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Feeling's Forms: Theorizing Sentiment in Women's Anti-Racism Poetry of the Long Nineteenth  
Century

By

Lucy A Sirianni

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in Charge:

Professor Susan Schweik, Chair

Professor Kathleen Donegan

Professor Beth Piatote

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## Abstract

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My dissertation, "Feeling's Forms: Theorizing Sentiment in Women's Anti-Racism Poetry of the Long Nineteenth Century," centers the work of a group of overlooked and interconnected nineteenth-century women poet-activists. Diverse racially and culturally as well as in their artistry and activism, the poets I examine are brought together by two shared and interlinked goals: first, to elucidate the wrongs done to and advocate for the rights of enslaved Africans and disenfranchised Native Americans, and second, to continually and self-consciously renegotiate their use of and stance toward the sociopolitical efficacy of their poems' formal strategies. In particular, they are concerned with sentiment—a literary mode first beloved for its emotional appeal, then decried and dismissed as lachrymose, and now viewed with more nuance as both politically powerful and problematic in its single-minded focus on individual feeling. My project builds on this most recent appraisal, suggesting that contrary to the popular conception of nineteenth-century poets as writing from a wellspring of unexamined feeling, the poets I consider themselves offered theorizations that both presage and problematize contemporary critical understandings of sentiment. In dialogues both between and within their poems, these now-largely-forgotten poet-activists transform poetry and its attendant forms into a realm in which sentiment itself could be actively tested and questioned, beginning a conversation about art and activism that remains profoundly pertinent today.

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## Introduction

Tuesday, May 30, 1854. Anthony Burns, born enslaved in Virginia and newly escaped to the nominally free state of Massachusetts, is in the midst of undergoing the trial that will lead to his return to slavery. As his trial proceeds in Boston's federal courthouse, surrounded, at the dictate of President Franklin Pierce, by a company of armed U.S. marines, outraged abolitionists protest. Thomas Wentworth Higginson is wounded by the slashing of a sword; deputy James Batchelder is shot and killed.<sup>1</sup> "It was really the trial of Massachusetts," Thoreau would later write. "Every moment that she hesitated to set this man free—every moment that she now hesitates to atone for her crime, she is convicted. The Commissioner on her case is God."<sup>2</sup>

On that same momentous day, a mere sixteen miles from the tumult and injustice of Boston, Charlotte Forten (later Charlotte Forten Grimke), sixteen years old and a free-born African American living at the time in Salem, worries over Burns's trial—and read a poem. In her journal, Grimke bears witness to the affective and political power of poetry, reporting:

His trial is still going on, and I can scarcely think of anything else; read again today as most suitable to my feelings and to the times, 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point,' by Elizabeth B. Browning; how powerfully it is written! how earnestly and touchingly does the writer portray the bitter anguish of the poor fugitive as she thinks over all the wrongs and sufferings that she has endured, and of the sin to which tyrants have driven her but which they alone must answer for! It seems as if no one could read this poem without having his sympathies roused to the utmost on behalf of the oppressed.<sup>3</sup>

In this quotation, which constitutes the bulk of the day's entry, thoughts of Burns and Browning are separated only by a semicolon, and the perils of the near-at-hand, flesh-and-blood fugitive give place to the "wrongs and sufferings" of a fictitious fugitive imagined by a white Englishwoman. Then, too, Browning's poem (a work surely as dramatic as any of her husband's monologues and seldom if ever read alongside its more overtly abolitionist/sentimental American counterparts) becomes "powerful" not for its art but for its activism—for its capacity to leave the reader with "his sympathies roused to the utmost on behalf of the oppressed." Grimke reads Browning, in short, as speaking directly to her own framework of concerns—as potently present as the imprisoned fugitive awaiting his sentence mere miles from Grimke's home. "I may never see her face," Grimke wistfully concludes of Browning, "but the thought of her makes my heart beat quicker, and I feel that she is indeed my *friend*."<sup>4</sup>

Grimke's powerful emotions, though striking, are hardly anomalous, for nineteenth-century literature was used frequently to foster a sense of friendship and even of kinship between readers and those faraway beings, authorial or fictional, whose faces they would never see. Indeed, both my dissertation and the poetry I analyze are at their hearts concerned with the bringing together of disparate perspectives and voices. My project enacts this process of bringing-together by presenting a group of largely overlooked nineteenth-century women poets from a diverse array of races, nationalities, backgrounds, and beliefs. Moreover, I will argue that they themselves enact it by using their poems as dynamic sites of confrontation where multiple perspectives clash, compete, and directly contradict one another. These various confrontations foreground their writers' complex and self-conscious commitment to interrogating their own formal and political choices—choices both they and I treat as inextricably interlinked.

The formal experimentation I identify in these poems, that is to say, works directly if often subtly to contemplate the efficacy of various approaches as forms of political activism—and most especially to evaluate the mode of feeling so often relied upon to bring about social change.

The authors I consider seek to expose and in some cases redress the wrongs inflicted upon enslaved Africans and indigenous peoples, often also invoking questions of gender, whether to claim sisterhood, to appropriate struggle, or to bring to light the doubly-marginalized position of women of color. The use of sentiment in attempts to ameliorate race-based and gender-based oppression has not gone unanalyzed. Such scholars as Jane Tompkins, Nina Baym, and Shirley Samuels have recognized sentiment's efficacy in their work on novels, and critics like Paula Bernat Bennett and Isobel Armstrong have turned to poetry to enumerate its possibilities and perils. What has yet to be explored, however, is the surprising extent to which at least ostensibly sentimental poets themselves were engaging in equivalents of these very same discussions—contemplating in and through their works still deeply relevant questions about the power and limits of individual sympathy, the ethics of speaking on behalf of another, and ultimately, how to seek justice in an unjust world.

