

foremother love

Phillis Wheatley &

Black Feminist Criticism

dana murphy



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Marta Gonzalez Murphy, *Phillis Looking Forward*, 2024. Pencil on watercolor paper, 9 × 12 inches. Author's personal collection.

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black feminism on the edge

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foremother love

*Phillis Wheatley and
Black Feminist Criticism*

DANA MURPHY

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For Mami and Mima

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Writing the preface to my book is an act of autonomy, yet it is one that connects me, inevitably, triumphantly, stickily, to the prefaces that precede my own. It is an act that harks back to works like the 1970 anthology *The Black Woman*, by Toni Cade (Bambara), in which her preface commences with this empowered call to action: “We are involved in a struggle for liberation.” When Bambara proceeds to outline the various ways that traditional, long-established academic disciplines have ignored or obfuscated the study of Black women, she paves the way for “a beginning—a collection of poems, stories, essays, formal, informal, reminiscent, that seem best to reflect the preoccupations of the contemporary Black woman in this country.” While understandings of Black feminisms (plural) increasingly both include and extend beyond Black women, I, along with Bambara, am hopeful about marking out another kind of “beginning.” Across archive and genre, I gather the ensuing pages to clarify my own thoughts and to engage other scholars via citation and conversation—what otherwise would have evidenced itself in “a habit [of writing] letters to each other,” “treadmilling the same ole ground.”¹ Indeed, part of why I write is that the person I refer to within these pages as “Phillis” is both nowhere to be found within *The Black Woman* and yet is everywhere informed by and connected to the concerns of Bambara’s pivotal anthology.²

Although Phillis herself is not individually featured in *The Black Woman*—among mentions of Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Mary McLeod Bethune, Ella Baker, and Fannie Lou Hamer—echoes of her story appear therein and across Bambara’s work. In an interview with Claudia Tate, for instance, published in Tate’s 1983 *Black Women Writers at Work*, Bambara describes how challenging it was to write her first novel, *The Salt Eaters* (1980), while she balanced academic and community work and the work of mothering her daughter as a single parent: “The short story, the article, the book review, after all, are short-term pieces,” entailing “work

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for a few days,” but a novel was “a way of life.” A novel required time “to master the craft, to produce, to stick to it no matter how many committee meetings get missed,” which resulted in “periods . . . when [Bambara was] just unavailable.”³ Tate’s introduction to *Black Women Writers* presents Phillis and Bambara as part of a continuum. She emphasizes, “Black women writers did not suddenly begin to write in the 1970s,” but there was “continuous literary activity among black American women ever since Phillis Wheatley in the eighteenth century.” Many of these women, however, lacked the privilege of publication and flourished only in brief flash-points garnered from their own resources, or their work was “hidden away from the world by both choice and fortune,” complicating future scholars’ efforts to study (with) them.⁴ If we extend Tate’s efforts by reading Phillis as a Black woman writer at work, we may recognize Phillis’s attempts to make space for her craft and life in the same way we do for her future counterparts.

Rather than read Phillis and her poems as constrained by the historical context from which they emerged, a complex and often delimiting strategy for understanding Black writers who were enslaved, this book reads Phillis as a key participant in a longer transhistorical conversation within Black feminist thought. For example, the ways Phillis’s work was once presented to the public has left a lasting—but, for me, unconvincing—impression. About two hundred years prior to *The Black Woman*, the publisher’s preface to Phillis’s 1773 book, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, began thus: “The following Poems were written originally for the Amusement of the Author, as they were the Products of her leisure Moments. She had no Intention ever to have published them.”⁵ This “protest” may have been, as Julian D. Mason Jr. writes, “traditional” of the time, but the reasons it reads as a faux pas to readers today will also serve to preface my own book.⁶ Today, few are likely to read with seriousness Phillis’s 1773 *Poems* and its paratexts in total isolation given the many intervening histories and texts contextualizing the ascription of Phillis’s literary prowess to “the Importunity of many of her best, and most generous Friends; to whom she considers herself, as under the greatest Obligations.”⁷ Indeed, one later tradition would preface Phillis quite differently, a specific movement—named a few years after the publication of Bambara’s anthology—devoted to “writing about Black women writers from a feminist perspective.”⁸ In the 1970s and thereafter, a growing “Black feminist criticism” would validate readers’ expertise in the subtext wrought through Black writers’ lives and work.

The future-to-past application of Black feminist criticism to retroactively read Phillis and others also functions valuably in the inverse: past-to-future. As Farah Jasmine Griffin wrote in 2002, "*The Black Woman* is not a black feminist text as we have come to understand that term . . . [but it] paved the way for an emerging black feminism that came to flower in the late seventies and early eighties."⁹ Phillis's poems and letters, Bambara's anthology, and other texts and materials indicative of Black feminisms from past to present continue to contribute to our increased understanding of its extensive parameters. In 1977, when Barbara Smith heralded Black feminist criticism as "a consistent feminist analysis" that "Black women writers and Black lesbian writers exist" and are not "beneath consideration, invisible, unknown," she built on shared knowledge of "the political, economic and social restrictions of slavery and racism [that] have historically stunted the creative lives of Black women."¹⁰ This book also understands and works within the complexity of Black feminist criticism as both a late twentieth-century term arising from a unique period in literary history and an analytic that has broader historical influence and shape. This two-pronged approach enables us to understand why a writer like Phillis is invisible in works like *The Black Woman*, and yet be able to use works like *The Black Woman* to provide methods for understanding Phillis (and vice versa). As Black feminist criticism is taken up by future scholars and writers, it continues to challenge temporal-spatial restrictions in many directions, radically reconceiving our understanding of the when and where from which critical work originates.

Black feminist criticism is still often associated with literary critics publishing within academia or with writers working simultaneously as professors, but this perspective requires one to be mindful of the ways racial capitalism has structured, and still structures, academic halls. For example, Audre Lorde, who later worked as a critic and professor, began her career writing poems while working as a librarian and later explained in her 1984 book, *Sister Outsider*, that this was because poetry was "the most economical" form of art, having spent "the last few years . . . writing a novel on tight finances."¹¹ This should help us understand why writing individual poems (often addressed to prominent individuals) also worked well as a medium for Phillis to gain support and readers, while her commitment to crafting a *book* of poems was also a "struggle for liberation," in Bambara's sense, as its publication led to Phillis's manumission thereafter.¹² In other words, sometimes poetry functions as prefatory work to criticism, and sometimes it is the reverse. Sherley Anne Williams published her only

critical book, *Give Birth to Brightness* (1972), while she was beginning work as a professor, and only later would be able to publish the books of poems and the novel she really wanted to write (while still teaching). For her own part, Bambara “chose not to enter completely into the academy,” demonstrating that “the sites of intellectual work are always shifting.”¹³ Even when she was teaching in the university, her “mellowness scented the room like lavender.”¹⁴ Likewise, Black feminist criticism will be engaged in this book as it blurs into spaces in and beyond the academy, drawing Black feminists variously in and out. Whether Black feminist critics were removed by force or left teaching by choice to pursue better opportunities elsewhere, I explore each critic’s leave-takings (or imaginations of leaving) in order to better understand their values and goals in their unique contexts.

Thus, while the above literary-historical moments of prefacing speak well to the scholarly questions I ask herein, they are offshoots of a larger expressive context that itself prefaces my work. In terms of how I found my way to this project, *Foremother Love*’s roots began long before I or, by extension, anyone in my family had any direct means of participating in this conversation in academia. I grew up in a multiracial family in a historically Black neighborhood on the northwest side of Altadena, California, and attended a private elementary school that prided itself on being interdenominational and multicultural—though what I remember most are the forms of secular expressive cultures that traveled through my group of friends in the form of dances, songs, and other modes of shared performance. In other words, outside of class, we were often left to our own devices to “study” what we wanted: ourselves and each other in a community often composed of our own celebration. I remember dance parties, where we made up our own dances to popular contemporary songs; “poem parties,” where we recited works by famous poets and orators; and slumber parties, where we play-acted all manner of 1990s “girl power” imaginings. In many ways, this interdisciplinary environment would predict the scholarship I would do later in life. But I do not remember thinking too far ahead during childhood about what my college environment was going to be like. I just assumed it would be something like TLC’s music video for their 1992 song “Baby-Baby-Baby”—an extension, in other words, of the kinds of Black feminist sociality and the safe space of the historically Black women’s dormitory I already had access to, at least in part, in my elementary school and after-school program.¹⁵ Unfortunately,

this safe space all but disappeared when my parents moved my sister and me to public school a couple of cities away, only fifteen minutes west.

Gone were the affirmative parties of my earlier youth and the spaces where I and others like myself were celebrated. Middle and high school were largely replaced by a predominating culture of whiteness.¹⁶ Yet select Black feminist expressions survived.¹⁷ For example, 2007 is a pivotal year in this book, as it marks a shift in the concentrated moment, among the deaths of several originating theorizers, of the first generation of the tradition of literary and cultural thought first named thirty years prior, in 1977, Black feminist criticism.¹⁸ The year 2007 is also when my mother, an administrative assistant then in her early fifties (working at the technology institute where I would later teach as the first assistant professor of Black studies and English in its history), came home one weekend afternoon during my last summer of high school and gave me a CD that she and her friend—both Black women who had immigrated to the United States as children from Cuba and Belize, respectively—had found earlier that day in a thrift store. Though she often gave me music I loved, I'm not sure why exactly my mother placed this album—released in the mid-1990s, with a Black woman singer looking off into the distance on its cover—in my hands. Nevertheless, I must have listened to Etta James and her musicians' interpretation of jazz standards across her 1995 album *Time After Time* hundreds of times in the coming months. It felt like I was listening to a version of myself. Hers was a music that signaled something to me far from our tiny unincorporated town on the northern edge of Los Angeles.¹⁹ Something I could not yet articulate on my own.

Time After Time. The album my mother and her friend gifted me felt like it was my soul's own. An inheritance. I knew I had latched onto something that reminded me of my early Altadena years, something that was keeping me alive and that I couldn't let go. As I pondered the album's sound and meaning, I began to practice critical imagination and let the work help me think some things through. I now understand that listening to the album was an early act of resistance, and a preface to my later work as a Black feminist critic. But in 2007, as a student in a predominantly white public high school and town, I did not have much in the way of academic resources to learn more about the singer, her historical context, and what this album could have meant to a wider community of listeners. I had yet to discover that a criticism that could speak to the experiences of others like me had been taking shape across the institutions of literature,

music, art, scholarship, and more, long before I was born. By listening re-iteratively, I was treating James like a “foremother,” someone whose work I admired and connected to in an emotional sense but whom I could not yet—or struggled to—connect with across the broader textures of my everyday life. It was not until many years later that I read an autobiography by James and learned that although our lives had in several ways been different, we shared many similar experiences and ideas about Black women’s expressive histories and about maternal lines of thought, survival, and rage.²⁰ The question was how to interlink my solitary practice of listening to Black women with a living practice of Black feminist criticism as an academic, teacher, and writer within, again, a larger community.

