

**“Oppression’s fallen, and slavery is no more!”¹:
Women, Abolitionism, and Poetry in the Transatlantic World, 1770s-1840s**

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The transatlantic slave trade brought millions of Africans to the Americas for over two centuries, silencing the voices it brought across the dreaded middle passage into the abyss of slavery. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, some British and American women challenged the silence by calling for the abolition of the trade and commodification of human beings. Their celebrations of freedom and attacks upon slavery reverberated across the Atlantic, creating an antislavery network of women. As rhetoric and ideas surrounding methods of emancipation travelled around the Atlantic world through antislavery efforts in these countries, the growing momentum of the antislavery movement inspired writers to create antislavery works of prose, fiction, and poetry. The established network of trade and the movement of ideas across geopolitical boundaries imparted the opportunity for interaction between British and American abolitionists, particularly through the circulation of published works. Some women achieved great recognition for their part in this antislavery dialogue revealing the rising (and continuing) inclusion of women in political and social worlds. Poetry added a powerful tool of deep emotional language to enhance the argument made against slavery for a popular audience. Hannah More, Ann Yearsley, Phillis Wheatley, and Sarah Forten contributed poems that lent significant voice to this network, thereby sustaining and revealing the interconnections in British and American antislavery movements. The transatlantic antislavery movements in Britain and America encapsulate a compelling dynamic of moral argument, gender, race, and conceptions of liberty. The interactive negotiations of these themes within British and American abolitionist literature elucidate not only the exchange and adaptation in poetic verse but also the unavoidable affect of social context and historical placement upon the antislavery movement.

The striking connections in poetic style and direct correspondence illuminate the important and ongoing interactions between British and American abolitionists throughout the transatlantic world. The extensive travels and correspondence of abolitionists, as well as transnational printings of the poems, clearly substantiate these interactions. The foundation of such interconnections held important implications for the transition between the abolition of slavery in the British colonies in 1833 and the simultaneous momentum building for American abolitionists. The timeframe for this paper presents that exchange of momentum and transition between the British and American antislavery movements exemplified in published poetic expression.

In the 1780s, the push for the abolition of the British slave trade grew in increasing influence to elicit a popular response against it with petition drives and circulation of literature. Women became increasingly involved in both of these areas, allowing women to have at least their names listed before Parliament on a political issue.² Central to the organization and passionate

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¹ Hannah More, *Slavery: A Poem, London, M.DCC.LXXXVIII* (1788) accessed from *Eigtheenth Century Collections Online*, Gale, Georgia State University, 9 August, 2014: 20.

² Seymour Drescher, “History’s Engines: British Mobilization in the Age of Revolution,” *The William and Mary*

determination of the fight against the slave trade was a transatlantic, revived Quaker commitment to reforming society, particularly through the elimination of the great evil of slavery.³ Much of the beginning organized steps toward a popular antislavery movement originated with Quaker Yearly Meetings in Philadelphia and New England in the latter half of the eighteenth century. In 1775, a group of men (mostly Quakers) formed the first antislavery organization in the world in Philadelphia. This society (later called the Pennsylvania Abolition Society) would later include members of highly influential men such as Benjamin Franklin and Benjamin Rush.⁴ Following the American Revolution, there was a wave of rhetoric inspired by the freedom won from Britain that fueled antislavery language for groups like the Pennsylvania Abolition Society and for poets like Phillis Wheatley (later echoed by Philadelphia poet, Sarah Forten). The contrast between cries for liberty from the figurative political slavery of Britain and the reliance upon slave labor became a powerful rhetorical tool for American abolitionists. British abolitionists similarly took up this useful rhetoric to contrast the veneration of liberty in England with its support of the enslavement of individuals and the continuance of the transatlantic slave trade, as exemplified in poems from Hannah More and Ann Yearsley. These steps toward greater zeal for the emancipation and benefit of the slave culminated in cooperative petition campaigns in 1783 in both countries. The London Meeting for Sufferings even formed a special committee charged with the circulation and printing of antislavery works aimed at abolishing the slave trade and the horrors of slavery, thereby revealing a belief in the power and influence of the written word.⁵

In addition to noticing the celebration of freedom by the British public contrasted with the defense of slavery from the same population, antislavery poems also reveal the paradoxical identity of enslavement. An enslaved individual held the enforced identity of ‘property’ while still holding their identity of ‘person’ that could not be removed. Such a poignant duality proved to be a useful and striking rhetorical tool for abolitionists. Thomas Menely outlines the structuring of British antislavery poetry in the late 1780s for political purposes. Underlining the idea of “sympathetic identification,” Menely suggests that the antislavery poet sought to bring the reader to a place of sympathetic or emotional connection to the slave in order to illuminate the “imbalance” of the condition of slavery.⁶ The imbalanced condition creates a binary structure that runs throughout the poems in temporality and in the identity of the slave. The poems denounced and lamented the oppression of the present, yet also looked forward in hopeful assurance to the coming of freedom thus illuminating the bifurcated time place of the poem.⁷ Because an enslaved person simultaneously held an identity as a commodity and a person, there existed an obvious barrier to connecting the reader (and poet) to the slave. The dual identity of an enslaved individual further reveals the “split temporality” that Menely argues is the cause of the imbalance in antislavery poetry.⁸ Rather than limit the effect of antislavery poems, these bifurcations within the poetic structure raise their sympathetic power by highlighting the paradox

Quarterly 66, no. 4 (October 2009): 740.