We speak today of privilege and complicity. In 1869, Lucy Larcom, poet of the Lowell mills, acknowledged these very concepts. In her poem "Weaving," an industrious and thoughtful weaver not unlike Larcom herself, "haunt[ed]," as she works, by "the world of women," addresses the "dark women slaving at the South," musing, "Of your stolen grapes I quaff the wine; / The bread you starve for fills my mouth."<sup>5</sup> "Who sins, and I am not to blame?", the weaver-speaker wonders, and in the poem's final line, she concludes, "Thy sister's keeper know thou art," as the image of weaving around which the poem is structured comes to refer not only to the speaker's work but also to what she sees as the inextricably interwoven nature of women's lives and intertwined oppressions.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, not all poets presaged what is best in our contemporary moment. Adah Isaacs Menken brings to mind a different word pervasive in today's discourse: appropriation. The Tennessee-born daughter of Irish immigrants, Menken pushed beyond its limit Larcom's notion of interconnectedness, gaining fame as a poet and performer by erroneously claiming African American and Jewish heritage. Menken's self-presentation as an "outsider" is evident not only in her claims of marginalized racial identities but also in poems like her signature piece "Judith," which explores the violent, for Menken feminist, rage of the apocryphal biblical heroine. For Menken, other women's marginalization served primarily to amplify and metaphorize her own perceived liminal status.<sup>7</sup>

Larcom and Menken take many of the tendencies of the poets featured in this project to their extremes. In the chapters that follow, we will see again and again poets who, like Larcom, express deep thoughtfulness about their role in and responsibility for the oppression of others, just as we will see again and again poets whose desires to speak on behalf of oppressed groups are complicated, and sometimes even, like Menken, thwarted, by an inability to recognize the full humanity of the members of those groups even while continuing to fight for justice for and with them. Most of all, what we will see is poets who exist in the vast space between the Larcoms and the Menkens—poets who question, test, reject, and reevaluate their poetic and political choices, perennially renegotiating their relationships to sentimentality as a genre and political tool and to the causes they use it to plead.

This study is transatlantic and cross-racial in both scope and form. Each of its four chapters is structured around a central grouping of British and American poets, white poets and poets of color, who speak, subtly or explicitly, to one another. This approach makes clear how



what Amanda Claybaugh calls the "Anglo-American public sphere," brought about by the extensive transatlantic circulation of nineteenth-century texts, bolstered both the artistry and the activism of the poets my project considers.<sup>8</sup> Many routinely compared to one another, these poets conceived of themselves as a distinct writerly cohort, speaking to and about one another and engaging in sometimes supportive, sometimes contentious, always complex literary conversations. Then, too, my project's structure highlights the fact that the vital poetic contributions of women of color, though too often ignored or suppressed, frequently preceded by many years the insights of their more widely-known white counterparts. Indeed, the end of each chapter foregrounds this still further by departing from chronology and circling back to explore how the chapter's earlier subjects' poetic and political strategies were anticipated and complicated by women poets of color whose words too often remained unheard.

My opening chapter reaches back to the final decades of the eighteenth century to seek the roots of nineteenth-century sentimental-political poetry. The poems it takes up explicitly think through what British philanthropist Hannah More calls the turn "from heads to hearts"—from Enlightenment rationality toward, in Phillis Wheatley's words, the domain of "feeling hearts."<sup>9</sup> More first justifies, then enacts this turn in sweeping abolitionist poems that engage directly with political figures like William Wilberforce and authors such as Aphra Behn and most notably Scottish poet Eaglesfield Smith, whose poem "The Sorrows of Yamba" she revises and substantially expands, creating a fractured, palimpsestic work in which disparate modes converge, collide, and come together. Phillis Wheatley, though at times compared to More, is known for her poems' restraint and elegant order, not fragmentation, yet I argue she shares More's penchant for experimentation with and ambivalence about the emerging sentimental ethos. I read Wheatley's poetic invocations of her parents in search of her often veiled commentaries on sentiment, and I conclude by considering nineteenth-century readings of her poetry and life that emphasize these commentaries. Two under-studied re-tellings of Wheatley's biography by Lydia Maria Child in particular echo the reliance on the female-centered political-literary conversation first seen in More's aforementioned address to Aphra Behn, revealing insights about Wheatley that critics who dismiss that conversation overlook to this day.

My second chapter continues the conversation, first considering two poets to whom Child compared Wheatley: Felicia Dorothea Hemans and the so-called "American Hemans" Lydia Huntley Sigourney, both renowned for their wholehearted embrace of sentiment but with, I argue, more to say about the genre. In the group of poems I analyze, Hemans and Sigourney adopt poetic personae, taking on the voices and even the purported cadences of imagined indigenous women to explore what Sigourney called "the medium of feeling."<sup>10</sup> Both are ultimately less concerned with endorsing or eschewing the precepts of sentimentality than with creating rhetorical realms in which those precepts could be pitted against alternative modes—reassessed and responded to in ways ranging from dialogue with literary epigraphs and historical events to sophisticated metrical experimentation. The chapter then circles back to consider the earlier work of Jane Johnston Schoolcraft (Bamewawagezhikaquay), who went still further in testing the boundaries between disparate modes. I look at her acts of revision and Ojibwe-to-English translation to suggest that her lived experience leads to a blurring of the very rhetorical strands white poets like Hemans and Sigourney seek to tidily untangle.

