not only as an interlocutor for black slaves in America but also for white Americans fashioning a national identity separate from their British (and otherwise European) ones, the latter of which she bears out more fully in an elegy for a family friend, George Whitefield. In the process of identity translation and transformation, her use of heroic couplets signals that she has, in fact, studied Dryden and Pope. However, she does as Audre Lorde would instruct all writers invested in the quare in “Poetry Is Not a Luxury,” exactly three hundred years later: She circumvents the white patriarchal gaze on her verse by going metaphorically above these and other white men’s heads. “To Maecenas,” her collection’s opening poem, seeks the blessing of African Greco-Roman

patrons of the arts as Wheatley Peters challenges her Muses (and her critics) to reconsider the measure of "partial grace" (line 39) endowed to Terence's mind and flesh. Has not this grace been endowed to her as well? she asks the divine forces (along with, tacitly, her white readers and any black and otherwise Othered ones who, as Scripture says, "hath ears to hear"). Terence was first, she says in the sixth stanza, but she too will prove herself worthy of their "paternal rays" and "propitious" favor.

Throughout *Poems on Various Subjects*, Wheatley Peters's elegies—for Whitefield, for an anonymous "young lady of five years of age," for a "young gentleman," and others—position her as both comforter of those in mourning and prophet revising traditional Judeo-Christian rhetoric of heaven and the hereafter. In her most anthologized poem, "On Being Brought from Africa to America," her use of capitalization, italics, and direct quotation underscore the satire readers easily envision springing from the minds of white men (Dryden, Pope, Milton, Shakespeare, etc.), who have used the rhyming couplet before her and since. Her satire's evangelical ingenuity is no less obvious in the poem's opening line, as Wheatley Peters lowers *mercy* and capitalizes *Pagan*, reversing readers' expectation that she give deference to that which is holy and denigrate that which is degenerate. Wheatley Peters knows that ships with such ironic names as *Mercy*, *Esperanza*, and the *Good Ship Jesus* displaced Africans throughout the Western diaspora, and she knows the ironic source of her own name. At the same time, she understands that the Christian God she has come to embrace in America is as integral to her literary success as the pagan gods who will be useful for her poem's arguments. For example, Aurora recurs as a stand-in metaphor for both the pagan Greek goddess and symbolic reclamation of the Islamic practice Wheatley Peters likely knew in Senegambia of praying at dusk and dawn in the direction of the sun. She references Aurora in many poems, often linking her to the mother from whom she was taken, whom she cannot name in the patriarchal society that governs her verse. As she plays to her white audience of benefactors and fans, who are overwhelmingly Christian, she winks at those in her audience, then and now, who know the pagan African pantheons she dare not name.

Thus, in the closing lines of her most canonized poem, Wheatley Peters protests the degradation to which African Americans have been subjected by those whites professing faith-based values and, like Terry Prince, frames a reviled (black) person's violence under the auspices of the divine. "Some view our sable race with scornful eye, / Their colour

is a diabolic die: / Remember, *Christians*, *Negro*s, black as *Cain*, / May be reft'd, and join th' angelic train" (lines 6–8). If Africans in the Americas must bear the phenotypic mark and curse of the Bible's first murderer, they must also carry his legacy. In God's punishment of Cain, he was forced to toil the earth where he had killed his brother, Abel; however, anyone who harmed Cain would be punished seven times more than he. Wheatley's invocation of Cain's legacy in the closing couplet not only states what should be obvious to evangelicals—that all who accept Jesus Christ as Savior should have access to heaven—but also warns racist, abusive slaveholders that their mistreatment of their African kindred will not escape God's (and their captives') retribution. In this way, typographical play throughout *Poems on Various Subjects*, *Religious and Moral* provides a book-length foundation for the African American *kwee*r's elegiac protest tradition.