³ David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution 1770-1823* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975), 215.

⁴ Dee Andrews, “Reconsidering the First Emancipation: Evidence from the Pennsylvania Abolition Society Correspondence, 1785-1810,” *Pennsylvania History* 64 (Summer 1997): 231.

⁵ Davis, *Problem of Slavery*, 217-218.

⁶ Thomas Menely, “Acts of Sympathy: Abolitionist Poetry and Transatlantic Identification,” in *Affect and Abolition in the Anglo-Atlantic, 1770-1830*, ed. Stephen Ahern (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2013): 57.

⁷ Menely, “Acts of Sympathy,” 63.

⁸ Menely, “Acts of Sympathy,” 56.

of slavery itself thereby leading to an understanding that it was neither a natural nor a necessary condition. Menely describes how antislavery poets worked around these difficulties to produce poems aimed at generating a “collective sentiment” even if full identification could not be achieved.⁹

Hannah More, already known for her prose and poetry, forged an important precedent in the structure and politicization of antislavery poetry with “Slavery: A Poem.” Associated with the “bluestocking” circle (a group of British women writers that included Mary Wollstonecraft), she had achieved a high degree of influence in literature that added clout and authority to her abolitionist writings. It would seem that her inclusion in a respected and popular group of novelists, poets, and prose writers suggests a more progressive view of women’s roles, yet her according to Karen Green her philosophy remained committed to “moral duty” within the established gender and class distinctions.¹⁰ Her conservative philosophy then allowed for her to have a political voice for the abolition movement without dislodging social conceptions of gender and class. The Abolition Committee commissioned More (as an influential yet conservative choice) to write the poem to direct the “collective sentiment” that Menely described.¹¹ If an antislavery organization believed that a poem from Hannah More would serve its interests in shifting popular perception towards abolition, then clearly her voice carried significant weight within the British literary and politically inclined communities. As a collaborator with many leading Quakers and members of the evangelical Clapham Sect, like William Wilberforce, Hannah More wrote many moral tracts and antislavery works within an international and organized context.¹² More’s “Cheap Repository Tracts” of 1795-1798 called for the reform of British society in reaction to the French Revolution. The current of conservatism in her religious beliefs and other publications, such as her “Essays for Young Ladies,” implicates a conservative antislavery rhetoric in the sense of upholding British social structure.¹³ Her status in the upper middle class in Britain certainly influenced her conservative, moralistic writing as well as directing her antislavery poetry. As Menely outlined the separation between the reader and the slave of the poem allowed the poet to distance herself from the reader so that she could point out the reader’s flawed understanding of freedom.¹⁴ In so doing, the poet would have an air of superiority over the reader, reflecting the hierarchy of social classes. In addition, her religious faith provides explanation into the way in which conservative, evangelical women entered the political conversation for reform and abolition especially when working alongside Quakers, who promoted education and space for women to engage in dialogue regarding the needs of others.¹⁵ With this backdrop of conservatism and religious zeal, “Slavery” may not hold a precursor to the approaching feminist movement, but it does uphold the transatlantic organization of Quakerism in the fight for abolition.

⁹ Menely, “Acts of Sympathy,” 59.

¹⁰ Karen Green, “A Moral Philosophy of Their Own? The Moral and Political Thought of Eighteenth-Century British Women,” *The Monist* 98, no. 1 (January 2015): 97-98.

¹¹ Moira Ferguson, “British Women Writers and an Emerging Abolitionist Discourse,” *The Eighteenth Century* 33, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 3-5.

¹² Vron Ware, *Beyond the Pale: White Women, Racism and History* (London: Verso, 1992), 70-71.

¹³ Kevin Gilmartin, “‘Study to Be Quiet’: Hannah More and the Invention of Conservative Culture in Britain,” *ELH* 70, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 493 and 509.

¹⁴ Menely, “Acts of Sympathy,” 57.

¹⁵ Ware, 79 and Clare Midgley, *Feminism and Empire: Women Activists in Imperial Britain, 1790-1865* (London: Routledge, 2007), 50.

“Slavery” reached a wide audience, particularly in antislavery circles, and was reprinted indicating its popularity and influence. The language reaches deep emotional levels and recalls much of Scripture and elements of spiritual slavery, thus reinforcing More’s evangelical pursuits.¹⁶ The opening page draws the reader’s eyes to heaven and questions why the “bright intellectual Sun” shines only partially on those below. This imagery produces the sentiment that equality like the equal rays of the natural sun should similarly be extended to all.¹⁷ Light and heaven represented for the poem’s audience the exemplars of wisdom and goodness as well as being inherent to the nature of God. More assumes a biblical foreknowledge of the reader in part revealing the societal reality of the eighteenth century but also foreshadowing an argument utilizing common sense morality through verses on natural elements. Thus she leads the reader to see the manifest wrong of slavery and the slave trade.