My third chapter reverses the trajectory of my second, taking up three poets who have been seen as roundly rejecting the sentimental tradition even as, I suggest, it inflects and informs their work. Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Sarah Piatt, another pair of poets who have been

seen as transatlantic counterparts, re-imagine the maternal figure, that crucial sentimental mainstay, to ask whether what Piatt tellingly dubs the "helpless, powerful slave" must be robbed of her agency in order to garner the sympathy that will spur readers to act on her behalf.<sup>11</sup> Free-born black poet Sarah Mapps Douglass anticipates the question—and answers it in no uncertain terms. Positioning her poems against conventionally sentimental epigraphs, she ringingly denounces sentiment's ability to speak to the realities of the titular mother she depicts in her poem "The Mother and her Captive Boy," emphasizing the extent to which systemic efforts to dehumanize the enslaved render the very notion of sympathetic identification a quixotic impossibility.

My final chapter moves toward the turn of the nineteenth-century, when even as sentiment was being decried by such figures as Mark Twain in *Huckleberry Finn's* maudlin "poetess" Emmeline Grangerford, politically passionate women poets were continuing to give the mode sustained and thoughtful consideration. The chapter begins by considering the work of Frances E. W. Harper, whose antebellum sentimental poetry stands in stark contrast to her later "Aunt Chloe" sequence, in which many of the alignments her earlier verse endorses are called into question. It then moves to the work of Iroquois poet and performer E. Pauline Johnson (Tekahionwake), whose indigenous speakers often seek cross-racial understanding only to realize that their white counterparts have no desire to attain it. It turns in closing to the work of Ruth Margaret Muskrat, whose poetic re-imaginings of nineteenth-century Native histories and sequence "Sonnets from the Cherokee (May Mrs. Browning Pardon Me)" make clear how the nineteenth-century strategies and relationships I analyze shaped subsequent generations of reformist poets, creating a lasting lineage.

Ultimately, the premise of this project is that women's poetry of the long nineteenth-century is worthy of sustained critical analysis. These texts, though often viewed as mere sociohistorical artifacts, reveal their nuance, complexity, and profound thoughtfulness when approached with the same scrutiny afforded to more revered canonical works. By centering these too-long-unheard voices and asking that we finally acknowledge the breadth and value of what they have to tell us, I hope my project will follow in the footsteps of the body of poetry it looks at, joining in the movement toward respect and equity in literary studies and beyond.

## Notes

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3. Grimke, Charlotte Forten. *The Journals of Charlotte Forten Grimke*. Ed. Brenda Stevenson. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989.
4. Ibid.
5. Larcom, Lucy. "Weaving." In *Nineteenth-Century American Women Poets: An Anthology*. Ed. Paula Bernat Bennett. Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley-Blackwell, 1997. Lines 18, 50, 51-52.
6. Ibid. Lines 48, 78.
7. For more on Adah Isaacs Menken, see Bennett, Paula Bernat. *Poets in the Public Sphere: The Emancipatory Project of American Women's Poetry, 1800-1900*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003.
8. Claybaugh, Amanda. *The Novel of Purpose: Literature and Social Reform in the Anglo-American World*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006.
9. See More, Hannah "Slavery" in *Selected Writings of Hannah More*, ed. Robert Hole (Brookfield: Pickering and Chatto, 1996) and Phillis Wheatley, "To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth" in *The Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, Ed. John C. Shields (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).
10. Sigourney, Lydia. "Letter to the Delegation of the State of Connecticut." *The Cherokee Phoenix*, Vol. 3, No. 40, 1831.
11. Piatt, Sarah. "The Black Princess." In *Palace-Burner: The Selected Poetry of Sarah Piatt*. Ed. Paula Bernat Bennett. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001.

## Chapter 1

### "From Heads to Hearts": Hannah More, Phillis Wheatley, and the Formation of the Sentimental-Political Poetic Tradition

In 2002, critic Alan Richardson made a discovery: a modestly well-known anti-slavery poem entitled "The Sorrows of Yamba" was not, as had been thought, the sole work of white British eighteenth-century philosopher, philanthropist, and poet Hannah More (1745-1833). It was in fact, Richardson's careful scholarship revealed, More's revision of the work of an obscure Scottish poet named Eaglesfield Smith.<sup>1</sup> In retrospect, the news that this early anti-slavery poem was the creation of two authors with two distinct ideologies should perhaps leave us unsurprised. Yamba, the poem's titular speaker, vacillates frantically between impassioned rage and Christian resignation, elevated rhetoric and crudely stereotyped black dialect, and her startling about-faces are the clear consequence of her fractured origins. Far more surprising is that even as discussions of women's writing, anti-racism, and sentimentality have increased over recent decades, the attention paid to this once frequently anthologized poem, called by Moira Ferguson a "prototype" for later anti-slavery literature, has waned in the wake of Richardson's work on its authorship.<sup>2</sup> This work, I suggest, makes the poem more deserving of study, not less, in no small part because of Richardson's intriguing but ultimately imperfect claims about the competing and contradictory forms of sentiment the poem's two authors espoused.

Writing in the wake of Jane Tompkins's theorization of "sentimental power" and the subsequent critical embrace of sentiment as an effective political tool, Richardson presents the poem's evident sentiment as forward-thinking.<sup>3</sup> Yet departing from the reclamation of sentiment as largely the province of feminist critics re-evaluating the work of dismissed and denigrated women writers, Richardson sees sentiment (and the political progress to which it can lead) as the domain not of More but of male author Smith. Describing the contributions of Smith and More respectively, he identifies in the poem "two distinct strains of British anti-slavery discourse at work, one tragic and sentimental (and vaguely liberal), the other Christianizing and infantilizing (and distinctly reactionary)." Until now, Richardson has had the last word, in part, I suspect, because his narrative is compelling in its cogency albeit problematic in its implications. A young Smith, whom Richardson portrays as an overlooked radical hero (he emphasizes Smith's time as a prisoner of war, support of the French revolution, and poetic engagement with "any number of the liberal and radical causes of the day"), writes a laudably progressive antislavery poem. More, an older, more established, and importantly female author and thinker, softens the poem, rendering it more palatable to an eighteenth-century audience but less so to the readers of today.