Along my journey toward the work of this book, I recognized Phillis’s work as beautiful in the same way I recognized James’s album. While I don’t recall reciting Phillis’s poems at the poem parties hosted by the multicultural private elementary school I once attended, I learned about and recited the work of other Black poets and writers from a young age. I first remember encountering Phillis in my early teens when I read my mother’s copy of Dudley Randall’s 1971 anthology *The Black Poets*.²¹ Later, as a doctoral student in English at the University of California, Irvine, I returned to Phillis, or she returned to me—in coursework and across the texts in my qualifying examination reading lists. In the tradition of Black criticism, I saw how often she was read, how she defied exhaustivity. She was often (though not always) conferred honor by critics only because she was a foremother—the first or nearly the first—and often because her later readers were starved for choice in that matter. However, scholars and creative writers’ differing accounts of their encounters with Phillis across a variety of archives and literary traditions—some positive, some glaringly vexed, and most deeply ambivalent—seemed to suggest the existence of a body of critical labor she helped generate, a criticism that was so often then richly applied to other writers. Accordingly, I argue herein that the critical energies that have gathered around Phillis in a way resembled my early survival strategy: listening to one beloved album over and over again in wait of, or perhaps in preparation for, a criticism that could do more.

In my doctoral dissertation, I wrote about how Phillis wrote poems that enabled her (future) readers to say what she could not. In this book, I take the opposite tack. Like Etta James in the jazz album my (fore)-mothers gifted me—who I later learned made the album because she wanted to sing songs made influential by her foremothers (including Etta Jones) as a way of returning to herself and what she wanted to sing²²—I

want to participate in a criticism that I believe Phillis began. I want to do criticism that feels like the party epistemology (knowing how to party) of my youth, like the feeling of study in the context of the dorm in TLC’s “Baby-Baby-Baby” video—understanding that, in the absence of such critical attending, these practices become vulnerable to erasure. Rather than make any claims about her being silenced, which, in many ways I suppose she was, I want to celebrate Phillis by writing this, my own critical work, on the way to a poem. I want to celebrate her by writing a poetics based on reading her life, her work, and the Black feminist context that, in turn, has enabled me to understand her. What would happen if we listened not just to Phillis, her (abridged) poems, or her biography, but also to all the ways that critics have listened to her over the years, and especially to the ways that those crafting a Black feminist analysis have listened to her? In what follows, I aim to problematize before returning, possibly more lovingly, to the idea of the foremother, and to what it means to provide care for those prior members of our literary lineage. As it stands, this project is a lamentation for the free spirit that was Phillis as well as the version of myself I was at thirty-one (Phillis’s estimated age when she passed away).²³ It is something of a praisesong. Something like foremother love.

—PALO ALTO, CALIFORNIA, JUNE 2024

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naming ceremony

A legacy is not static. It is not suspended in the time frame of the birth and death of the person. Rather, it is like a poem. It imparts to each person who encounters it an affirmation, a confrontation, or an indulgence.

—MELBA JOYCE BOYD, *Discarded Legacy: Politics and Poetics in the Life of Frances E. W. Harper, 1825–1911*

I was born too late to have been able to take the Poetry for the People (P4P) course designed and taught by June Jordan (1936–2002) in the Department of African American Studies at the University of California, Berkeley (UC Berkeley), between 1991 and 2002. And I didn't get a chance, when I was a UC Berkeley undergraduate shortly thereafter, to take the version taught after Jordan's passing due to cancer and offered by Aya de León since 2006.¹ Nevertheless, all these years later it is one of my favorite courses to keep thinking about. In video recordings of Jordan's class meetings with her "student teacher poets," she looks so relaxed and often sits with her forearm rested on the back of the chair beside her—a deferral of her status as the professor and a sign of invitation to her students to become the teacher poets who would not only co-instruct their peers but also offer their knowledge and skills to communities in and beyond the Bay Area. It is not Jordan who asks, "Okay, so what are we doing today?" about fifteen minutes into class on February 13, 2001, but one of her students.² Indeed, much of the class is spent in cheerful student-facilitated discussion of, not so much the content of recent P4P lectures—how to understand a specific "poetic genre, history, or tradition," or close reading or workshopping students' weekly poem assignments—as how to navigate various pedagogy-related issues and questions: attendance, grading, and so on.³ I can sense Jordan's interest in each and every turn in the conversation, how she often leans forward to listen to and laugh along with her students gathered around the table. In other words, the lesson was about learning to ask one another, "How are we going to be together?"⁴

I understand these questions to be part of a naming ceremony that centers a collaborative and continuously reflexive ethic when it comes to defining one's academic praxis. Indeed, I hope this book reads more like Jordan's "student teacher poet" classes than their lecture counterparts. As I've been thinking about this project in one form or another for over a decade now, earlier versions were composed of the groundwork studying that might be well suited to a lecture. Many previous scholars of the figure I refer to herein as "Phillis" (as part of a tradition of Black feminist naming I will unfurl in the coming pages) have already provided knowledge of her life and work within more traditional disciplinary formats.⁵ What follows is not just my own contribution to the field of thinking about, as Tara Bynum writes, "what the poet Phillis Wheatley thought about as she brushed her teeth," but also what I thought about all the times I was brushing my teeth during the writing of this book.⁶ Like other young scholars entering the profession during and after the end of the Obama era, my career began with mentors warning me of the precarity of the now profoundly adjunctified contemporary university.⁷ My own transition from working in public land-grant universities to a private technology institute also meant going from having access to monumental research library systems to working with a single humanities librarian to build a collection in my field. Writing a book on Phillis that drew on a body of knowledge most of my technoscience students had never even heard of was a singular, albeit challenging, opportunity to think, teach, and write like I was reinventing the wheel. This impossible task gave me, at the very least, the breathing room to listen to the unruly student within who kept asking of herself as well as the university and the world, "What are we doing?"

This question is also an extension of the question Jordan asks multiple times across her 1985 essay "The Difficult Miracle of Black Poetry in America or Something like a Sonnet for Phillis Wheatley." Reflecting on Phillis's childhood survival of the Middle Passage and the moment she arrived to be auctioned in Boston, Jordan asks, "Was it a nice day?" The question's second instance appears after Jordan describes, or imagines, the Wheatley family eating breakfast, leaving home ("ordered the carriage brought 'round") to head to the auction, where they would then purchase and enslave Phillis. The question then becomes a refrain, always broken off onto its own line, repeated five more times across the essay, functioning like a skip in a record, a jolt in repetition that causes the reader to be confronted again and again with the fact that underlying Phillis's (vexed, according to Jordan)

poetic output is her lived experience as enslaved. Reflecting on Phillis's most famous poem, "On Being Brought from Africa to America," and its "assertion" of a Black identity before slavery, Jordan asks, "Where did that thought come to Phillis Wheatley? / Was it a nice day? / Does it matter?"⁸ Jordan never answers these questions outright in her essay, but they ring out and continue to demand response. On its face, and in its first mention, "Was it a nice day?" reads innocently enough, like a mere query on the weather, but with each subsequent repetition it becomes a clearly voiced critique. In forcing attention on the everyday factors surrounding Phillis's enslavement, Jordan connects readers to someone who might otherwise exist only at a historical remove. She also posits the argument (by asking "Does it matter?") that the material lived experience surrounding Phillis's poetry does indeed matter.

In this book, I present new research on Phillis's lived experience and how it shaped her poems while at the same time demonstrating how the lived experiences and labor of Black feminist critics of Jordan's generation have shaped that said research in generative ways. Altogether, it is a work rooted in archives, criticism, and poetics that reads the work, life, and afterlife of Phillis in the context of Black feminist criticism. Following Melba Joyce Boyd, I argue that Phillis's "legacy is not static. It is not suspended in the time frame of [her] birth and death." Indeed, throughout this book, I read Phillis's "legacy" like I would "a poem," as variously "an affirmation" of liberative thoughts, as "a confrontation" with power, or as "an indulgence"—as pure joy, pleasure, or peace.⁹ As I follow new or revisited moments along the wide arc of Phillis's legacy, my analyses move temporally between the late eighteenth and twenty-first centuries, while tilting more toward the significance of reading Phillis alongside the articulation of "Black feminist criticism" starting in the 1970s. Thus, this term is alternatively used to describe, depending on the context, either a distinct body of work by late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century literary and cultural critics, following the earliest published articulation of Black feminist criticism as a term by Barbara Smith in 1977 in "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," or a transhistorical criticism whenever critics or writers from earlier time periods evidence work that is suggestive of Black feminist critical values. Overall, it is important, to this critic, to define Black feminist criticism (a subset of Black feminist thought) with some looseness, celebrating the ways it is picked up and remixed by practitioners past or future, deepening our capacity to read in new, different, and flexible ways.¹⁰

Beginning with works like Alice Walker's 1974 essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" and culminating in Nellie Y. McKay's (1930–2006) passing and subsequent memorialization by her colleagues, Phillis is often present in key texts by and about Black feminist critics. When she is invoked, as in June Jordan's 1985 essay "The Difficult Miracle of Black Poetry in America," it is often with a combination of awe for her survival of the abject conditions of chattel slavery and a vacillating assessment of her poetry as at times "graceful and musical" and at other times, due to her fidelity to the conventions of her time, "awful, virtually absurd."¹¹ In McKay's 1998 essay "Naming the Problem That Led to the Question 'Who Shall Teach African American Literature?'; or, Are We Ready to Disband the Wheatley Court?" Phillis's literary success is curtailed by her having to prove her authorship, a concession that is indicative to McKay of the ongoing shortage of support for Black literary scholars.¹² Sometimes, however, Phillis is not invoked at all. Even so, I read her alongside the articulation of Black feminist criticism via its other corresponding works of literature and culture from many critics and writers hailing from diverse academic institutions and other intellectual sites.¹³ For example, Phillis does not appear in some of the most famous extant Black feminist critical works, including Barbara Smith's 1977 essay "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" as well as the 1977 Combahee River Collective "Statement," which is not a work of "literary analysis" but has "functioned," as Arlene R. Keizer writes, "as an empowering manifesto for black feminist literary critics."¹⁴ Accordingly, this is not a book about Phillis's influence in a linear sense, but a theoretical meditation on the condition of her divine presence, and at times absence, as a shaping force within the Black feminist critical tradition in published as well as unpublished settings, including archives.