More illuminates how contradictory the enslavement of others is to reason, order, and law with language rife with indignation. She grounds the necessity of freedom for all upon the foundation of true reason underneath the banner of moral law.¹⁸ More employs the liberty rhetoric aforementioned that British and American abolitionists utilized for greater impact. She presents Britain as the true bearer of the standard of freedom, thus calling upon the patriotism of British readers to continue to uphold their homeland’s fame in removing the stain of slavery.¹⁹ She enjoins the reader to question if it is possible to hold such unnatural reasoning in promoting Britain as the defender of liberty while believing that withholding the same liberty to British slaves is right. She steers the reader to the answer of true reason in saying that it is impossible for such a belief to be right. More also extensively admonishes the reader, specifically white readers, to understand slavery as unnatural and impresses the necessity of seeing the slave as the same on a human level with “heads to think, and hearts to feel, And souls to act, with firm tho’ erring zeal.”²⁰

The push towards such an understanding evokes a sense of dutiful and reasonable action, which British campaigns that promoted boycotting goods produced by slaves would later emulate in the 1820s.²¹ These campaigns were predominantly directed to involving women in antislavery action, and utilized poetry as a means of promoting and spreading the idea such as Mary Birkett’s “A Poem on the African Slave Trade” (published in 1792) in addition to More’s “Slavery”.²² Antislavery poetry embodied much of the surrounding debates and context for the abolition movement and some, like More and Birkett, connected poems to religious ideology thus indicating the entrenched interconnectedness of the transatlantic world. More infuses a stirring and rich affect into the conclusion of “Slavery” with hope in reason to bring about the termination of slavery:

She tears the banner stain’d with blood and tears,
And LIBERTY! Thy shining standard rears!
As the bright ensign’s glory she displays,
See pale OPPRESSION faints beneath the blaze!

¹⁶ Anne K. Mellor, “The Female Poet and the Poetess: Two Traditions of British Women’s Poetry, 1780-1830,” *Studies in Romanticism* 36, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 266-267.

¹⁷ More, 3.

¹⁸ More, 4.

¹⁹ More, 18.

²⁰ More, 5.

²¹ Ware, 72.

²² Midgley, 51.

The giant dies! No more his frown appals,
 The chain untouch'd, drops off; the fetter falls.
 Astonish'd echo tells the vocal shore,
 Oppression's fall'n, and Slavery is no more!²³

More attaches such powerful language to this final triumph over the giant of slavery, the hallmark of oppression. In addition, the gendering of liberty as feminine does not necessarily implicate a stance on women's rights, but rather upholds the conservative ideology that women were virtuous and removed from the corrupted sphere of men. She evokes the accepted viewpoint of female sensibility despite the powerful (and ultimately victorious) strength Liberty seems to hold in this poem.²⁴ In maintaining such a conservative perspective of gender in this poem, Hannah More complicated the posturing of women's role in antislavery to uphold the established separate-sphere structuring of gender. However, her own clear voice in the movement suggests how the British antislavery movement, led by many conservatives, negotiated the need for women's support while maintaining hesitance to challenge traditional gender stereotypes. The "astonish'd echo" carrying the voice of freedom across the shore presupposes the complete abolition of slavery and the slave trade not just in the British empire, but throughout the transatlantic world. The fascinating setting in which this poem entered antislavery literature reveals the echoes of ideology, belief, and reform reverberating across physical and cultural boundaries.

There exists strong evidence of positive interactions between abolitionists in this British context, but there were also great rifts as in the case of Ann Yearsley and her patron, Hannah More. Hannah More's prominent and established place as a woman writer in the British literary and antislavery worlds, as well as her middle class position, positioned her to act as a patron, which she extended to another widely read woman author, Ann Yearsley, from 1784 to 1785.²⁵ There has been much scholarly attention paid to the class dynamics in their relationship as representative of broader social interactions in Great Britain. More discovered Yearsley and her natural talent for poetry in 1784 while Yearsley struggled to provide for her family as a milkwoman. More became Yearsley's patron and succeeded in securing the publication of her first volume, *Poems on Several Occasions*.²⁶ Tensions mounted in their relationship when Hannah More, with the help of fellow writer Elizabeth Montagu, set up a trust for the proceeds from Yearsley's poems rather than allowing Yearsley direct control.²⁷ The reasoning offered by More for her actions was that the trust would be safe for the children, thus emphasizing Yearsley's place as a mother rather than as an earning poet.²⁸ The control over this trust in a sense encapsulated the complexity conservative female abolitionists encountered in trying to maintain British class structure yet still assuring a place for their voices to be heard.²⁹ For

²³ More, 20.

²⁴ Mellor, 267-268.

²⁵ Carolyn Williams, "'Am I Not a Man and a Brother?' 'Am I Not a Woman and a Sister?': The Transatlantic Crusade Against the Slave Trade and Slavery," *Caribbean Quarterly* 56, no. ½ (March-June 2010): 119.

²⁶ Kerri Andrews, "Paternal Care and Maternal Feeling: New Correspondence between Ann Yearsley and Hannah More," *Romanticism* 16, no. 1 (April 2010): 43.

²⁷ Julie Cairnie, "The Ambivalence of Ann Yearsley: Laboring and Writing, Submission and Resistance," *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 27, no. 4 (December 2005): 136.

²⁸ Patricia Demers, "'For mine's a stubborn and savage will': 'Lactilla' (Ann Yearsley) and 'Stella' (Hannah More) Reconsidered," *The Huntington Library Quarterly* 56, no. 2 (Spring 1993): 136, 139-140.

²⁹ Ferguson, 9-11.