Indeed, as Terry Prince's haunting ballad makes clear, this *kwee*r's roots in the quare are inextricable from radical violence and mercy that evolved to constellate subtle exegetical and sociopolitical critiques in the late eighteenth century through spirituals such as "Sometimes, I Feel Like a Motherless Child" and "Hush. Somebody's Calling My Name." These songs, passed from griot to griot, formed a sonic narrative arc that complicated the false written narratives of African slaves as happy participants in the chattel system, setting the record straight, making clear that not only were they victims whose families are irreparably damaged but also spiritual atavists who have the Almighty God of the Jews on their side. This opaque arc came into fuller focus when Wheatley Peters's *Poems on Various Subjects*, *Religious and Moral* expanded the exegetical interventions through which she and other black female exegetes challenged Calvinist Puritanism's racism and misogyny, highlighting the divine's care for those the Christian Bible seems to mark as "pagan"/Cain's spawn/nigger/queer. While the problematics of an atavistic and "magical Negro" trope are not lost to me, I find recent scholarly and creative reclamations of *black girl magic* an encouraging development.¹¹ These scholars understand that black women should be exalted as progenitors not only of liberation theology but also of a long arc of protest, rooted in the quare, voiced in a freedom *kwee*r that continues to preach a gospel of righteous indictment and divine mercy amid mourning all that chattel slavery and colonialism have left in their wake.

This critical *kwee*r's mothers are the means through which we can attenuate the virulence of the white supremacist gaze such that the

self-affirming power of an African diasporic consciousness can be mined. They include the operatic soprano lilt of Elizabeth Taylor-Greenfield, Maria Selika Williams, Maude Sissieretta Jones, Leontyne Price, and all who have followed; the bluesy moans of Ma Rainey, Ethel Waters, and the Smith trio (Mamie, Bessie, and Clara); the offbeat scats of Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, and their jazz progeny; the stirring gospel and rollicking rock of Clara Ward, Mahalia Jackson, Big Mama Thornton, and Rosetta Tharpe, and all the divas they inspired, whose scale-bending belting invented and innovated American popular music and culture, including Dionne Warwick, Aretha Franklin, Diana Ross, Roberta Flack, Minnie Riperton, Tina Turner, Donna Summer, Gladys Knight, Patti LaBelle, Whitney Houston, Mariah Carey, and Beyoncé; the multifarious, disruptive hustle and flow that hip-hop's Salt-n-Pepa, Queen Latifah, M. C. Lyte, Lauryn Hill, Missy Elliott, and Lil Kim torqued and freaked, making way, most recently, for the queare to birth a new wave of trap gospel and sex positivity in the bars that Nicki Minaj, Janelle Monáe, Megan Thee Stallion, and Cardi B have brought, alongside an awakening of womanist praise of living legends and ancestors on American and African soil in the verses of Rapsody.¹² Thankfully, there are far too many to name. This vast *kweer*'s merciful wonder awaits.

NOTES

- 1 Du Bois was orphaned at sixteen when his single mother, Mary Sylvia Burghardt, died. See *Darkwater*, particularly the essay "The Damnation of Black Women" and the poem succeeding it, "Children of the Moon," in which he offers a sobering indictment of the ways black mothers' lives are cut short by labor, disease, and other emotional and physical traumas.
- 2 In *Slave Songs and the Birth of African American Poetry*, Lauri Ramey deploys this historiographic intervention to name this music "both new and a recuperation of something ancient by heartening back to models spanning from classical Greek tradition to the ballad tradition" (19). She cites it as the origin not only of African American poetics but also the free-verse experimentation of imagism and "high" modernism and the elements of performance that define postmodern Beat and contemporary slam poetics.
- 3 Joylene Valero Sapinoso's dissertation, "From 'Queare' to 'Kweer': Towards a Queer Asian American Critique," offers an important intervention that launches in a different direction than my invocation of the allomorph for "queer." It's exciting that both avenues lead us to new paths of self-identification for people of color. See my review of Kathleen Pfeiffer's *Brother Mine: The Correspondence of Jean Toomer and Waldo Frank* (2010) in *Callaloo*, vol. 37, no.