Archival work often demands long hours of labor, unexpected travel hiccups, and, ultimately, uncertain returns, but it is one of a few areas of contemporary academic life that provides the possibility of a kind of research that confounds traditional disciplinary constraints and tidy canons. Rather than uphold the authority and totality of the select works that have been published, it can be a radical way to dance in the aisles of history.¹⁵ While the space between memory and record is often where Phillis found her groove as a poet, and many of her poems evidence a subtle choreography as they navigate the use of poetic language by an author who was enslaved, we know she did not have the leisure or luxury to preserve her own personal archive, and all its ephemera, in its entirety. What remains extant (letters, one volume of public-facing poems, a handful

of additional public-facing poems, two proposals for a second volume, and maybe two copybooks) pales in comparison to what we would most certainly wish to find. We wait with bated breath in hope that someone discovers her diaries, her lost second volume of unpublished poems, “personal” poems (i.e., love poems for Obour), a lock of her hair—or, best of all, something so unexpected yet familiar we would not have recognized we had always longed for it until we suddenly chanced upon it.¹⁶ Since we have not received such news and expect none, perhaps we may afford her something else: the ability to move freely in the possible space of the unrecorded. Such porous archival boundaries are traversed in the works, published and unpublished, of many future Black feminist critics, not limited to poems that have validated the importance of creative, as well as critical, speculation in our engagement with Phillis’s life and work.¹⁷

Far from the distanced foremother or “progenitor” at the beginning of the canon, Phillis has lived on in the published works and unpublished archives that developed out of Black feminists’ lives, work, and all too often untimely deaths.¹⁸ Reading her as she appears within the wider archives of several future Black feminist critics and creative writers, especially those who often rejected “the politics of respectability” that predetermined the narrow pathways to power and privilege within their disciplines, opens alternate contexts for understanding Phillis’s creative and critical work.¹⁹ For her future counterparts, Black feminist criticism was a way to perform and practice an imperfect and messy love—both intrapersonal and interpersonal—that nevertheless proclaimed their determination, venturousness, and sense of a free self beyond others’ attempts to further the opposite. Rather than embody an unrealistically optimistic rubric for solidarity, Black feminisms continue to navigate complex questions of affinity and difference. For example, while several works of Black feminist criticism praise Phillis and claim her as a foremother without hesitation, even more critique her quite severely, in what could also be read as instantiations of the darker side of foremother love, wherein critique does not mean a lack of love but does point out a thornier relation. This enables us to theorize Black feminisms beyond a solidarity rooted in cohesion and may help us better understand the perhaps more roughhewn work of Black feminists who have not been held in popular regard and who remain understudied by a criticism primarily focused on positive legacies. From unpublished letters and extant drafts of novels and poems that were never published, to the notes that laid the groundwork for works of criticism that were never attributed primarily to them, Black feminist

critics demonstrated how much of their labor went unrecognized and unrewarded during their lifetimes. Their archives also provide insight into the roots of creative or critical success: constant strivings for due compensation, recognition, and resources—sometimes via unconventional academic channels as well as personal networks, a legacy shared by Phillis and by critics today.

Thus, in conjunction with acts of homage (or admonition), Black feminist critics have also indexed Phillis when they grappled with hardships like those that she experienced and when they asked questions that she also raised by virtue of being Black in times of ongoing white supremacy. Such works include but are not limited to Black feminist ephemera as survival work, writings on the state of Black people in academia, elegies and other genres of mourning (e.g., a growing archive of memorial essays and poems for Black feminist professors), and more. This book will not just tell Phillis's story in the way readers have heard it told countless times before, but it will evidence her significance for the development of a specific Black feminist critical practice that I term *foremother love*. In crafting this concept, I return to Barbara Christian's definition of Black feminist criticism as "a response to the writer to whom there is often no response, to folk who need the writing as much as they need anything."²⁰ I define *foremother love* as the Black feminist expression of the love (however complex) of a distantly related or even unrelated feminist ancestor as a legitimate relation in which to practice inheritance, mourning, celebration, and, if not friendship, collegiality. Foremother love is my description of a specific kind of Black feminist critical response; not all instances of Black feminist criticism are foremother love. As I will discuss in the following chapters, Phillis's own varying practices of fictive kinship with, and estrangement from, the figures in her poetry—as well as members of her community with whom she corresponded—predicted the many kinds of affective attachments future readers expressed for herself and others. Foremost among these will be their records of the academic, administrative, quotidian, and unexpected ways in which Phillis lives on, via foremother love, in Black feminist criticism and Black studies generally.

With regard to who might consider themselves a Black feminist critic who practices foremother love and who is the recipient of such scholarly study, some may assume that most accounts of Black feminisms privilege Black cis women at the expense of all other identities. However, my inheritance of this field is one that understands a long-standing intention to root the tradition in care for our society's most marginalized constituents

and, others by equitable extension, a Black feminist foremotherhood that is written for LGBTQ+ people, such that “women,” when used across this book, refers to both cis and trans women.²¹ Contemporary Black feminist scholarship has been shaped by the theoretical contributions of gender-queer theorists and theorizing, enabling us to recognize that while several of the Black feminist critics studied in this book were cis women, they often practiced gender queerly by subverting gendered expectations and resisting legibility and visibility within cisheteropatriarchal critical lenses. Thus, I wish to reclaim the word *foremother*, which has so often been used to demarcate a distanced if not staid literary ancestor, as a term for someone who is, as Janet Mock writes, “celebrated” for being a “spiritual healer,” “cultural bearer,” “caretaker,” and “instructor.”²² Whether one prefers to use *foremother* or the gender-inclusive term *foreother*, *foremother*—as I use it across this book—should be understood as blurring the gender binary, affirming gender nonconformity and diverse sexualities, and welcoming the possibilities that become available for study as a result. Further, while *foremother* might have once meant something narrow, *foremother love* is an extension of my study of a genderqueer Black feminist criticism and urges us to love all who understand themselves (and all whom we might understand) as fore(m)others.

It perhaps goes without saying that I was not alone while I wrote this book. Communicating what I know about Phillis and other Black feminist critics has also required bridging a variety of other disciplines. In addition to a selection of Black feminist critical works (and works about Black feminist criticism) that are engaged throughout, this book builds on criticism and theory on a variety of topics that have helped provide a model for my approach herein. In the 1980s–90s, select Black literary scholars reinvigorated the critical conversation on Phillis in various ways, which I aim to build on here.²³ In addition, works in Black poetry and poetics inclusive of or beyond Black feminisms of the period I focus on have been important models.²⁴ I have also been inspired by several works in white feminist or white women’s historical poetry and poetics.²⁵ More recently, scholars of Black feminist literature and theory broadly have revisited the latter half of the twentieth century in ways that have been generative for this project.²⁶ And as previously noted, there are several recent extant biographies of Phillis (and recent creative reimaginings of her life), as well as many older versions of such works—and I try to cite from whichever is most definitive in order to ground what I can in the historical record. Everything else is my own, and at the time of this writing there are no other recent

scholarly monographs on Phillis read as a single-author or defining figure via a literary critical theoretical perspective, though there are an increasing number of book chapters and works in academic journals.²⁷ *Foremother Love* is a scholarly monograph on Black feminist criticism generally as well as an intellectual reflection on Phillis—the first book to read Phillis as a Black feminist critic in concert with a collective of critics, my attempt to fulfill a wish to assuage the isolation she faced at the end of her life. Overall, to cite Nellie Y. McKay, the book aspires to the following practice: “If you found something, you let everybody else know what you found. You didn’t keep it to yourself.”²⁸

From Foremother to Black Feminist Critic

As I approach the subject of naming, I invoke what Barbara Christian says toward the close of “The Race for Theory”: “I can only speak for myself. But what I write and how I write is done in order to save my own life. And I mean that literally.”²⁹ That being said, the following marks one way—my own—to think about Phillis’s life and afterlives, how she saved her own life, mine, and many other lives in between, even while the conditions of those lives have shifted across time in various levels of proximity to the genres of social death. Thus, my approach to naming often differs from that of other contemporary scholars.³⁰ As you may have already noticed, I mainly use the name Phillis (as June Jordan did).³¹ My writing about Phillis is attentive to her feminist selfhood, our fictive kinship, and the possibility of her embodied guiding voice, in the same vein that guides similar methodological acknowledgment by Black feminist scholars across diasporas. For example, in *Pedagogies of Crossing* (2005), M. Jacqui Alexander introduces “Kitsimba—not the [archive’s] plantation name Thisbe,” but the “true name” of “one of those captured and forced into the Crossing,” whose very knowing “confront[s] the limits of . . . methodology.”³² Likewise, M. NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!* (2008) is coauthored, “as told to the author by Setaey Adamu Boateng,” while the bottom-of-the-sea-like margin of each page of *Zong!* becomes a memorial to all the renamed, discursively transforming bone into being.³³ Similarly, I refer to her intentionally as Phillis, a name for the woman who existed in between the institutional documentation of slavery and marriage. While some have recently taken to calling Phillis “Wheatley Peters,” which combines the

names of her enslavers and her husband, I prefer not to use this approach, since I largely focus on Phillis's feminist and queer relationships with other Black feminist critics past and present in my book, including with her colleague-friend Obour.³⁴

Of course, Phillis itself is also a vexed name, as it is the one ascribed by the Wheatleys in reference to the ship the *Phillis*, "her Christian name presaging her in its dark wet wood."³⁵ I retain it only to reclaim it, as I imagine she herself did, given that she retained this first name even as a freedwoman. Such a name also signifies in memoriam her counterparts in the African diaspora, who were connected via and forged into new subjectivities within the hold of such a vessel.³⁶ As Meta DuEwa Jones writes, "Phillis's natal name is a keyword."³⁷ As I am also a Black diasporic subject, albeit now some generations from my ancestors' experiences of the Middle Passage, I have come to feel an intimacy with Phillis that is also a loss, as though I am both speaking to and about an ancestor of my own.³⁸ I also concur with Frances Smith Foster and Nellie Y. McKay, who experienced a sense of intimacy due to the experience of conducting long-term research together on their 2001 *Norton* critical edition of Harriet Jacobs's narrative, and referred to their project by her first name, Harriet.³⁹ In addition to its resonance within the contexts of Black feminist criticism, Phillis's name has several other ties. For example, "the given name Phillis, which means leaf or foliage, suggests a pastoral world and indeed recalls Virgil's Phyllis from the *Eclogues*."⁴⁰ In Latin, Phillis means "the name of the daughter of King Sithon of Thrace, who was changed into an almond tree, a stock female name in poetry"; "a pretty country girl; a female sweetheart"; and "a pretty or dexterous female servant."⁴¹ As Phillis was an avid poet, I like to believe that her name combines the modern Black diasporic feminist as well as classical Latin poetic influences she embodied in her life and work. All this is to say that throughout this book I refer to Phillis using her first name as the best current expression of a number of my own scholarly investments. Further, if I could choose, my chosen full name for her would be Phillis Divine, taking up the word *divine* that she was so fond of in her poems as a term of endearment and a way to express my own foremother love for her.