Yearsley, the struggle for control of her own earnings represented the added complication of being from a lower class that More did not face. The formation and fracture of their relationship underscores the difficult layers that abolitionists, particularly women abolitionists, navigated and how even in difference they remained interconnected. The rift between did not remain a private affair, but circulated in literary reviews and letters. In Yearsley's second volume to *Poems on Various Subjects*, published in 1787, Yearsley brought to light the various, unjust charges laid against her thereby placing More in an unflattering, and unfeminine, light.³⁰ Yearsley had previously celebrated Hannah More as "Stella" in her first volume, yet in the next (following the break in their patronage) she publicly reduces "elevated Stella [...] to low scurrility."³¹ The disintegration of their relationship grabbed public attention but did not prevent Yearsley's noteworthy poems from enriching the body of antislavery literature.³² Class difference permeated the landscape of social protest in Britain as seen in the patronage relationship between More and Yearsley. Their relationship represented the delicate class dynamic of late eighteenth century Britain revealing the differences and barriers British abolitionists had to navigate in order to ground their rhetoric and strategy upon a common path towards abolition.

Shortly following More's poem, Yearsley also produced an antislavery attack on the slave trade, "A Poem on the Inhumanity of the Slave-Trade."³³ Unlike Hannah More, Yearsley wrote her poem without the commissioning of an organization.³⁴ Some have inferred that perhaps she did so not only for moral purposes but so that she would not be outdone by her former patron.³⁵ Yearsley's place in the lower class status, and limited material resources, restricted her advancement as a writer, and her poem against the slave trade required the patronage of Frederick Augustus Hervey, the Earl of Bristol.³⁶ Vron Ware refers to the problem of class (and race) difference between women involved in the antislavery movement as it prompted a need to define whether a common womanhood existed and its implications for women's rights in the conservative environment of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.³⁷ Yearsley's class distinction from More and her subsequent break from More's patronage may indicate a declarative independence from the social hierarchy, yet her continued pursuit of patronage suggests that her status still necessitated the assistance of an individual occupying a wealthier position.³⁸ Noting the practice of patronage and the complication of class structure for the antislavery movement is important for viewing the transatlantic world as not entirely comprised of connection but also its disjuncture within society. In spite of this problem of class difference, Yearsley's antislavery poem significantly contributes to the body of literature to which others of different class and gender similarly added.

Ann Yearsley begins her poem against the inhumane slave trade with an impassioned condemnation of the city of Bristol for its role in perpetuating the commodification and trading

³⁰ Claire Knowles, "Ann Yearsley, Biography and the 'Pow'rs of Sensibility Untaught!'" *Women's Writing* 17, no. 1 (May 2010): 167.

³¹ Demers, "'For mine's a stubborn and savage will,'" 143.

³² Frank Felsenstein, "Ann Yearsley and the Politics of Patronage: 'The Thorp Archive: Part I,'" *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 21, no. 2 (Autumn 2002): 350-352.

³³ Felsenstein, 363.

³⁴ Cairnie, "The Ambivalence of Ann Yearsley," 359.

³⁵ Kerri Andrews, "'More's Polish'd Muse, or Yearsley's Muse of Fire': Bitter Enemies Write the Abolition Movement," *European Romantic Review* 20, no. 1 (January 2009): 21-36.

³⁶ Felsenstein, 351.

³⁷ Ware, 107-108.

³⁸ Felsenstein, 351.

of human beings.³⁹ The campaign for the abolition of slavery had organized around the petition mobilization in 1787 in Manchester and the formation of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade in 1788. Both Yearsley's poem and More's poem were situated within a contested debate and heightened drive for a collective and organized voice to speak before Parliament.⁴⁰ By beginning her poem with an attack upon the place deeply associated with the slave trade, Yearsley integrates her voice within a larger campaign; thus her poem did not stand alone but added to a growing base of antislavery literature and debate. Yearsley, similarly to More, also calls the reader to acknowledge the intended state of freedom for all within nature by looking to the day when "Nature moves obedient to her voice" with the secured liberty of the enslaved.⁴¹ Yearsley draws upon deeply personal and spiritual language by calling woe upon herself as the narrator if she should "scorn this gloomy wretch, and turn [her] tearful eye to more enlighten'd beings," thus seeking to move the reader to conviction for neglecting a moral (and spiritual) responsibility to help the suffering slave.⁴² Yearsley continues the call to conviction and to act upon Christian duty by summoning the support of the "few who feel a more than cold, material essence" to aid the fight against slavery.⁴³

In the same way that More utilized a feminine personification of Liberty, Yearsley also employs the same feminine sensibility. She also places such a gendering upon Nature and upon Justice, yet the slave figure, Luco, is a man. Yearsley uses Luco to paint a portrait of a family torn apart, thus centering the family as the locus of sympathy and identification for the reader. She lays a "curse on him who from a bending parent steals his dear support of age, his darling child; perhaps a son, or a *more tender* daughter."⁴⁴ Not only does she elevate the protection of family, but she also distinguishes between a son and "a *more tender* daughter," thereby reinforcing societal understanding of feminine sensibility and distinctive gentleness. Here she does not make attempts at women's rights or feminine solidarity, but rather structures her language to influence the sympathetic reading of the poem. Perhaps in light of her break with More (especially in response to More's attacks on Yearsley's parenting and dedication to family), the attention to family aligns Yearsley with the devotion of Luco to his family. In the poem, she primarily focuses upon the Bristol seller in connection with the symbol of Luco and his family even calling the seller to consider placing his own daughter or wife upon the auction block.⁴⁵ She forces the seller to a point of identification with the slave in such a way that employs paradox as a powerful language tool. When faced with the horrific prospect of having to sell one's own children, Yearsley reasons that no one could maintain support of the transatlantic slave trade.