Richardson is right to question rigidly gendered understandings of sentiment and right to frame sentimentality as a potentially liberal, even liberatory, strategy. Yet as we see through Richardson's own choice of adjectives, the poem's two strains are less separable and more inextricably entangled than he himself seems to perceive. Christianization and infantilization have hardly been seen as remote from sentimentalism, and his formulation, however unwittingly, should remind us of the far from monolithic nature of sentiment. Indeed, rather than pitting sentiment against some nameless alternative mode, "The Sorrows of Yamba" brings together disparate forms of sentiment, testing their efficacy and striving with however much uncertainty toward a more nuanced sense not only of whether but also of exactly how the power

of sentiment could be harnessed to support political activism. As a poem that could not exist outside the realm of conflict and confrontation, both poetic and political, this fascinating late eighteenth-century text seems a fitting starting point for this project, which will seek to clarify the ways in which nineteenth-century women's sentimental-political poetry as a body was at once fueled, sustained, and plagued by just such efforts.

Yet it is also the case that the tradition extends further back. I'll begin with an earlier poem by More, entitled simply "Slavery." This poem displays More's transformation from rational Enlightenment thinker to harbinger of sentimentalism. After looking closely at this poem and at "The Sorrows of Yamba," I will conclude by turning to the work of an American poet who herself endured life as a slave and whose poetry both complements and complicates More's, inaugurating a tradition of women poets of color whose writing presciently anticipated (and alas, was too often unheeded by) the work of their white counterparts.

Each poem examined represents a distinct moment in the tradition of women's political poetry, but each functions, too, as a site in which sentiment as both a literary genre and a political tool could be actively tested and questioned. Exploration and experimentation, self-questioning and self-critique, are the elements that both bring these poems together and set them apart. Ultimately, they are the elements that reverberate with both potency and poignancy across the nineteenth-century, serving as the hallmarks of what I read as a distinct, undervalued, and still utterly relevant sub-field of literary production.

After even a cursory glance at More's biography, it becomes no surprise that slavery would occupy such a central role in her work. Born near and educated in Bristol, a major slave trading port, More later established herself in London, where she made the acquaintance of such prominent figures as Samuel Johnson, Edmund Burke, and most crucially for our purposes, abolitionist leaders Thomas Clarkson and William Wilberforce, the latter of whom became a close friend. As she continued to pursue her varied and prolific work as a playwright, novelist, educator, and religious and moral philosopher, she also remained active in the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the African Slave Trade. Her politics and her poetry were inextricably linked. Even as, as scholar Brycchan Carey notes, "planning for the abolition campaign ... formed a great deal of [More and Wilberforce's] conversation" during the summer holiday the two spent in England's Peak District, More was using her poems, most notably "Slavery" and "The Sorrows of Yamba," to popularize the abolitionist movement.<sup>4</sup> It is to the first of those poems that we will now turn.

More's anti-slavery poetry begins with a clear sense of faith in the power of rationality to effect political change. Her poem "Slavery" is, at first glance, an eminently reasonable one. The 294-line work, composed of tidy heroic couplets, is carefully divided into twenty numbered sections. Densely allusive and meticulously footnoted, the ambitious poem's emergence out of eighteenth-century Enlightenment thinking is abundantly evident. More's work begins in a characteristically logical manner, with a rhetorical question that springs directly from the implications of its opening conditional clause. It reads thus:

If heaven has into being deign'd to call  
Thy light, O LIBERTY! to shine on all;  
Bright intellectual Sun! why does thy ray  
To earth distribute only partial day?<sup>5</sup>

Though the answer to this query may, alas, continue to elude us, we can be left in little doubt as to what we are to think in response. If Heaven created liberty to "shine on all," as the poem's opening couplet posits, then indeed, it ought to do precisely that rather than working in the "partial" way the poem here identifies and goes on to consider at length. The metaphor of liberty as an "intellectual Sun" underscores the lines' insistence on careful thought and unflinching rationality. It is surely no coincidence that the only two words proclaimed in bold capital letters in this opening section of the poem are "Liberty" and, mere lines later, "Mind" (More 11). For More, the concepts begin as inextricably intertwined.

Yet the poem as a whole is less certain about the power of intellect or reason than its opening might lead us to believe. Reason, it suggests, remains crucial but is itself merely a "partial" solution when addressing social evils such as slavery. Is reason, More's speaker wonders, implicitly elitist? Might a turn to a more universal and equalizing mode lead more effectively to the goal of political change? In a moment central to More's poem (and that indeed appears almost exactly at its midway point), our speaker muses, "From heads to hearts lies Nature's plain appeal, / Tho' few can reason, all mankind can feel" (More 149-150). Even as its denunciation of slavery remains passionate and sweeping, it is this turn "from heads to hearts," I argue, that this poem is more subtly invested in exploring. In attempting to work through the interplay between logic and sentiment, it relies on reasoned argument to suggest reason's limitations." Hearts," it concludes, are perhaps no less reasonable than "heads," and being reasonable implies, however paradoxically, that one must sometimes reject reason in favor of sentiment.