The following story has been told before, and as readers of this book likely already know something of it, I'll not repeat too much of what has already been said. Typically, biographical or other scholarly accounts of Phillis's life begin with some version of the following: In 1761, a kidnapped Black African child (born ca. 1753) survived the Middle Passage and was

renamed after the ship that bore her, the *Phillis*, and the Boston family of enslavers, surname Wheatley, who exchanged money for her flesh; a little over a decade later, the now young woman saw to the publication of her book of poems during a trip to London, ensuring that something of hers would transcend the violent conditions of her early life; however, she died of illness and poverty in 1784 (it is thought that her three young children died along with her). Stories about Phillis often begin this way due to an influential, though specious, memoir published by a distant member of the Wheatley family in 1834.⁴² Thus, I devote the ensuing pages to a different telling, one that is more about how particular literary histories and texts have shaped our epistemological relationship to Phillis. While this book could have focused more on responses by early Black feminist critics and writers from the late nineteenth century, who tended to read Phillis positively, I've found they often also read the Wheatley family as benevolent in ways that are no longer supportable by the historical record.⁴³ Early twentieth-century Black male literary scholars tended to relegate Phillis to the eighteenth century, without having any particular aesthetic or political investments in that project.⁴⁴ Black Arts Movement or Black masculinist readings beginning in the 1960s decried that so few of her poems reference her enslavement.⁴⁵ More recently, scholars of "Wheatley studies" (now commonly called "Wheatley Peters studies") often emphasize reading her in her original eighteenth-century context.⁴⁶ Finally, those working on Phillis in the field of "historical poetics" privilege "the practice of reading [her poems] from the histories and theories of reading that mediate our ideas about poetry."⁴⁷ Overall, this book is grateful to the above methods of reading, even as it builds on them toward another analytic.

The task of Black feminist criticism of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries was how to adequately respond to issues of identity and lived experience (e.g., race, gender, sexuality) and issues of literary representation (e.g., history, poetics, theory). Phillis has long presented a barrier to this field because she is not, as previously noted, archivally transparent along all axes of her being or output. Thus, she became a "foremother," a term that functions as a placeholder, demarcating moments where Phillis continues to confound scholarly understanding.⁴⁸ Largely, ascriptions of Phillis as foremother are invoked with regard to her curious literary historical precedence, that is, her position as an early or even first figure in the timeline of Black access to the publication of "books" rather than Black "material culture" broadly.⁴⁹ Sometimes, or in conjunction

with this, Phillis's foremotherhood is also understood primarily within discourses of pregnancy and childbirth (carrying and then bearing or "birthing" the Black literary tradition).⁵⁰ In many cases, when Phillis is introduced in either of these contexts, it is perfunctorily and without further interrogation of the ramifications of these claims—eliding a range of possible critical-affective relationships that readers have had or may have with Phillis. Meanwhile, Phillis's intensified foremother status has meant that she may be deeply unpopular and ubiquitous at the same time—all the while only perfunctorily critically engaged. Complicating ideas of literary output or childbirth as standalone or solely definitive events—a revision of Phillis as not merely a foremother who writes and/or gives birth but a foremother whom we love for doing these things and more—could widen the field of possibilities in which she is allowed to interact as a living participant across the Black feminist critical tradition. This would entail showing Phillis a different kind of foremother "love," and demonstrating care for and recovery of her as an extension of our flesh. It would entail engaging Phillis both as a foremother and as a Black feminist critic, as someone who is often held apart yet who is part of that history of holding.

To call Phillis a foremother as well as a Black feminist critic is to claim, I argue, that it is not her ubiquity but, rather, the uneven way she appears across Black feminist criticism that demands not merely our attention but also our love. For example, when figures like "Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Frances E. W. Harper, Ida B. Wells Barnett, and Mary Church Terrell" gain mention by name in the Combahee River Collective statement, it is in conjunction with the "thousands upon thousands unknown," whom readers are encouraged to recognize as "our mothers and sisters."⁵¹ Similarly, in her introduction to the teaching guide to *Black Foremothers*, Barbara Christian writes that the biographies of Black women that do "exist are about women for whom there is readily available information," and she emphasizes the importance of the "ongoing effort to research, preserve, and write the history of black women."⁵² While Phillis occupies a unique position as a historical figure in that she is, as of today, the subject of several biographies and scholarly works, she still remains difficult to encapsulate due to what Tara A. Bynum, Brigitte Fielder, and Cassander L. Smith discern as "a general politics of white supremacy that has for centuries made the study of Wheatley a vexed proposition."⁵³ Phillis's position as a freedwoman who wrote most of her literary output while she was enslaved has also led many scholars to throw up their hands. While Bynum, Fielder, and Smith root much of this trouble in white supremacy,

this book will explore the ways in which various racialized and sexualized oppressive dynamics have impacted the attention given to recovering Phillis within Black feminist criticism specifically. As Samantha Pinto writes, “a black feminist epistemological orientation”—“a method of reading the political” in Phillis “through and with uncertainty” that “emphasizes vulnerability and interdependence as viable visions for black study”—enables us “to interpret generously and generatively through loss.”⁵⁴ Indeed, as pre-2007 Black feminist critics’ careers shifted and institutions changed, their analyses of Phillis have ebbed and flowed with varying levels of influence and power. Yet this is precisely why Phillis has remained an anomalous figure beyond any one person’s influence and is far more legible within the discourse of what Black feminist criticism desires than some of its early proponents might have fathomed.

Accordingly, this book will read Phillis as a collaborator in the tradition of Black literature not only as someone whose poetry is invested in solicitations of response but also as someone whose work as a Black feminist critic—sustaining, sharing, explaining, and responding to her work and its wider contexts—suggests “there is still much more to Wheatley’s story that we have not yet explored.”⁵⁵ In fact, within the body of thought that has come to be known as Black feminist criticism, Phillis remains perpetually connected to several critical aspirations in quite complex ways, aspirations that include but are not limited to the desire for an overarchingly positive story of the tradition, a wish for synchrony between creative and critical work, and the maintenance of a shared idea of what constitutes Black feminist identity, friendship, and sisterhood. In terms of Phillis’s own writing, again, most of her output was published while she was enslaved. Across this book, my close readings of her poems attend to their poetic effects and their historical contexts.⁵⁶ But because I am reading Phillis both as a poet and as a critic, I also read the ways her letters and other material surroundings respond to, and sometimes change, the original meanings of her poems. In this way, my readings of the poems look something like Elizabeth Catlett’s 1946 linocut *In Phillis Wheatley I Proved Intellectual Equality in the Midst of Slavery*, wherein Phillis is depicted in an inverted version of her 1773 frontispiece image (this time she is facing the right), while the additional image of three enslaved women traverse—or join—the immediate background on which she is beginning to write.⁵⁷ Few works have imagined Phillis in an act of lived solidarity with other everyday Black people. Thus, *Foremother Love* seeks to change the stories we tell about Phillis and about Black feminisms—as they are

theorized by her, her contemporaries, and other Black feminist critics past and future.

From Black Feminist Critic to Foremother

Barbara Christian (1943–2000), one of the early theorizers of Black feminist criticism, proclaimed in a 1982 speech at the Center for Research on Women at Stanford University that Phillis’s “poetry reflects little of her identity either as a Black or a woman.”⁵⁸ Christian then concurred with Alice Walker, another early theorizer of Black feminist criticism (especially a version she termed “womanism”), who had written in 1974 that “it [wasn’t] so much what [Phillis] sang, as that [she] kept alive, in so many of our ancestors, *the notion of song*.”⁵⁹ Christian’s assessment of and agreement with Walker regarding Phillis’s shortcomings arose during a pivotal moment in her career as a Black feminist critic and by then tenured professor of African American studies at UC Berkeley.⁶⁰ Having recently published her first book, the 1980 *Black Women Novelists*, and her 1980 *Teaching Guide to Accompany [Dorothy Sterling’s] “Black Foremothers,”* it was just a few short years before Christian would publish her 1985 essay collection *Black Feminist Criticism*. Although Phillis would not feature extensively in any of these works, Christian’s (dis)acknowledgment of Phillis in her 1982 speech, later published as an essay in *Black Feminist Criticism*, provides a useful rubric for understanding Phillis’s position in the tradition of burgeoning literary criticism on Black women writers. Understandably, Phillis could not receive ample study in Christian’s book on Black women novelists, nor in her teaching guide to Dorothy Sterling’s *Black Foremothers* (which presents biographies of Ellen Craft, Ida B. Wells, and Mary Church Terrell).⁶¹ Instead, it is in the expansion of authors and genres under study across Christian’s *Black Feminist Criticism*, where Phillis makes a brief entrance as part of Christian’s critical tradition, albeit only as a “curio.”⁶² Today, Christian’s inability to fully interpret Phillis within her discipline’s critical lexicon, from the foremother to the Black feminist critic, calls out for understanding and redress.

To foreground a better understanding of Christian’s critical context as well as a call for redress is to acknowledge the conditions in which all Black feminist critics work. In other words, any foremother’s vulnerability to mistake or misfortune, no matter how distanced they may seem from

us, may one day be our own fate to share. Frustratingly, as will be discussed throughout this book, many Black feminist critics experienced systemic discrimination in their everyday and work lives in ways that paralleled the inequities Phillis experienced even after she was manumitted—often to the point of “premature death.”⁶³ Just under two hundred years after Phillis passed away at the estimated age of thirty-one in 1784, Audre Lorde (1934–92) asked the readers of her 1980 book, *The Cancer Journals*, “What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence?”⁶⁴ Thus, I argue that one reason Phillis has not been the sole subject of any Black feminist critical book is the paucity of Black feminist critics to begin with. In response, I want to take this moment in my own career to break the silence that Lorde alludes to—the silence that stifled Phillis as well as many late twentieth-century Black feminist critics, and which still largely imperils my generation—while I have momentary capacity and the resources to do so. For to be a Black feminist critic today is to live in a somber reality. In addition to Lorde’s untimely passing, several other major Black feminist critics renowned for reaching the pinnacle of academic stature and success have also passed away of cancer before their time, including Christian, McKay, Jordan, and Sherley Anne Williams (1944–99), truncating the first generation of official Black feminist criticism, which had begun to burgeon from the 1970s to the late 1990s and early 2000s.