In a particularly poignant accusatory questioning of the slave trader, Yearsley beseeches those who would sell another person to present their case before Justice and to endure "Luco's groan":

Speak, Astound the voice of Justice! Bid thy tears

³⁹ Ann Yearsley, *A Poem on the Inhumanity of the Slave-Trade. Humbly inscribed to the Right Honourable and Right Reverend Frederick, Earl of Bristol, Bishop of Derry by Ann Yearsley* (London: G.G.J. and J. Robinson, Paternoster-Row, 1788) from University of London's Goldsmith's Library, accessed from *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*, Gale, Georgia State University, 9 August 2014: 1.

⁴⁰ Drescher, 740.

⁴¹ Yearsley, 2.

⁴² Yearsley, 4.

⁴³ Yearsley, 4.

⁴⁴ Yearsley, 5-6.

⁴⁵ Yearsley, 6-8.

Melt the un pitying pow'r, while thus *she* claims the pledges of thy love [...] Yet beware, Lest Luco's groan be heard [...] Justice will scorn thee in *her* turn.⁴⁶

The presentation of Nature and Justice recall the conservative understanding of feminine sensibility thus indicating the influence of the British social context upon Yearsley's poetry as well as her connection to More's poetic style through such a socially-influenced literary convention. In addition to the similar use of gender to compound the sentiment of their poems, both More and Yearsley distance themselves from the slaves in effect adhering to a British understanding of racial distinction.⁴⁷ The balance and negotiation of the issues of gender, class, and race complicated and dictated the nature of the transatlantic abolition movement. Despite their broken relationship, Hannah More and Ann Yearsley similarly adapted, challenged, and submitted to the various dynamics of British social structure, yet their poems also provided useful frameworks for later antislavery authors and exerted influence on a popular audience, evidenced through multiple printings of their poems.

Yearsley and More crafted the voices of these poems as the British antislavery movement gathered organized momentum against the slave trade, while across the Atlantic, Phillis Wheatley, still a slave, reached a wide and transatlantic audience challenging the deep-seated racist ideologies surrounding enslaved African people. Unlike the British context, American women abolitionists encountered the difficult determination of race in relating to one another and its wider impact upon the antislavery movement. Exemplifying this added negotiation were Phillis Wheatley, an African-born slave in Boston, and Sarah Forten, a free African-American from Philadelphia. Phillis Wheatley traveled around Britain and met the Earl of Dartmouth (for whom she wrote the poem later discussed in this paper), revealing the expansive structured avenues of the transatlantic intellectual community.⁴⁸ Wheatley earned great influence and acclaim in an international community, despite the complication of her status as a slave. Her work greatly benefited the antislavery movement by exhibiting rich humanity and intelligence to a society that held perspective of inferiority of slaves.⁴⁹

Wheatley's enslavement during much of her writing career and lecture travels in America and Britain complicated her significance in the antislavery movement, yet it by no means diminished her importance to antislavery activists as a poet and as a clear example that black people held the ability to overcome the inhumanity of slavery. Her mistress, Susanna Wheatley, granted her freedom in 1773 upon her return from her travels in England in the same year.⁵⁰ As discussed earlier, conservatism within the antislavery movement tempered (but did not squelch) the more progressive elements Quakerism that esteemed female education and racial equality, yet still allowed space for an enslaved woman of color to produce published and highly acclaimed literature. Born in Africa and brought to Boston as a young girl, Wheatley demonstrated talent that the Wheatley family noted and fostered through private tutelage.⁵¹ Writing in the years before the massive British campaigns against the slave trade during which More and Yearsley wrote, Wheatley preceded many of the American slave narratives, such as Harriet Jacobs and Solomon Northup (as well as preceding Olaudah Equiano's narrative). She

⁴⁶ Yearsley, 7-8. (emphasis mine)

⁴⁷ Mellor 268, Ferguson 7, and Cairnie 361.

⁴⁸ David Waldstreicher, "The Wheatleyan Movement," *Early American Studies, An Interdisciplinary Journal* 9, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 527.

⁴⁹ Williams, " 'Am I Not,'" 117.

⁵⁰ James A. Levernier, "Phillis Wheatley (ca. 1753-1784)," *Legacy* 13, no. 1 (1996): 67.