The above offered quote constitutes a turning point thanks not only to its shift in content but also to its placement in the poem. At the close of the poem's tenth section, the speaker asserts of enslaved Africans, "Let Malice strip them of each other plea, / They still are men, and men shou'd still be free" (More 139-140), before concluding with a by this point not unexpected appeal to "insulted Reason" (More 141). The logic is, as always, sound, but the call to reason remains futile, and the eleventh section continues in tones of ever mounting frustration. "Perplex'd, the baffled Muse involves the tale; / Nature confounded, well may language fail!" (More 143-144), exclaims our rightfully outraged speaker. Thus, in the space of a single couplet, both the "Muse" (already established as the wellspring of inspiration for this poem) and "Nature" itself become "perplex'd," "baffled," "confounded." Reason, it seems, has failed in the face of an utterly unreasonable system, and profound intellectual confusion has taken its place. Further, we encounter the fear that language itself will "fail." Reason and rhetoric, the poem worries, may no longer be enough, and in direct response to this failure, More turns from reason to feeling. While the poem hesitates to disavow reason completely, its questioning of the mode becomes increasingly trenchant. The poem's twelfth section opens by stating, "Tho' wounds there are which reason's force may heal, / There needs no logic sure to make us feel" (More 157-158). Feeling is far from absent from More's poem's opening sections. In the work's eighth section, the speaker exclaims, "See the dire victim torn from social life, / The shrieking babe, the agonizing wife!" (More 99-100). The emphasis on a "social life" centered around familial bonds is crucial to More's project and presages the approach taken by subsequent anti-slavery discourse and sentimental literature in general. Yet the explicit theorization of the interplay of logic and feeling in lines 157-158 heralds a change nonetheless. The couplet acknowledges the efficacy of "reason's force," yet the turn from logic to feeling is not only clearly articulated here but also more subtly reaffirmed through the equally important turn from the portrayal of African slaves as an exoticized and othered "they"

to a part of the universal "us." The poem enacts a dramatization of a shift from the early, slightly surprised and more than slightly patronizing observation that "They have heads to think, and hearts to feel / And souls to act, with firm, tho' erring, zeal" (More 67-68) not only toward the more equalizing pronoun "us" but toward a more forward-thinking and inclusive world-view. It is only after this interplay has been logically examined that the poem can proceed to imagine an alternate past that could have "link'd dissever'd worlds in brothers bands" (More 240) and a hopeful future in which "Oppression's fall'n, and Slavery is no more" (More 290). Reason remains an integral part of this new vision, but it is seen as limited as well. Of slaves, the speaker tells us, "Their miseries philosophic quirks deride, / Slaves groan in pangs disown'd by Stoic pride" (More 169-170). It is not through the "philosophic" but through sentiment and physical sensation, the poem concludes, that shared humanity can best be revealed.

This interplay between reason and feeling, head and heart, is explored not only as it relates to the realm of the political but also in terms of aesthetics. In a move that underscores More's awareness of her participation in a tradition of political protest writing (and of women's political protest writing specifically), her speaker addresses Aphra Behn, identified in one of More's many footnotes as the "Author of the Tragedy of Oronoko" [sic]. Here, she speaks to Behn directly, addressing her thus:

O, plaintive Southerne! whose impassion'd strain  
 So oft has wak'd my languid Muse in vain!  
 Now, when congenial themes her cares engage,  
 She burns to emulate thy glowing page;  
 Her failing efforts mock her fond desires,  
 She shares thy feelings, not partakes thy fires. (More 37-42)

Though the poem's admiring speaker modestly gestures toward a gap in artistic ability, she and the "plaintive Southerne" Behn are brought together by shared "feelings." Yet More also questions what she figures as Behn's emphasis on sentiment. Even as the poem lauds Behn's "glowing page," it implicitly differentiates More's project from Behn's less by virtue of the former's self-proclaimed "failing efforts" than because of the latter's reliance on the very "feeling" that brings them together in the first place. The speaker states:

No individual griefs my bosom melt,  
 For millions feel what Oronoko felt:  
 Fir'd by no single wrongs, the countless host  
 I mourn, by rapine dragg'd from Afric's coast. (More 55-58)

The critique here, on the surface, is that in choosing to protest slavery by creating sympathy for a single, ostensibly representative individual, Behn forgets the "millions"—the "countless host" of enslaved Africans suffering under the same white oppression faced by Behn's Oronoko. By extension, More implies that Behn's critique is predicated on sentiment rather than systemic awareness and is consequently incomplete. Yet of course it is the shared feeling of these suffering "millions" on which More bases her critique. It is the shared emotion far more than the physical or sociopolitical condition of the "countless host" that More implicitly strives to reveal. Thus, the poem's attempt to untangle the competing yet interlinked notions of reason and

feeling is ambivalent and not wholly conclusive, yet it raises questions that reverberate throughout the tradition she helped to found.

It would be easy to dismiss More's turn from reason to what she figures as the more populist sentiment as stemming from the racist and ubiquitous assumption that Africans were inherently less rational than their European counterparts and thus could not be proved equal on the basis of their shared reason. Indeed, More is far from exempt from the racist beliefs of her day. She notes Africans' "firm, tho' erring, zeal" (More 68), remarks on what she perceives as Africans' "rude energy" (More 71), and states that, "Strong, but luxuriant virtues boldly shoot / From the wild vigour of a savage root" (More 73-74). Yet she does not subscribe to the notion that race affects intellect. More's speaker proclaims:

Perish th'illiberal thought which wou'd debase  
The native genius of the sable race!  
Perish the proud philosophy, which sought  
To rob them of the pow'rs of equal thought! (More 59-62)

Here, we see not only More's concern for the "native" and "equal" "thought" and even "genius" of "the sable race"; we see, too, that white "thought" and "philosophy" are the entities that have "rob[bed]" Africans of these very qualities by enslaving and oppressing them. Indeed, it is perhaps for this very reason that More turns away from the rational. Reason, the above passage intimates, has been perverted and rendered complicit in perpetuating the unspeakable horrors of slavery. As invested as More remains in revealing the flaws in the pro-slavery rationale, she ultimately concludes that it is more effective still to turn away from rationality itself in favor of a mode untainted by a pro-slavery past: the mode of feeling. Thus, through both its explicit theorizations and its more subtle shifts, More's "Slavery" works to instruct its readers about the value of sentiment.