Several scholars have also noted the prominence of this cancer cluster.⁶⁵ Ann duCille, in 2011, attributed the deaths of Christian, Jordan, McKay, Williams, as well as Sylvia Ardyn Boone (1940–93), VèVè A. Clark (1944–2007), Claudia Tate (1947–2002), and “too many others,” to the “stress” of “our work environments.”⁶⁶ Biographer Vincent Carretta also attributes Phillis’s premature death to what was likely a combination of her being unable to find a publisher for her second volume of poems; the imprisonment of her husband, John Peters, for “debt”; and her ongoing vulnerability to the “asthmatic condition that had afflicted Phillis in previous winters.”⁶⁷ Thus, this book will mourn the collective misfortune of the loss of recent Black feminist critics’ lives alongside Phillis’s own early death as a negative legacy that demands continued response. Contrary to academic disciplines that understand the critic as a solely professional role separate from one’s subject position, this book will necessarily understand Black feminist critics’ lives as intertwined with their work. Furthermore, I argue that the Black feminist critics under study herein were doing such a great deal of labor to recover the tradition of African American and Black

literature generally that they likely did not have time to recover an archivally complex figure like Phillis, and even if they did, doing so would have required access to the Black feminist critical language that they were currently developing. Thus, I maintain that via the Black feminisms they practiced in their lives and in their critical work, Phillis's future Black feminist counterparts ensured that her story would not be forgotten. Indeed, the way contemporary Black feminist critics have written about each other has inspired the way I write about Phillis herein.

In 2000, when Christian passed away from lung cancer at the age of fifty-six, Ann duCille wrote a tribute essay memorializing her life and work. DuCille noted how quickly Christian had died (their colleague Sherley Anne Williams had passed away from cancer just the summer before), especially given that they had recently spoken on the phone about, among other things, "the health and well-being of black women in the academy."⁶⁸ In Christian's own tribute essay following Audre Lorde's passing in 1992 due to breast cancer, Christian wrote, "I am stunned, unprepared, though I should not be."⁶⁹ Indeed, as more and more Black feminist critics died prematurely in the 1990s and early 2000s, Black feminist memorial tribute works quickly became an elegiac tradition in their own right. Over and again, the authors of these elegiac remembrances have grappled with how to memorialize these mourned figures as they passed from the role of the living Black feminist critic to that of the foremother. Writing in tribute of these figures, these authors were establishing Black feminist criticism as a mode of cultural inheritance powerful enough to bestow "nothing less for its subjects than everlasting literary life."⁷⁰ DuCille noted Christian's discomfort with "generational metaphor[s]" like academic mothers and daughters, given "her own sense of marginalization" and concern about whether anyone "would freely choose a low-status mother and focus on intersections of race, class, gender in Afro-American women's literature."⁷¹ The increasing prevalence of the Black feminist tribute essay demonstrates that several major academics indeed saw people like Christian as worthy of being foremothers.

Of course, *foremother* is not a term that Christian would likely have used to describe herself or her colleagues as modern-day scholars. In Christian's tribute to Lorde, she wrote that Lorde "refused to be limited to any one category, insisted on being all that she was: poet, black, mother, lesbian, feminist, warrior, activist, woman," imitating the elongated descriptions Lorde herself often used to self-identify and thus truly paying "tribute" to Lorde.⁷² Christian also deferred the stricture of a single definition in

terms of her own praxis and selfhood, writing in the introduction to *Black Feminist Criticism*, “What is a literary critic, a black woman critic, a black feminist literary critic, a black feminist social literary critic? The adjectives mount up, defining, qualifying, the activity. How does one distinguish them?” Similarly, while the word *foremother* and the phrase *Black feminist critic* predate my scholarship, my use of them here is idiosyncratic to my own critical propensities and desires. Nevertheless, I strive above all to remain true to the ethos of Christian’s theorization of Black feminist criticism, including her mandate that “reading is itself an involved activity. It’s a response to some person’s thoughts, and language, even possibly their heart.”⁷³ Christian’s emphasis on the possibility of reading the “heart” of someone’s writing underlines the significance of affective response within the body of responses that one might gather loosely under the title of Black feminist criticism. Christian could have easily demarcated the lines of what Black feminist criticism was and what it was not. Instead, she invited her readers into the tradition in ways that would require them to involve themselves in Black feminist criticism’s definition, shifting the onus of responsibility away from Christian as the solitary expert and onto an array of Black feminist critics stewarding and extending its tenets and values.

Accordingly, this book will unfurl the history and status of the figure of the Black feminist critic with a similar attention to the ways it has, sometimes purposefully, sheltered a fair amount of definitional ambiguity. Rather than underpin a stable concept of Black feminist criticism, the archive often presents questions rather than clear answers and thereby encourages a model of the tradition that gathers around concepts such as difference rather than cohesion, and collective ethical study rather than the model of the singular expert. As a scholar, Christian remained skeptical of “prescriptiveness,” preferring to remain open to different ways “of seeing the world and of playing with possibilities,” especially the “difficult to control” instantiations of “multiplicity” and “eroticism” in literature.⁷⁴ Thus, in the following pages, I will use *foremother* less as a term for a stable role than as a gesture toward the critical practice of responding to one’s (fictive) ancestors that I call “foremother love.” While there is no one singular way to practice foremother love, one might recognize it as love rooted in, and an extension of, the theorizing of Black feminist critics as an ongoing affective-poetic practice. For example, some iterations of foremother love might lean heavily on Audre Lorde’s concept of “the erotic,” whereupon not only reading but even the act of “building a bookcase” alongside an-

other is a practice of knowledge production.⁷⁵ I may never get to experience the act of building a bookcase with Lorde or Christian or Phillis, but this book—and those it joins in reading—functions as the next best thing. Others might take inspiration from a number of related concepts, from the joyful fictive kinship of Barbara Smith’s “home girl” and Kevin Everod Quashie’s “girlfriend” to the somber broken kinship of Rita Dove’s “mother love” and Saidiya Hartman’s account of “los[ing] your mother.”⁷⁶ At its core, foremother love is about the people who came before us with whom we choose to feel close, and the lengths we go to bridge difference or distance between us.

Models for the foremother love practiced in this book do surface in various permutations across Christian’s work. For example, Christian’s infamous 1987 essay “The Race for Theory” has received ample attention for her critique of critical theory, or what she terms “New Philosophy,” used specifically to describe a form of literary criticism informed exclusively by Western European philosophy.⁷⁷ Christian combatted the erasure inherent in this theory’s tendency toward extreme abstraction by rooting her work as a critic in her identification with “the women I grew up around,” women who “continuously speculated about the nature of life through pithy language that unmasked the power relations of their world,” a language that Christian recognizes is also “celebrated, refined, critiqued” in Black women’s writing.⁷⁸ These women are Christian’s folk, and their vernacular oral literature forms the grounds of a language for written literature as well as for its criticism. In fact, key to Christian’s argument is the importance of these women’s lives to what she is able to do as a critic. Furthermore, for a critic to state explicitly that these women form a key part of their studies and livelihood means that what is tangible in their lives is not just acknowledged but also understood as actively shaping Black feminist criticism. While other versions of literary criticism may peremptorily disavow the writer for the text in accordance with a single theory, Christian instead emphasizes, “We need to read the works of our writers in our various ways and remain open to the intricacies of the intersection of language, class, race, and gender in the literature.”⁷⁹ About two years before Kimberlé Crenshaw published her renowned articulation and definition of the Black feminist term *intersectionality* in her discussion of the erasure of Black women’s identities in the discipline of law,⁸⁰ Christian posited the concept as a guidebook for practicing Black feminist criticism outside the prescriptiveness of one single-minded theory.

It is in, as Christian puts it, “the intricacies of the intersection of language, class, race, and gender” that Phillis indeed comes alive as a bellwether for the history of Black feminist criticism. Christian’s conceptualization, what I will forthwith call “intricate reading,” provides some guidance on how scholars might conduct intersectional criticism, or what Christian would call “the intersection of language, class, race, and gender” about two years before “intersectionality” was codified in scholarship under that name.⁸¹ Again, Crenshaw’s well-known articulation of the term *intersectionality* was first published in the 1989 essay “Demarginalizing the Intersection,” in which she importantly explained that Black women live at the intersections, using the analogy of the traffic accident that occurs when two cars enter an intersection at the same time to describe a society that mainly caters to those whose identities travel within only certain intersecting lanes at the exclusion of others, so to speak.⁸² While Crenshaw detailed the detrimental effects of an ignorance of intersectionality on Black women in a legal system that does not consider the ways they are excluded both on the basis of gender (since legal recourse might cater only to white women) and on the basis of race (since legal recourse might cater only to Black men), “Demarginalizing the Intersection” and the expansion of Crenshaw’s research on intersectionality in 1991 in “Mapping the Margins” remind us that what often afflicts the law is troubling other disciplines as well. I propose that using Christian’s concept of intricate reading in conjunction with other similar Black feminist formulations helps to continue to define a practice of Black feminist critique of literature as just as wide-ranging in its possible applications as Crenshaw’s “intersectionality” was.

Following Christian’s advice, I argue that intricate reading expands the possibilities of someone as seemingly archivally complex as Phillis. If, as Henry Louis Gates Jr. wrote in the 1988 introduction that appears at the beginning of each volume in the Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers, “the history of the reception of Phillis Wheatley’s poetry *is* the history of Afro-American literary criticism,” then I would argue that the history of the reception of Phillis *herself*—read in conjunction with her work—is the history of Black feminist criticism.⁸³ Gates’s introduction underlines the often negative ways Phillis is received within Black literary criticism, often by Black masculinist critics. Yet Gates’s use of Phillis as the primary prefiguration for nineteenth-century Black women writers points to another critical tradition in which it is not enough to consider Phillis alongside other writers (or in critique by

Black writers) on the basis of their shared racialization or gender alone: It is important to consider Phillis alongside *Black feminist critics* actively living, working, and complicating the intersection of race, gender, and writing. If Black feminist criticism is an intellectual tradition in which the experiences of racialized gender transform, if not supersede, the experiences of being a writer, what does it mean to consider *Phillis* as not only a Black woman writer but as a Black feminist critic? In fact, the question of who Phillis was—or is—outside of, or in addition to, her identity as a poet mirrors a similar debate in the differentiation of the tradition of Black feminist criticism as distinct from others within literary criticism. Thus, in some of the earliest Black feminist critical readings of Phillis, she is engaged not just for her poetry, or just for her status as an enslaved woman, but for the complex ways she demands ongoing articulation of the complexity of her racialized and gendered writerly identity, requiring us to read what we can of her more intricately.