⁵¹ Williams, " 'Am I Not,'" 116.

occupied a precedent-setting position by providing a space for African American writers, especially women, to publish antislavery literature. Wheatley's "Poems on Various Subjects," published in London in 1773 circulated the country at an important juncture in antislavery proceedings with the landmark case spearheaded by Granville Sharp, *Somerset v. Stewart*, occurring the year prior.⁵² In Boston, the intensifying revolutionary rhetoric tinged with the threat of war utilized the provocative language of slavery and liberty, which may not have seemed contradictory to slaveholding men like Thomas Jefferson (or even John Wheatley) but to abolitionists such a paradox implemented a way for antislavery literature to illuminate the aberrant nature of slavery.⁵³ As mentioned earlier, the existence of this contradictory language provided an important rhetorical tool for American abolitionists, like the Pennsylvania Abolition Society. Additionally, this rhetoric also aided the language of Pennsylvania's Act for the Gradual Emancipation of Slavery in 1780. In the preamble to this act (the first of its kind in the world), the assembly directly connects its decision to set a plan for gradual emancipation with their own fight for independence from Great Britain:

When we contemplate our abhorrence of that condition to which the arms and tyranny of Great Britain were exerted to reduce us [...] we conceive that it is our duty, and we rejoice that it is in our power to extend a portion of that freedom to others, which hath been extended to us; and a release from that state of thralldom to which we ourselves were tyrannically doomed [...] We esteem it a peculiar blessing granted to us, that we are enabled this day to add one more step to universal civilization, by removing as much as possible the sorrows of those who have lived in undeserved bondage.⁵⁴

This excerpt indicates the striking rhetorical links between the language of the Revolution and the language of emancipation (albeit a very gradual freedom). Additionally, the Pennsylvania assembly utilizes in its prose the sympathetic identification Menely references as integral to antislavery poetry. As a legislative body, the assembly has the ability for direct political action (unlike a poet) yet they similarly sought to connect their situation with that of enslaved individuals. The appearance and employment of antislavery language in structuring law foregrounds its influence within society. This connection between law and antislavery poetry reveal that these works of abolitionist literature did not remain in isolation but interacted with their broader social contexts. The preamble itself holds an air of poetic verse that recalls Wheatley's address of the contradictory revolutionary rhetoric, which preceded the passage of this act by several years. Writing in 1773, she precedes this groundbreaking legislative act by several years. Placed in such an environment of contradiction, Wheatley's own personal situation somewhat mirrors the larger social context expressed in her poetry that described longing for freedom while dedicated to her master.

While Moira Ferguson points to Hannah More as the developer of a formulaic antislavery poem structure in her 1788 "Slavery" poem, much of the language of intense separation for the slave from Africa and family is similarly found in Wheatley's "Poems on Various Subjects,"

⁵² Louis Taylor Merrill, "The English Campaign for the Abolition of the Slave Trade," *The Journal of Negro History* 30, no. 4 (October 1945): 384.

⁵³ David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 144-145.

⁵⁴ Pennsylvania, *An Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery, 1780* (March 1, 1780): accessed from *Avalon Project*, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/pennst01.asp

specifically the poem she composed for Lord Dartmouth.⁵⁵ A year before her travels to England in 1773, Wheatley had already accrued a great deal of recognition in Boston from her eulogy of George Whitefield evidenced by Thomas Woolridge's visit to the Wheatley household to see the poet for himself. Unfortunately Woolridge's visit reveals the deep-seated racism prompting him to disbelieve that a slave could craft poetry.⁵⁶ While More and Yearsley faced the challenge of writing despite restrictive gender roles and class boundaries (in Yearsley's case), Wheatley had the added negotiation of race. The visit, and subsequent poem, also illuminates the interconnections between America and Britain and how this interconnection translated into the transatlantic antislavery movement.

In the poem, Wheatley addresses her audience as "my lord" calling him to read her verses and hear the suffering and longing for freedom in her voice representing a collective voice of those desiring liberty:

Should you, *my lord*, while you peruse my song,
Wonder from whence from love of Freedom sprung,
Whence from these wishes for the *common* good,
By feeling hearts alone best understood,
I [...] was snatch'd from Afric's fancy'd seat:
What pangs excruciating must molest,
What sorrows labour in my parent's breast?
[...] Such, such was my case. And can I then but
pray
Others may never feel tyrannic sway?⁵⁷

Wheatley deepens the suffering of separation to which many abolitionist authors infused in their verses because it is felt on a personal plane rather than in the assumption of another's voice as in the case of white authors. The reader, faced with Wheatley's direct engagement, must decide whether to adopt the common sense tone that she puts forward regarding her obvious want for freedom. Here again, the exchanging of antislavery sentiment and poetic structure is evident as More and Yearsley similarly adopted voices supporting the natural reasoning behind the abolition of slavery and the esteem of freedom.

Wheatley's travels in England in 1773 illuminate the international connections within the transatlantic world in which she took part in spite of the decline in her career followed by her death in 1784.⁵⁸ She met several abolitionists in traveling the transatlantic literary circuit, and those who visited the Wheatley household, who viewed her impressive talent as ammunition to antislavery discourse regarding the humanity of slaves.⁵⁹ While a current perspective witnessed the treatment of Wheatley as more of an exhibition of the abilities of African people rather than a genuine celebration of her work, her importance and her talent is not diminished because her

⁵⁵ Ferguson, "British Women Writers," 3-4.

⁵⁶ Waldstreicher, 522-523.

⁵⁷ Phillis Wheatley, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. By Phillis Wheatley Negro Servant to Mr. John Wheatley, of Boston, in New England (London: A. Bell Bookseller, Aldgate, 1773) accessed from *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*, Gale, Georgia State University, 9 August, 2014: 74. (emphasis mine)

⁵⁸ Williams, 118.