"The Sorrows of Yamba; Or, The Negro Woman's Lamentation" functions as both a continuation of this ethos and as a radical departure. Published in its longest and most read form in 1795, the poem follows "Slavery" in its turn away from rational denunciations of slavery and toward impassioned appeals to the heart. Unlike "Slavery," though, the primary site of duality is not between reason and sentiment but is rather inherent within sentiment itself, which in the context of this poem emerges not as the unambiguously hopeful alternative seen in "Slavery" but as at best multifaceted, at worst hopelessly fractured. We recall from this chapter's opening paragraphs that the poem's fragmentations stem in part from its dual authorship and were forced onto the poem when More made substantial emendations to the work of Eaglesfield Smith. This structure leads aforementioned critic Alan Richardson to conclude that "The Sorrows of Yamba" is characterized by "ideological and formal discontinuities," and his characterization is apt. Reactionary precepts like "As ye hope for mercy sweet, / So forgive your Massas' sin" coexist uneasily alongside powerfully radical pronouncements like the opening and repeated line, "Still with Afric's love I burn."<sup>6</sup> Yet the very same structure should lead to an inevitable question never posed in Richardson's article: if we accept Richardson's sense that Smith's poem is one of forward-thinking outrage and More's revision is one of obsequious moralizing, why retain so much (indeed, nearly all) of the original poem's rage? Does More's creation of a sympathetic oppressed figure necessarily demand the erasure of Yamba's powerfully-voiced fury, as Richardson suggests, or does her striking willingness to graft her own, ostensibly status quo-endorsing Yamba onto Smith's



defiantly angry one leave room for a more subversive reading? Could Yamba's seemingly disparate voices complement each other in ways not initially apparent?

Of the 88 lines of Smith's original poem, More's 188-line version includes all but two. Of the 86 Smith-penned lines More chooses to retain, only twelve contain changes beyond minor edits to Smith's punctuation and standardization of the poem's grammar and meter. As we will see, close examination of these changes is important, but for now, we can conclude that taken as a group, they suggest that More's project is less one of rejection and reduction, as Richardson implies, and far more one of eager expansion, perhaps even embrace—albeit embrace tempered with correction. More saw something of value in Smith's text and chose not to erase but to adapt it. Ultimately, More's graftings serve as a palimpsestic glimpse into the processes by which one work can serve as a testing-ground for seemingly conflicting techniques both poetic and political. Her careful revisions of Smith's original poem serve as a sort of case study, allowing us a glimpse into how one prominent forbear of the tradition of sentimental anti-racist poetry grappled with enduring questions about how to garner sympathy for her oppressed enslaved subject. Should Yamba die a tragic death or continue to fight for freedom? Should she be an exoticized other or a Westernized liberal subject? Should she be an exception (a softened, whitened anomaly) or an undifferentiated spokeswoman for the suffering millions she is used to represent? Using Smith's more stylistically uniform poem as a base-line, More's version stretches the work in competing and often contradictory directions. The result is a potent reminder that sentiment, whatever it may be, is not straightforward, monolithic, a spontaneous outpouring of sympathy but rather a dynamic strategy recreated again and again.

As powerfully present as Smith's words remain in More's poem, the works are fundamentally different not only at the level of the line but also in terms of plot, structure, and even genre itself. The two versions' opening evocations of Yamba's life in Africa and their subsequent harrowing descriptions of the Middle Passage are largely similar, but subtle reworkings hint at the striking ways in which the poems' trajectories will ultimately diverge. Smith's version of "The Sorrows of Yamba" is one of many slave suicide narratives written in the eighteenth century—preparation for and justification of the principal character's impending death and a last, poetic goodbye.

This is clear from the opening lines of the Smith version, which read thus:

Come, kind death, and give me rest;  
Yamba hath no friend but thee;  
Thou canst ease my throbbing breast,  
Thou canst set a pris'ner free.<sup>7</sup>

These tragic words appear verbatim in More's revised version of "The Sorrows of Yamba," but they serve, significantly, as the poem's second stanza rather than its first. While the enduring power of the slave suicide narrative employed by Smith is revealed by its presence throughout the nineteenth century, More herself chooses to create a narrative not of suicide but of hard-won survival and ultimate salvation.<sup>8</sup> The religious strain is not immediately present in her poem's opening lines, but it is clear from the outset that her version tells a story very different from Smith's.

More's Yamba begins with Smith's second stanza, lamenting:

In St. Lucie's distant isle,

Still with Afric's love I burn;  
 Parted many a thousand mile,  
 Never, never to return. (More 1-4)

It is true, as Alan Richardson observes, that the effect of More's inversion of Smith's first two stanzas is "to distance the poem from the `slave suicide` genre," thus "shielding her intended lower-class readership from cultural `corruption`." Yet the primacy More affords to what is perhaps the most radical line in any version of the poem—"Still with Afric's love I burn" (More 2)—hints at a dichotomy that remains central to her poem. In the very act of "shielding" her readers from one kind of "cultural corruption" in the form of Smith's ostensible condonement of suicide, the poem cannot seem to help but foreground another by throwing its readers headlong into Yamba's scathing rejection of the white British world. And indeed, though softening the original poem's emphasis on Yamba's suicide may have been motivated by conformity to what Richardson would define as reactionary Christian mores, this choice also forces More and her readers to imagine the possibility of a future for Yamba beyond the generically prescribed alternatives of enslavement and death. More's poem, then, is in tension not only with Smith's previous version but with its own conflicting impulses. The radical and the reactionary, critique and Christian consolation, blur and come together to form a new kind of sentiment that would come to dominate nineteenth-century discourse.