An Invitation

In this book, each chapter is as capacious as possible. I want them to feel not like folders in an archive after processing, but like the moments before papers are bequeathed to an institution. I want to linger in that time when everything is still (dis)organized in ways that made the most intrinsic sense to their author. To savor and protect the possibility of different critical interconnections. You, dear reader, may need to reorient yourself to this and work to follow my wavering thread of a through line rather than one stitched from a more traditional discipline of literary study (although I do my best to signpost navigational milestones along the way). *Foremother Love* is not an exhaustive account of all the legacies of affection for Phillis within the tradition of Black feminist criticism from the eighteenth century to today. Instead, it is an attempt to articulate in this moment what it might mean to be a practicing Black feminist critic despite all the difficulties of finding support for a life and work built on “foremother love” as read via Phillis and a selection of her future counterparts. Reflecting my research, teaching, and writing from the past ten years, this book is not organized hierarchically around any one critic; rather, each chapter conveys the interarticulations of several critics regarding a different conceptual aspect of Phillis’s Black feminist critical legacy, and my own theorization of a selection of Black feminist critical moments as they index

foremother love transhistorically. Again, the book's major intervention is in providing the first scholarly monograph on Phillis in conjunction with Black feminist criticism, theorizing her as a living participant in ongoing conversations in the discipline today. I hope you enjoy this book's transformative reading, its critical homage to previous and living critics, and its invitation to you to participate in the tradition going forward.

Chapter 1, "Obour Outsider," centers on how we might theorize one of the most archivally preserved Black relationships in Phillis's life: that of her friendship with Obour Tanner. Sometime shortly before she passed away in 1835, Obour, also an enslaved woman, bequeathed her personal collection of a first edition of Phillis's *Poems* and several letters Phillis wrote her between 1772 and 1779. While previous scholarship has often focused on the letters' cultivation of intimacy for intimacy's sake, I argue across this chapter that Phillis and Obour were not just friends but colleagues who communicated transactionally for the sake of their own respective goals. This chapter also navigates key ephemeral expressions (most glaringly, the loss of Obour's side of the correspondence) that complicate our ability to read friendship easily or transparently in the fragments that remain. To read these works has, for me, necessitated an analytic that gives language to the interstitial spaces between friendship acts, such that they may be studied without sacrificing acknowledgment of the real ways in which they were delayed, impeded, or erased. Further, while their correspondence has been studied before, I focus on the meaning of Obour's bequest and what it means that she harbored Phillis's letters and poems for over fifty years before bequeathing them—what it means that Obour was a key critic of Phillis's work and early practitioner of foremother love. Alluding to Audre Lorde's 1984 collection of essays, *Sister Outsider*, and applying Lorde's concepts of "the erotic" and "difference," terms central to her theorization of a Black feminist love that is radically interpersonal in the attempt to theorize queer solidarity between Black women and white women, Obour's choice to extend Phillis's work to the care of a young white woman provides a window onto nineteenth-century possibilities for feminist solidarity as well as challenges to such legacies today.

Chapter 2, "Their Eyes Were Watching Phillis," continues to interrelate Phillis and her future Black feminist counterparts. Therein, I describe how critics have reckoned with Phillis in the absence of definitive autobiography given that Black feminist criticism continues to grapple with the question of how critics may ethically talk about the silences in their research subjects' lives, especially the silences they purposefully cultivated,

without compounding such silence with one's own acts of scholarly erasure. While no act of reading is ever completely neutral, this chapter traces a set of readings of Phillis that do not purport to be neutral at all, practicing foremother love with reckless abandon. Alluding to a period in the 1970s wherein Black feminist critics reimagined copyright to photocopy, share, and collectively read Zora Neale Hurston's 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* when it was out of print, this chapter focuses on print and social engagements with Phillis that reckon, sometimes with great speculation, with the silences in her life and work in order to shed light on the histories behind their methodological practices. While several scholars, including Saidiya Hartman, have debated the extent to which speculative ascriptions of voice in some ways perpetuate and in other ways truncate historical violence, I describe why it is worth attending critically to these instances of projection, as doing so opens further inquiry into the ways in which moments of critical encountering reflect understudied historical dynamics. Phillis's critics inserted themselves not merely into what she wrote but also into what she did *not* write, and the long history of readers trying to rewrite Phillis's poems into the poems they would rather read indexes readers' own desires, fears, and grievances.

Chapter 3, "In Search of Our Foremothers' Gardens," moves to the most ephemeral threats to Phillis and her counterparts—their financial precarity, health issues, and deaths—while also making space for different, perhaps more nuanced understandings of ephemerality in the "garden" and in the elegiac poems critics never got to write for themselves. Overall, this chapter demonstrates that Black feminist critics are never working alone. From Phillis to her modern-day counterparts, they have engaged in transhistorical practices of collaboration, collection, preservation, and validation, not only for the subjects of their research but for themselves as members of the community they research. Presuming that Phillis wrote not just as a poet but as a critic to negotiate her manumission, this chapter contextualizes her letters and poems, especially elegies, within Black feminist criticism. Building on the theorization of mother love in Alice Walker's 1983 essay collection, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, this chapter asks how Black feminist critics may successfully recognize and thus research the work of their foremothers, especially the work of figures with whom they may have previously failed to find commonality. Beginning with the self-mourning inherent in Alice Walker's unexpected critique of Phillis, this chapter also reveals how Walker, Phillis, Williams, and Wanda Coleman practiced elegy not only in the poetry they wrote for others but

also in genres of self-writing that retroactively expressed their own unmet professional desires. While these elegiac practices should have sustained both Phillis's and more recent Black feminist critics' careers, they alone were not enough to combat institutional forces that oppressed these critics. Thus, this chapter engages in a practice of restitutive criticism, wherein I retroactively lovingly mourn foremothers Phillis, Williams, and Coleman by constructing an elegiac criticism out of the archival fragments of their work.

Finally, while this book lingers long in the years between the 1970s and 2000s, I conclude with a brief chapter titled "We're Ready" that discusses the current life of Black feminist criticism, or, perhaps more accurately, my own intersection with Black feminist criticism in the latter half of my life, from the late 2000s to early 2020s. This chapter presents an overview of what an early practitioner of Black feminist criticism, Phillis, might say to the scholars of today—especially via a reading of her poem about Harvard, "To the University of Cambridge in New-England." I will join Phillis's expression of hopes, predictions, and notes of caution for the university first in 1767 and then in 1773 with June Jordan's own reflections on the university over two centuries later in the 1960s to '90s. Then this chapter closes with a meditation on the university today and my own set of recommendations for ensuring the future of the Black feminist critical tradition via my visit to Barbara Christian's papers at UC Berkeley in 2023. This chapter comes full circle by acknowledging that foremother love, the practice of Black feminist criticism for our foremothers, will only continue to exist insofar as present-day Black feminist critics and allies receive support going forward. In other words, remembrance, in all its complex manifestations, is not just a one-and-done but instead comprises an ongoing set of commitments that necessitate continued resources. For those of us who do have access to the power and resources required to re-member figures like Phillis, there is no telling what we may do for the future of our tradition specifically and for the transformation of criticism generally.

DUKE

UNIVERSITY

22 INTRODUCTION

Preface

- 1 Bambara, *The Black Woman*, 1, 6, 7.
- 2 I use Phillis's first name to invoke a different kind of familiarity than that of her enslavers, the Wheatley family, as I explain in more detail in my introduction in the section titled "From Foremother to Black Feminist Critic."
- 3 Bambara in Tate, *Black Women Writers at Work*, 32, 34, 33. (Tate completed *Black Women Writers at Work* in 1983 and published it in 1985; see publisher's note at beginning of 2023 edition, vi.) While Bambara was writing *The Salt Eaters*, she was working a great deal—and, of course, doing the labor required to simply maintain academic employment, such as her lengthy negotiations for a visiting position at Spelman College to teach their first course on Black women writers, as Holmes noted across "Making Dreams Work."
- 4 Tate, *Black Women Writers at Work*, 13.
- 5 See Phillis, *Poems on Various Subjects*, iv.
- 6 Mason, *Poems of Phillis Wheatley* (1989 ed.), 45n2. Mason also writes that Phillis "had been publishing poems for some years and had tried to publish a book of her poems in Boston in 1772 (see her 1772 Proposals)." This is a bit different from what Mason wrote over two decades earlier below the same preface in Mason, *Poems of Phillis Wheatley* (1966 ed.): "It is probably true that she did not originally write with publication in mind, and her friends probably did suggest publication to her and even attempt it without her permission" (n.p.; n. 2, a couple of pages before p. 1). The preface precedes John Wheatley's authenticating letter to the publisher in the second and third 1773 editions of *Poems* published in London, as noted in Robinson, *Phillis Wheatley*, 83.
- 7 See Phillis, *Poems on Various Subjects*, iv.
- 8 B. Smith, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," 20.
- 9 Griffin, "Conflict and Chorus," 118, and *In Search of a Beautiful Freedom*, 245 (Griffin's 2023 collection of new and selected essays). While there was a concentrated theorization of Black womanhood across Bambara's 1970 *The Black Woman*, it was a theorization that was not yet calling itself "Black feminist." That term would be used with more frequency in 1973 to refer to