⁵⁹ James A. Levernier, "Phillis Wheatley and the New England Clergy," *Early American Literature* 26, no. 1 (March 1991): 24.

work endured and greatly impacted later antislavery poetry.⁶⁰ The timing of her poetry within the contradictory revolutionary atmosphere in America and prior to the rise of British abolitionism against the slave trade serves to illuminate the layered junctures characterizing the transatlantic world. The interaction between her personal life, the political climates of Britain and America, and the way in which race affected the treatment of her work presents a complex portrait of transatlantic history that is at times connected and at other times disjointed.

More, Yearsley, and Wheatley occupied, at least in experience, similar political and social climates during the late eighteenth century, yet Sarah Forten (a free woman of color) was not born until 1814 and did not begin her writing career until 1831. Entering into antislavery authorship in the 1830s, decades after the height of the careers aforementioned women, she nonetheless submitted numerous poems to *The Liberator* (the antislavery newspaper her father sponsored at the behest of William Lloyd Garrison) under the pseudonym “Ada.”⁶¹ Sarah Forten, born into a prominent free African-American family, did not hold the added burden of enslavement that Wheatley carried throughout much of her life. Her status as a free woman of color deeply affected her experience and understanding of freedom in a country in which state lines held significant meaning in determining liberty based upon skin color. Forten’s family was integral in the abolitionist movement, and her father (James Forten) corresponded considerably with his British antislavery counterparts. In addition to her family’s direct communication with leading British abolitionists, James Forten, along with other free African American men, set out to further finance publication of some of Wheatley’s poems.⁶² An artistic connection between Wheatley and Forten was thus forged, constituting yet another indication of how a transatlantic community of letters and literary exchange could be forged even when physical contact was impossible.

Forten shared with Wheatley the added limitation of race in addition to her gender, which held particular meaning as a free African American in the 1830s. For free people of color, their place in American society was restrained at numerous levels, and although the Fortens were financially successful and stable, they would have witnessed and experienced the legal restrictions that William Yates recounts in his book of the status of free African Americans published in Philadelphia in 1838, such as the barring of African Americans from public schooling and voting.⁶³ Contiguous to Forten’s entrance into the literary sphere, the British antislavery movement had ramped up petition drives for the total abolition of slavery. Elizabeth Heyrick, an incredibly significant writer in the British antislavery movement (who deserves much greater attention than the scope of this paper), moved immediate emancipation of slaves to the forefront of British antislavery thought with her pamphlet published in 1824 that challenged the London Anti-Slavery Committee’s promotion of gradual emancipation.⁶⁴ The petition campaigns of the 1830s also witnessed a massive response of women signers, with women constituting 30 percent of signers of the 1833 petitions, thus signaling an important expansion of

⁶⁰ Williams, 118.

⁶¹ Julie Winch, “Sarah Forten’s Anti-Slavery Networks,” in *Women’s Rights and Transatlantic Antislavery in the Era of Emancipation*, Kindle edition, ed. Kathryn Kish Sklar and James Brewer Stewart (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), Loc. 2293 of 5644.

⁶² Winch, Loc. 2278 of 5644.

⁶³ William Yates, *Rights of Colored Men to Suffrage, Citizenship, and Trial by Jury: being a book of facts, arguments, and authorities, historical notices and sketches of debates, with notes* (Philadelphia: Merrihew & Gunn, 1838) accessed from *The Making of Modern Law*, Gale 2014, 13 August 2014: 5.

⁶⁴ Ware, 71-72.

collective involvement in the British movement.⁶⁵ Sarah Forten, whose family was intricately connected to many leading British abolitionists, would have been invested in the coverage of these petition drives and rhetoric of immediate abolition. James Forten, her father, maintained correspondence with antislavery leaders like William Wilberforce, Thomas Clarkson, and Benjamin Rush, was connected to Anthony Benezet, and sponsored William Lloyd Garrison's antislavery newspaper, *The Liberator*.⁶⁶ Surrounded by such prominent leaders and exposed early to their literature, Sarah Forten received a firm foundation upon which to build her own career, however short, in antislavery literature.

Forten, as Ada, answered Garrison's call for women authors with "The Slave Girl's Address to her Mother." In this poem, Forten employs much of the established pattern of highlighting slave separation from the African homeland in order to intensify a sense of the slave being ripped from not only from her birthplace, but also from the humanity that having a homeland yields. While More and Yearsley adopted more distant voices from the actual slave, Forten assumed the voice of an actual slave girl in the same way that Wheatley placed herself within her poem. In first-person narrative, Forten infuses the power of experience, even fictional experience, to heighten the emotion of the poem and to challenge those living in freedom to recognize the contradiction of slavery in a democracy. This recalls Hannah More's challenge to the British who claimed to uphold the love of liberty, yet Forten takes the voice of the slaves rather than a distant figure like More:

Torn from *our* home, *our* kindred, and *our* friends,
[...] No heart feels for the poor, the bleeding slave;
No arm is stretched to rescue and to save.
Oh! ye who boast of Freedom's sacred claims,
Do ye not blush to see *our* galling chains;
To hear that sounding word – 'that all are free' –
When thousands groan in helpless slavery?⁶⁷

In April 1831, Forten wrote another poem that most likely resonated with the free African American community as well as recalling the language of liberty from the American Revolution. She challenges those who have neglected to take up the cause of the slave, having forgotten that "bondage had once been their lot," despite having "bled and died" for freedom.⁶⁸ Having a heritage of enslavement, yet being born into freedom, Forten speaks with felt experience in this poem, calling upon an understanding of oneness based on race as well as American patriotism in order to connect her audience to the slave. These examples of her widely read poetry, through the circulation of *The Liberator*, reveal not only her connection by way of her family to the transatlantic antislavery movement, but also through the channel of the written word. One of her poems, "The Grave of the Slave," garnered such attention that Francis Johnson set it to music and brought it to England in 1837.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Seymour Drescher, *Abolition: A History of Slavery and Antislavery* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 250.