What More's poem succeeds in imagining is certainly curbed by the cultural norms she subscribed to. Her version of "The Sorrows of Yamba" envisions a life for its heroine and even offers a closing glimpse of an imagined post-slavery world, but both are seen solely and explicitly through the lens of white Christianity. Consider Yamba's plea to her British readers here:

Where ye gave to war its birth,  
 Where your traders fix'd their den,  
 There go publish "Peace on Earth,"  
 Go proclaim "good-will to men."  
 Where ye once have carried slaughter,  
 Vice, and Slavery, and Sin;  
 Seiz'd on Husband, Wife, and Daughter,  
 Let the Gospel enter in. (More 169-179)

Smith's poem, in contrast, envisions an Africa that is free not only from slavery but from Western interference, but in it, death remains the only option for Yamba herself. This earlier version closes with the lines:

Thus, where Yamba's native home,  
 Humble hut of rushes stood,  
 Her happy sons again may roam,  
 And Britons seek not for their blood. (Smith 85-88)

More's version reprints the first two lines of the stanza but cannot quite bring itself to finish the thought, picturing instead a "rom[ing] ... Missionary good" (More 179-180) who might, Yamba hopes, "join [her husband] to the Christian band" (More 183). Her struggle to imagine freedom

for Yamba and Africa is painfully evident, yet she refuses to leave Yamba to die as she does in Smith's poem. Smith's version's tragic ending of course has power in its own right, but More, with few literary models, attempts, however falteringly, to envision a different path. Does More deserve praise simply for not killing off her black speaker? Surely not, and indeed, Richardson is right that at the level of plot, her poem, though laudable in some respects, leaves much to be desired by today's standards. Yet as we will now see, a closer look at the poem's diction, and especially its subtle departures from Smith's version, suggests that we should not dismiss the poem as merely a watered-down version of Smith's.

Perhaps the most immediately apparent of More's revisions is her transformation of Yamba's voice. Yamba speaks primarily in standard (even flowery) English in all of Smith's version and most of More's. However, More's Yamba employs dialect at several key moments, all thematically linked. "Master" becomes "massa" throughout, Smith's "wily man" becomes "whity [whitey] man," and, in More's poem's most extended turn to dialect, the missionary who introduces Yamba to Christianity is introduced thus:

There I met upon the Strand  
English Missionary Good,  
He had Bible book in hand,  
Which poor me no understood. (More 81-84)

At first one might think More's additions of dialect fit neatly with what Richardson sees as More's project of softening Smith's initially radical Yamba. Her Yamba is less well-versed in the conventions of Western rhetoric and more exoticized—less an equal and more an "other." For Richardson, her use of dialect renders Yamba "childlike." Yet this reading becomes more tenuous when we note the context of each turn to dialect—when we realize, specifically, that More's Yamba uses dialect exclusively when she is speaking about white British men (her initial captor, her subsequent owner, and the "English Missionary Good"). Yamba is only a rhetorical "other," then, during her moments of direct contact with the dominant culture. What are we to make of this? Would it be a stretch to suggest that, intentionally or otherwise, the poem implies that "otherness" lies in contact with the "othering" force—that Yamba's otherness is not innate but forced onto her externally? Could the fact that the dialect appears most consistently in the titles Yamba ascribes to those she is introducing ("massa," "whity man," "English Missionary Good") serve to highlight the otherness less of Yamba than of the white Englishmen she's describing?

When we turn from the general question of dialect to the more specific one of pronouns, we begin to suspect that this may indeed be the case—indeed, that More's Yamba uses dialect not only to eschew the very otherness she at first seems to perform but as a kind of foil against which she proclaims her own lyric subjectivity. In both versions of the poem, Yamba alternates between speaking of herself in first and third person. In More's version, the third person emerges most consistently in the added, dialect-heavy section about the speaker's conversion to Christianity. The following stanza is representative:

Wicked deed full many a time  
Sinful Yamba too hath done  
But she wails to God her crime,  
But she trusts his only Son (More 109-112).

Despite her own reliance on third-person discourse, though, More is not always content to leave Smith's third-person passages unedited. As Smith's poem reaches its conclusion, we encounter this stanza:

And when Yamba sinks in death,  
This her latest pray'r may be;  
While she yields her parting breath,  
O! may Afric's land be free (Smith 77-80).

In the More version, the corresponding stanza reads thus:

And when Yamba sinks in Death,  
This my latest prayer shall be,  
While I yield my parting breath,  
O that Afric might be free (More 157-160).

Here, the third-person opening is retained, but the More version quickly transitions back to first person, as well as replacing Smith's hypothetical "May" with the far more confident "Shall." In this intensely personal moment of prayer, hope, unfettered imagination, More's Yamba is able to speak—perhaps must speak—for herself, as herself. At the precise moment in which she envisions a state free of slavery, Yamba emerges as a lyric subject—a fully-formed "I" who is liberated, too, from the stock conventions of stereotypically "othered" speech. Given the evident care with which More revised Smith's existing text, the powerful implications of this moment seem far from coincidental. In these most inward-looking lines of her poem, More no longer infantilizes Yamba by imbuing her speech patterns with cringe-inducing pseudo-dialect that contains none of the authenticity or power found in the dialect of later, Black-authored texts. She no longer relies on third-person phrasings to merge her own voice with that of her speaker in what comes across as a paternalistic refusal to cede agency even to this inherently agency less rhetorical creation.

Indeed, the agency More chooses to afford Yamba in this pivotal moment should lead us to question Richardson's reading of More's version of the poem as wholly complicit in wider systems of oppression. It is a moment that can only be read as resistant, and that should lead us to be skeptical of other moments that may seem otherwise. Yamba's earlier dialect-laden, third-person professions of acceptance of white culture, especially Christianity and its tenets and adherents, begin to ring hollow in the face of this later shift. They begin to appear complicit less in oppression and more in subversion and a subtle process of literary experimentation. More's version of the poem takes up, amplifies, and re-imagines this element of Smith's. His version's innocuous moments of third-person speech become passages of glaringly exaggerated dialect only for the poem to end in a rejection of the third-person modes as well as of dialect itself, proclaiming through a clever act of contrast the power in affording Yamba the voice and agency of the lyric subject.