- organizations such as the National Black Feminist Organization (1973–75), the National Alliance of Black Feminists (1976–80), and the Combahee River Collective (1975–80) (see Springer, *Living for the Revolution*, 1). Barbara Smith was a founding member of the Combahee River Collective and published the essay “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism” in 1977.
- 10 B. Smith, “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism,” 20. Smith here cites Alice Walker’s 1974 essay “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,” collected in the 1983 volume of the same name, as a key example of this historical arc underlying Black women’s creativity.
- 11 Lorde, “Age, Race, Class, and Sex,” in *Sister Outsider*, 116.
- 12 David Waldstreicher writes that “there are no fewer than four possible concrete scenarios for how Phillis Wheatley became free by the autumn of 1773, three of which are supported by her few words on the subject” (*Odyssey*, 215). Each was dependent on the London publication of her book, if not due to public opinion than due to sales. “Now she held a copyright, a property. That changed something, if not everything” (*Odyssey*, 220).
- 13 Griffin, “Conflict and Chorus,” 126, and *In Search of a Beautiful Freedom*, 255.
- 14 Holmes, “Lessons in Boldness, 101,” 154. Beyond academia, Bambara often participated in other cultural institutions that she believed in and that were receptive to her organizing for Black people, people of color, and other marginalized groups.
- 15 “Baby-Baby-Baby” is the twelfth track on TLC’s *Oooooohhh . . . On the TLC Tip* (LaFace, 1992, CD).
- 16 While there are many scholarly definitions of this term, what a colleague-friend once described to me as “an ethos of white patriarchy,” I will provide one brief anecdotal example here: In the wake of 9/11, a national movement away from multiculturalism toward exclusion is perhaps embodied in the fact that I lost my sixth-grade run for school president to a young man whose surname was Bush and who ran under the slogan “Two Bushes Are Better than One.”
- 17 R&B singer Tinashe is one of the few fellow Black women students who attended my public middle and high schools in La Crescenta (out of over two thousand students) at the same time as my sister and me. Tinashe’s music video to “Bouncin’,” from the album *333* (Tinashe Music, 2021), especially the joyful choreography on the mini trampolines, reads to me as a healing reclamation.
- 18 Black feminist criticism was memorialized in two 2007 retrospectives: Farah Jasmine Griffin’s “That the Mothers May Soar” and Arlene R. Keiz-er’s “Black Feminist Criticism.”
- 19 I later learned that James was born in Los Angeles proper, which deepened my sense of imagined kinship with her. The combination of vast numbers of books and ever-playing music, mostly from the radio, led my father to dub my room “the Jazz Library.”

- 20 James and Ritz, *Rage to Survive*. First published in 1995, Etta James's autobiography certainly reads today as a work of Black feminist criticism.
- 21 Randall, *The Black Poets*, 38. There is no mention of Phillis's biography in this anthology, and I would later learn that the single poem of hers anthologized is quite abridged. Dudley Randall (1914–2000), who named his first daughter Phillis, was also a poet and an instrumental editor of Black poetry via his Detroit publishing house, Broadside Press, founded in 1965 (see Boyd, *Wrestling with the Muse*, 51, 2).
- 22 James and Ritz, *Rage to Survive*, 264. Even today, when I listen to Etta James's "cover" of Etta Jones's 1960 "Don't Go to Strangers," its opening notes transport me. And as the song closes, I believe James when she belts out the final lines of the song in a way that Jones's version reminds me, rather, of a much younger version of myself.
- 23 This is in the vein of Erika de Casier's song "Story of My Life" from *Essentials* (Independent Jeep Records, 2019), her debut album.

Introduction

- 1 I did at some point purchase a reader for the Spring 2010 course, which I've fondly perused over the years.
- 2 June Jordan, "African American Studies 158A Tuesday Class," February 13, 2001, Jordan Collection, UC Berkeley, https://archive.org/details/cabeuaas_000213_16:30-31.
- 3 Muller and the Blueprint Collective, *June Jordan's Poetry for the People*, 13.
- 4 In the winter of 2015, I took a graduate seminar titled Contemporary Experimental Poetry with Fred Moten at the University of California, Riverside, where he asked us this question.
- 5 The next section of this chapter provides more information on my decision to use this name. Recent biographies of Phillis by historians and literary scholars include the 2023 editions of Vincent Carretta's *Biography* and David Waldstreicher's *Odyssey*. Throughout this book I cite alternatively from both for moments of literary-historical consonance. Carretta cautions that while Waldstreicher's biography is "worthy of its subject," it also includes several examples of apocrypha, "slipping seamlessly from supposition to assertion"; see Carretta's review of Waldstreicher, *The Odyssey of Phillis Wheatley*, 158, 156.
- 6 Bynum, "Phillis Wheatley on Friendship," 42, and *Reading Pleasures*, 50.
- 7 To which would be added the sudden trauma then slow burn of the COVID pandemic (2019–) and other harrowing events since 2017—part of a long cascade of crises characteristic of life for millennial and zillennial scholars.
- 8 June Jordan, "The Difficult Miracle," in *Some of Us*, 175, 178.

- 9 Boyd, *Discarded Legacy*, 26. Boyd's description of her approach to reading Frances E. W. Harper's work as "a voice-over," a creative and critical mode of intertextual or intersonic conversation, is a praxis I hope to extend herein.
- 10 As described in my preface above, Black feminist criticism arises in special relation to "a consistent feminist analysis" about "Black women writers and Black lesbian writers" (B. Smith, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," 20). It is part of, though not to be confused with, Patricia Hill Collins's pivotal term *Black feminist thought*, which often encapsulates Black feminist criticism to describe a wider "critical social theory" about "heterogeneous Black feminist intellectual traditions" (*Black Feminist Thought*, 20). Note this is a revision of what Collins wrote in her first 1990 edition, in that there was "a distinctive Black feminist intellectual tradition." See Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 16. Ultimately, my understanding of Black feminist criticism is akin to Marina Magloire's description of "Black feminism [as] a kind of poetry that must constantly conjure a relationality said to be innate but which actually requires active pursuit" (*We Pursue Our Magic*, 4).
- 11 June Jordan, *Some of Us*, 179.
- 12 McKay, "Naming the Problem," 367–68.
- 13 Griffin names Hazel Carby, Barbara Christian, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, bell hooks, Nellie Y. McKay, Valerie Smith, Hortense Spillers, Eleanor Traylor, Gloria Wade-Gayles, Cheryl Wall, Sherley Anne Williams, and more throughout the essay as "a few of the architects of black feminist criticism," noting that Guy-Sheftall, Traylor, and Wade-Gayles, worked in "historically black institutions," and the others at "elite white institutions in unprecedented (though still small) numbers" ("That the Mothers May Soar," 491, and *In Search of a Beautiful Freedom*, 268). Keizer also engages in retrospection of several of these critics, adding Carole Boyce Davies, Frances Smith Foster, Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, Audre Lorde, Mary Helen Washington, and others, in "Black Feminist Criticism," 158.
- 14 Keizer, "Black Feminist Criticism," 155.
- 15 While I am careful about historical facts, I balance what cannot be known with plausible speculation about historical gaps using a Black feminist critical context. Also, while my archival work draws on academic archives of critics and writers who often worked at universities, I am aware of the intertwined histories of colonialism and chattel slavery and ongoing exclusive dynamics of these spaces, too, as detailed in Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, and "Venus in Two Acts." My book also traverses my very uneven institutional experiences as a researcher from graduate student through tenure-track assistant professor.
- 16 Chapter 1, "Obour Outsider," details Phillis's relationship with Obour, a Black woman who was enslaved by the Tanner family in Newport, Rhode Island, and who safeguarded and later bequeathed at least seven letters from her and Phillis's correspondence.

- 17 This includes poems like Robert Hayden's "A Letter from Phillis Wheatley, 1773," in *Collected Poems*; Nikki Giovanni's "Linkage," in *The Collected Poetry of Nikki Giovanni*, 313–15; Evie Shockley's "wheatley and hemmings have drinks in the halls of the ancestors," in *a half-red sea*, 25–26; drea brown's *dear girl: a reckoning*; Allison Clarke's *Phillis*; Honorée Fanonne Jeffers's *The Age of Phillis*, a work of poetry and poetics; the poems collected in Danielle Legros Georges and Artress Bethany White's *Wheatley at 250*; and more. See also those cited in Waldstreicher, *Odyssey*, 454–55.
- 18 For the use of the word *progenitor* see Gates, "In Her Own Write," x. Rowan Ricardo Phillips describes Phillis as an "epigraph" and "an *ab ovo* figure" in *When Blackness Rhymes with Blackness*, 13, 17.
- 19 This term, coined by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, has remained alive in the critical conversation since *Righteous Discontent*. See Jenkins, *Private Lives, Proper Relations*; Morris, *Close Kin and Distant Relatives*; Cooper, *Beyond Respectability*; and C. L. Smith, *Race and Respectability in an Early Black Atlantic*.
- 20 Christian, "The Race for Theory," 62.
- 21 Grounding texts for this intention across this book include those by the Combahee River Collective, "Statement"; B. Smith, *Home Girls*; Lorde, *Sister Outsider*; Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins"; Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*; Quashie, *Black Women, Identity, and Cultural Theory*; Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*; Mock, *Redefining Realness*; Ellis, *Territories of the Soul*; Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*; Taylor, *How We Get Free*; Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined*; and more.
- 22 I cite and take inspiration from Janet Mock's definition of *mahu*, or *mahuwahine*, the Indigenous word reclaimed by Hawaiian trans women, in *Redefining Realness*, 102–3.
- 23 See especially O'Neale, "A Slave's Subtle War," and "Challenge to Wheatley's Critics"; Foster, *Written by Herself* (see also Foster's 2008 introduction to *Love and Marriage*); and Bassard, *Spiritual Interrogations*.
- 24 Hull, *Color, Sex, and Poetry*; Shockley, *Renegade Poetics*.
- 25 Howe, *My Emily Dickinson*; Lootens, *Lost Saints*; Prins, *Victorian Sappho*; Jackson, *Dickinson's Misery*; and G. White, *Lyric Shame*.
- 26 Gumbs, *Spill, M Archive, and Dub*; Williamson, *Scandalize My Name*; Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined*; Sullivan, *The Poetics of Difference*; Tinsley, *The Color Pynk*; and Thorsson, *The Sisterhood*. Joshua Myers's *Of Black Study* has chapters especially relevant to Black feminisms on June Jordan, Sylvia Wynter, and Toni Cade Bambara. After my book entered production, I was also happy to read Gumbs, *Survival Is a Promise*; Nash, *How We Write Now*; and Savonick, *Open Admissions*.
- 27 For a recent (2022) special issue of *Early American Literature* on Phillis, see Bynum, Fielder, and Smith, "Special Issue Introduction." Other recent scholarship includes Ford, "The Difficult Miracle"; Pinto, *Infamous Bodies*;