⁶⁶ Winch, Loc. 2260 and Loc. 2277 of 5644.

⁶⁷ Sarah Forten as 'Ada,' "The Slave Girl's Address to Her Mother," *The Liberator* (Boston: Saturday, January 29, 1831) accessed from *Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers*, Gale, 13 August 2014: 18. – emphasis mine

⁶⁸ Sarah Forten as 'Ada,' "The Slave," *The Liberator* (Boston: Saturday, April 16, 1831) accessed from *Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers*, Gale, 13 August 2014.

⁶⁹ Winch, Loc. 2301 of 5644.

In addition to her contributions to antislavery poetry, Sarah Forten also served as a founding member of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society (PFASS) formed in December 1833, a society which continued to fight for rights of freedmen until the passage of the Fifteenth amendment.⁷⁰ The PFASS featured an interracial membership of influential women in Philadelphia, including Sarah Forten's sisters and mother and Lucretia Mott, a prominent Quaker and family friend of the Fortens. The interracial composition of the PFASS became a point of serious contention between Philadelphian society and abolitionists. In May 1838, a riotous mob surrounded the meeting hall where the PFASS (and the Pennsylvania Abolition Society) met and then burned it. The mob reacted to the "amalgamation" or mixing of black and white abolitionists, thereby revealing the difficult negotiations of race that abolitionists navigated.⁷¹ Even before the fire more "timid Philadelphia abolitionists," (according to Lucretia Mott) were resistant to holding public, interracial meetings when William Lloyd Garrison visited in 1834. Mott however attended an event at the Forten's home and hoped that the cause was "certainly making rapid progress."⁷² Following the events of May 1838, the more conservative president of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society (which was not an interracial group until the 1840s) encouraged the PFASS to segregate rather than risk further violence from broader society. Lucretia Mott, the society's president, decided to host a tea for her fellow abolitionists – both white and black – as a way of ignoring that suggestion.⁷³ Sarah Forten, as a member of the PFASS and the Forten family, faced these challenges against interracial cooperation not only from Philadelphian society but also from within the broader antislavery network. While certain abolitionists like the Fortens and the Motts saw the benefit and necessity of removing race from the activist equation, other abolitionists did not hold the same view. This point of contention not only illuminates the difficulty facing black abolitionists to assert their place in promoting freedom, but also highlights the wide spectrum of viewpoints represented in the transatlantic abolition movement.

Although Forten seemed poised to achieve more recognition and acclaim as an antislavery activist, her marriage to Joseph Purvis and resignation to the domestic sphere in 1838 brought her career to a sudden stop.⁷⁴ Julie Winch designates this screeching halt to the limitations of gender in the 1830s, reminiscent of the conservatism within Hannah More's and Ann Yearsley's presentation of feminine sensibility in the poems several decades earlier. Perhaps the riot and fire of 1838 solidified her decision, but unfortunately this remains a supposition rather than an evidenced reasoning for her leave from active duty in the abolitionist movement. Despite this abrupt end to a promising career, Forten's role in the antislavery movement should be noted with attention and not disregarded for its temporality.

Hannah More, Ann Yearsley, Phillis Wheatley, and Sarah Forten each employed the language the British and American antislavery movements utilized as well as imbibing within that language of the transatlantic social contexts in which they were actively involved. The similarities shared in poetic verse and an exaltation of freedom to an extent embodies the connective nature of transatlantic history. Their differences in class and race, as well as

⁷⁰Emily Hatcher, "The Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society and the Civil War," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 135, no. 4 (October 2011): 528-530.

⁷¹Margaret Hope Bacon, "The Motts and the Purvises: A Study in Interracial History," *Quaker History* 92, no. 2 (Fall 2003): 4.

⁷²Lucretia Mott to J.M. McKim (May 5, 1834) in *James and Lucretia Mott: Life and Letters*, edited by Anna Davis Hallowell (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1884): 119.

⁷³Bacon, "The Motts and The Purvises," 4.

⁷⁴Winch, Loc. 2375-Loc. 2393 of 5644.

timeframe, in no way detracts from the prevalence of interconnectedness between the British and American antislavery movements, rather they highlight the complex environment facing these movements in order to navigate towards a common goal of freedom. The transitions across the Atlantic and across time invoked distinction between the moments referenced in this paper, but the overarching continuity of language and poetic voice seems to point towards the continuing trend of women authorship for the later women's rights movement. Hindsight certainly allows for such a perspective, but regardless of whether More, Yearsley, Wheatley, and Forten would have shifted to another freedom fight on behalf of common sisterhood, the analysis of their noteworthy and historically important work in antislavery poetry creates a space for a transnational glimpse into further social movements.