- 3, pp. 735–738, for my earlier ruminations. The words that would lead to contemporary definitions of *queer*—spelled, according to the 2nd edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *kweer* and *queere* in the singular and *queers* and various allomorphs in between in the plural—first appeared in historian Robert of Gloucester's 1325 *Chronicle* of the Brits and Normans and Reformation pioneer John Wycliffe's 1382 Middle English Bible, a translation of the fourth-century Latin Vulgate. This early *kweer* described churches' lead singers, the plural spelling specifically associated with Jewish temples' cantors (review of Pfeiffer 60). In this way, *kweer* evolved, essentially retaining its core meaning, until it became the contemporary *choir*. The Irish dialect's introduction of *queare* is significant because its emphasis on strangeness offers positive connotations of intensity and exceptionality in quantity and quality, all the more impactful when one considers that it emerges from Britain's least "white" denizens.
- 4 See Michael Guasco, "The Fallacy of 1619: Rethinking the History of Africans in Early America," *Black Perspectives*, 4 Sept. 2017, <https://www.aahs.org/the-fallacy-of-1619-rethinking-the-history-of-africans-in-early-america/>, and Cheryl Harris's "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review*, vol. 106, no. 8, June 1993, pp. 1717–1725.
- 5 See Douglass, where he uses this phrase to make this temporality achingly clear, both in discussions of his mother in opening pages and reflections on his grandmother throughout. Moreover, the darning choice to precede despairing lyrics with "Sometimes," often bayed rather than spoken or sung, continues from Douglass and the chattel era to present-day R&B and hip-hop. Bilal and Fetty Wap evince wails, respectively, in their hits "Sometimes" and "I Wonder," which are prominent examples of this refrain's invocation of the queare at the bookends of this century.
- 6 Lauri Ramey's insights fill gaps in Michael W. Harris's *The Rise of Gospel Blues: The Music of Thomas Dorsey in the Urban Church* (Oxford UP, 1992), Richard Newman's *Go Down, Moses: A Celebration of the African-American Spiritual* (Clarkson Potter, 1998), Robert Darden's *People Get Ready! A New History of Black Gospel Music* (Bloomington, 2004), and other historiographies.
- 7 In *Playing in the Dark* (Harvard UP, 1992), Toni Morrison characterizes this Othering of all marked as nonwhite as an "Africanist presence" that reemerges in whites' literary imagination. She fictionalizes the manifestation of these complex subject positions in precolonial America, before racial markers and hierarchies were codified, in her novel *A Mercy* (2008).
- 8 Terry Prince's account is likely secondhand. Her original lyrics cannot be known; what we teach is that which was remixed in the white imagination for more than a century. Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina's *Mr. and Mrs. Prince: How an Extraordinary Eighteenth-Century Family Moved Out of Slavery and into Legend* (Amistad, 2008) separates Terry Prince's truth from myth.
- 9 See Walcott's entire oeuvre, particularly "Outside in Black Studies: Reading from a Queer Space in the Diaspora," *Black Queer Studies*, 2005, pp. 90–105,

for discourse on Canada's role in conceptions of black liberation, and see Cassander L. Smith's *Black Africans and the British Imagination: English Narratives of the Early Atlantic World* (Louisiana State UP, 2016) for accounts of black Africans in precolonial America. Africans lived among Indigenous Americans long before chattel slavery. Accounts of Africans in what is now Alabama date to the 1540 Battle of Mabila, and others are documented in the regions that would become Canada. Despite the persistence of small-scale racial slavery in Canada prior to 1833 under both British and French rule, this nation represented a fantasy of freedom, particularly for indigenous peoples displaced by European American colonialism. African- and Caribbean-born people of color in Canada were able to enjoy a modicum of independence and access to capitalism a full generation before their enslaved American peers. Some would found cities, namely Jean Baptiste Point du Sable, the man of mythical Haitian and French Canadian descent who married a Potawatomi woman and with her inhabited the land that would become Chicago. It is not a stretch to conjecture that black Africans were among the Abenakis who led the 1746 Deerfield massacre.

10 See Haywood's *Prophesying Daughters: Black Women Preachers and the Word, 1823-1913* (U of Missouri P, 2003), Richardson's *Maria W. Stewart: America's First Black Woman Political Writer* (Indiana UP, 1988), and Cooper's *Word, Like Fire: Maria Stewart, the Bible, and the Rights of African Americans* (U of Virginia P, 2011) for analyses of the Puritan rhetoric these women proselytized.

11 Essays by Aria S. Halliday, Nadia E. Brown, and Sarah E. Whitney in *Girlhood Strides*, vol. 11, nos. 1-2, and *Souls*, vol. 20, no. 2, provoke thought, and poet Malogany L. Browne's children's book (*Roaring Brook Press*, 2018) and edited anthology (Haymarket Books, 2018), both titled *Black Girl Magic*, await scholarly engagement.

12 See my long-form essay on Rapsody, "Queen of Snow Hill," *Oxford American*, no. 105, Winter 2018, pp. 136-143; also accessible at <https://www.oxfordamerican.org/magazine/item/1629-queen-of-snow-hill>, and listen to her new album, *Eve* (Jamaica Records, 2019).

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