- Jackson, *Before Modernism*; Bynum, *Reading Pleasures*; and C. L. Smith, *Race and Respectability in an Early Black Atlantic*.
- 28 McKay and Benjamin, "Breaking the Whole Thing Open," 1680.
- 29 Christian, "The Race for Theory," 61.
- 30 Toward the close of my 2018 dissertation, I thought it best to honor Phillis's later married surname, Peters, but have since thought it more radical to try to imagine a name for her beyond the cisheteropatriarchal institutions of slavery and marriage. Others' recent positions include Honorée Fanonne Jeffers's decision to use the surname Wheatley Peters in alignment with her positive imagination of Phillis's marriage and of the way Phillis signed her name after her marriage to John Peters, in *The Age of Phillis*, 179. Similarly, Zachary McLeod Hutchins justifies the surname Wheatley Peters based on the fact that Phillis "chose to marry" and the fact that scholars regularly use white women writers' married names ("Add New Glory to Her Name," 666). Also, Jennifer Y. Chuong uses the surname Wheatley, critiquing others' attempts to navigate her naming, including "the feminist alternative of referring to women artists by their first names [as] equally problematic" ("Engraving's 'Immoveable Veil,'" 84n2). Finally, Cassander L. Smith takes a measured stance that both Phillis's enslavers and her husband's surnames "stand in for what we cannot know about the conditions of Wheatley's birth and early childhood" (*Race and Respectability in an Early Black Atlantic*, 188–89n1).
- 31 June Jordan imagines a new full name: "Phillis Miracle Wheatley" ("Miracle" being Jordan's own appellative addition), in "The Difficult Miracle," in *Some of Us*, 176.
- 32 Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 294, 293, 294.
- 33 Philip, *Zong!*, front cover.
- 34 Far from any judgment on John Peters (à la the 1834 memoirist Margaretta Matilda Odell's account), I am just less interested in the institution of marriage within the scope of this project.
- 35 R. R. Phillips, *When Blackness Rhymes with Blackness*, 13.
- 36 Waldstreicher writes that of the "ninety-six people" who left Africa on *The Phillis*, "between seventy and eighty survived" (*Odyssey*, 19).
- 37 Jones, "Poetics," 149 (strikethrough in original).
- 38 It has long been common among the members of my maternal family to refer to ourselves within family settings via shortened versions of our names.
- 39 Moody et al., "In Memoriam," 7.
- 40 Cavitch, *American Elegy*, 192.
- 41 "Phillis, n.," *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/phillis_n?tab=factsheet#30766709, accessed March 26, 2023.
- 42 Odell, *Memoir and Poems*. Information about Odell and her life is detailed by Glatt, "'To Perpetuate Her Name.'"

- 43 Frazier, “Some Afro-American Women of Mark,” esp. 102–5; Hopkins,
 “Famous Women of the Negro Race”; and Mossell, *The Work of the Afro-*
American Woman, 55–56, 68–69.
- 44 Johnson, “Preface,” in *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, xxiv; and S. A.
 Brown, *Outline for the Study of the Poetry of American Negroes*, 1.
- 45 Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley* provides a comprehen-
 sive history of criticism on Phillis, and by Black masculinist critics specifi-
 cally on 74–81.
- 46 For a synopsis of scholars working in Wheatley (Peters) studies, see Sesay,
 “Remembering Phillis Wheatley.” Carretta’s revised 2023 version of his 2011
 biography uses the name Wheatley Peters in its title.
- 47 Prins, “‘What Is Historical Poetics?’” 14.
- 48 While my research has demonstrated that uses of the word *foremother* to
 describe Phillis increased after the 1990s, I argue that the concept has been
 operative in criticism on her long before this.
- 49 For example, in her introduction to the 1990 edited collection *Wild Women*
in the Whirlwind, Joanne M. Braxton includes Phillis in her multipart defi-
 nition of a foremother: a “female ancestor” or a figure “at the foreground
 of cultural experience” (Braxton and McLaughlin, *Wild Women in the*
Whirlwind, xxv). Herein, Phillis is grouped with other early literary figures,
 distinct from those who practiced “forms of material culture including
 quilting and furniture making . . . [such as] our mothers and grand-
 mothers . . . ‘ordinary women of courage.’”
- 50 Bynum, Fielder, and Smith, “Special Issue Introduction,” 664; and Gates,
 “In Her Own Write,” x.
- 51 Combahee River Collective, “Combahee River Collective Statement,” 16.
- 52 Christian, *Teaching Guide*, 1.
- 53 Bynum, Fielder, and Smith, “Special Issue Introduction,” 663, abstract. They
 continue, “There aren’t enough poems, extant materials, or quite simply not
 enough interest in her” (664).
- 54 Pinto, *Infamous Bodies*, 33.
- 55 Bynum, Fielder, and Smith, “Special Issue Introduction,” 664.
- 56 All my references to Phillis’s writings are from the 2024 *Writings of Phillis*
Wheatley Peters edited by Vincent Carretta, unless otherwise noted.
- 57 I also admire Kerry James Marshall’s 2007 acrylic on PVC panel painting,
Scipio Moorhead, Portrait of Himself, 1776, which portrays Scipio amid the
 process of painting (gazing directly at viewers), while a sketch of Phillis
 is poised in the background, seeming to gaze almost directly at viewers:
 Marshall places viewers in the position of Phillis as she is being painted.
- 58 This line is from Christian’s speech on Black women poets, “Majority
 Report,” December 4, 1982, *Pacifica Radio Archives*, [https://archive.org/](https://archive.org/details/pacifica_radio_archives-AZ0642.12,2:07-11)
[details/pacifica_radio_archives-AZ0642.12, 2:07–11](https://archive.org/details/pacifica_radio_archives-AZ0642.12,2:07-11). This speech was later
 published as the essay “Afro-American Women Poets” in *Black Feminist*

Criticism, 120. I typically refer to Christian's full name without reference to her middle initial, which she often omitted in her own later publications. Across this book, I largely refer to her by her last name, in alignment with today's convention of subsequently referencing scholars by surname. I also do my best to align with the ways other twentieth- and twenty-first-century scholars most regularly published their names.

- 59 Christian paraphrases Walker's 1974 essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," which was later published in a collection of the same name in 1983 (see A. Walker, *Our Mothers' Gardens*, 237). Walker defined *womanism* at the very beginning of this volume (xi–xii). Emphasis original to *Gardens*.
- 60 In 1978, Christian became the first Black woman to earn tenure at UC Berkeley, see Bowles, Fabi, and Keizer's introduction to *New Black Feminist Criticism*, esp. x.
- 61 One of Phillis's few appearances in this triple biography is in the brief albeit fascinating detail that Terrell named one of her daughters after Phillis, spelled as Phyllis, in Sterling, *Black Foremothers*, 133.
- 62 And named as Phyllis, in Christian, "Afro-American Women Poets," in *Black Feminist Criticism*, 120.
- 63 See Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, 28.
- 64 Lorde, *The Cancer Journals*, 14. Across this book, Lorde demonstrates that she considered her cancer to be a direct result of a "carcinogenic" food chain and environment as well as a symptom of the body's broader attempt to survive marginalization like racism and sexism in the United States, in *The Cancer Journals*, 9. Sadly, Phillis's death in her early thirties in 1784 was in line with "the average life expectancy" of all Black people in the United States around that time, as noted in Carretta, *Biography*, 197.
- 65 Priest, "Salvation Is the Issue"; Gumbs, "We Can Learn," 21; Hong, *Death Beyond Disavowal*, 126; Thorsson, *The Sisterhood*, 200–202.
- 66 DuCille, "Feminism, Black and Blue," 151, 152.
- 67 Carretta, *Biography*, 196, 197.
- 68 DuCille, "Tribute to Barbara T. Christian," xvi.
- 69 Christian, "Your Silence Will Not Protect You," 1.
- 70 Murphy, "Praisesong," 299. In terms of "everlasting . . . life," the idealism of this statement is meant to counter the lived reality in which few Black feminists specifically and Black people generally are afforded this kind of mythic status.
- 71 DuCille, "Tribute to Barbara T. Christian," xvii, xviii.
- 72 Christian, "Your Silence Will Not Protect You," 1. Alexis De Veaux writes that Lorde described herself as a "black, lesbian, feminist, mother, poet warrior" despite stigma at that time against lesbianism (whereas June Jordan's bisexuality was more accepted) and against possessing other identities in addition to Blackness, in *Warrior Poet*, 179.
- 73 Christian, "Introduction," in *Black Feminist Criticism*, x, xi.

- 74 Christian, "The Race for Theory," 58, 59.
- 75 Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic," in *Sister Outsider*, 57.
- 76 Smith defines "home girls" as "the girls from the neighborhood and from the block, the girls we grew up with" (B. Smith, introduction to *Home Girls*, xxiv). Quashie defines the "girlfriend" as "the other Black woman who is a subject's girl," e.g., "an othermother, play sister, god sister, cousin, or sister-friend . . . who makes it possible for a Black female subject to bring more of herself into consideration" (*Black Women, Identity, and Cultural Theory*, 17, 18). Dove poeticizes "mother love" across her eponymous book of poems and in one particular poem, "Mother Love," which combines a dark form of love and mourning via the Greek myth of Demeter and Metanira (*Mother Love*, 17). Hartman articulates the concept of losing one's mother as a metaphor for transatlantic slavery: "To lose your mother was to be denied your kin, country, and identity" (*Lose Your Mother*, 85).
- 77 Christian, "The Race for Theory," 56. Arlene R. Keizer writes that Christian's essay resulted in "polarizing controversy" and that Christian herself was "pilloried" (*Black Subjects*, 14).
- 78 Christian, "The Race for Theory," 52.
- 79 Christian, "The Race for Theory," 53. Christian also emphasizes that it is important to "share our process" with others as this is ultimately "a collective endeavor."
- 80 Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection," 140.
- 81 For similar information on formulations of like concepts that have been theorized at least since the nineteenth century, see Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 21; Taylor, *How We Get Free*, 4–5; Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined*, 6–11, 40–42; and Sullivan, *The Poetics of Difference*, 5–8.
- 82 Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection," 149; and Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined*, 9.
- 83 Gates, "In Her Own Write," xi.

1: Obour Outsider

- 1 I still have not located this essay. I hope someone reading this will be able to locate it—and I look forward to future scholarship on it.
- 2 My memory tells me that it was not a colorism issue that was at play, but more of a general indifference to Black sisterhood generally. It could also have been a sign of falling numbers of Black students at the university due to the 1996 ban on affirmative action in California after the passing of Proposition 209. UC Berkeley has recently come under fire "for having the worst campus climate for Black students in the University of California system," and a total Black enrollment that hovers around 3 percent of the student population, as Teresa Watanabe writes in "UC Berkeley Has a Poor