Equally subtle and equally striking is the transformation that occurs in the last lines of the passages quoted above. At the end of the Smith passage, Yamba exclaims, "O! may Afric's land be free" (Smith 80). In the corresponding moment in More's revised version, Yamba prays, "O that Afric might be free" (More 160). The changes may at first appear minuscule—the

removal of an exclamation point, the revision of a "may" to a "might," slight rearrangements in word order that even the most careful of readers could hardly be blamed for overlooking. Yet taken together, the changes are once again revealing. Smith's Yamba's exclamatory phrase is a proclamation—a performative speech act. May it be so. More's Yamba's quieter rephrasing neither proclaims nor performs; it pleads. The removal of the declamatory exclamation point, the replacement of "may" (a word of potential decree) with "might" (one of only uncertainty)—these textual details transform the meaning of the line. Yamba's prayer is no longer political but deeply personal—an outpouring of desire rooted in past trauma.

Here, as ever, the poem pulls in contradictory directions. Even as More remains insistent on Yamba's lyric subjectivity and foregrounds her inward struggles, she is careful to remind us, too, that Yamba's speech is not for herself alone. Indeed, part of More's revision of the literary sentimental status quo comes in the form of her insistence on depicting not only individuals but the broader role of systems. We have already seen this insistence in "Slavery"; recall that poem's speaker's thoughts on Aphra Behn and her rebuke that "Millions feel what Oronoko [sic] felt." Here, Yamba explicitly represents those "millions." In what was likely one of the most extended poetic evocations of the Middle Passage extant at the time it was written, More revises Smith's description of the "hundreds stow'd with me" (Smith 32) to one of "Hundreds stow'd like me" (More 32). The voiceless hundreds, then, are not only aligned with Yamba due to their proximity but due to their shared suffering. Yamba's status as representative falters only after her story becomes one not of captivity but of conversion and Christ-like forgiveness—then she proclaims, in a stanza not present in the Smith version of the poem:

Here an injured Slave forgives,  
There a Host for vengeance cry;  
Here a single Yamba lives,  
There a thousand droop and die (More 133-136).

What is portrayed as uplifting in Yamba's story (namely, her conversion to Christianity) is also portrayed as unusual. Yamba's story may be palatable for white readers, but the poem is careful to remind us of the more troubling stories that remain untold. More's turn from the philosophizing mode of "Slavery" to the more Behn-inspired mode of "The Sorrows of Yamba" may be the logical continuation of her growing distrust of rational discourse, but she has in no way renounced her concern for the masses, be they "hundreds," "thousands," "millions," or even a "Host."

If Yamba's voice is anything, it is powerful—strange, self-contradictory, but utterly, hauntingly memorable. In Smith's version, she speaks out potently if fleetingly against the evils of slavery. In More's, her speech is transformed, expanded, stretched—pulled in multiple directions that oppose and chafe against one another. More renders her Yamba at once more exoticized and more compatible with notions of the Western lyric subject, more an individual speaking from a background of deep, inward trauma and more a representative speaking on behalf of others, more a survivor of the trauma she's endured and more a casualty of a paternalistic system that can imagine Yamba as free from slavery but not from the confines of white Western Christian imperialism. The poet's last name could hardly be more apt.

Yet much as More adds, with this endlessly additive project, to our growing understanding of women's anti-racist poetics, she's of course not the only poet whose work can tell us more. Indeed, even in her own day, when the tradition of anti-racist, sentimental

women's poetry had just barely started to take form, More was compared to a fellow woman poet whose work still resonates with her own. A shared debt to and desire to expand Enlightenment thinking, a shared commitment to both maintaining rational order and invoking affective bonds, and shared emphases on the traumatic nature of slavery, particularly as manifested through the endurance of the Middle Passage and the severance of mother/child bonds—all reveal the value of reading Hannah More's poems alongside the poems of Phillis Wheatley (c. 1753-1784). It is to the latter's work that this chapter will turn in closing, along with a crucial response to it by nineteenth-century author and activist Lydia Maria Child (1802-1880).<sup>9</sup>

More was aware of Wheatley, to whom she was occasionally compared. This association was one More viewed with troublingly derisive amusement—and one that Wheatley, with characteristic restraint, never chose to discuss in any form that has been preserved. In September, 1774, More wrote to her friends Frances Reynolds and Mary Reynolds Palmer (the latter of whom had met Wheatley the year before):

Have you seen a little Poem called the Female advocate? The Author (a Woman) sent me a copy tho I do not know her. She seems to write with some ease and spirit. [Mrs] Chapone and I are under infinite obligations to her, for ranking us with Phillis Wheatley the black girl. I have a notion the comparison of Phillis and I occurred to her from the similarity of our complexions as well Talents...<sup>10</sup>

The casual racism leveled against Wheatley by More and her circle is perhaps as good a justification as any for Wheatley's oft-maligned stylistic choices. Reduced to her race, her gender, her youth, Wheatley chose to down-play these aspects of her identity by writing elegantly rational verses that surely do not belong in a project on sentimental poetry. And yet, perhaps they do. Wheatley's work, though sentimental only in rare moments, allows us a revelatory glimpse not only into the shift from her own occasionally sentiment-tinged reason toward the reason-tinged sentiment by which More's work is characterized. It allows us, too, to reflect upon the ways in which the crucial contributions of women poets of color were too often denigrated and dismissed by their white counterparts. Through both her poetic evocations of her own lived experience of enslavement and the flourishing tradition of responses thereto by more conventionally sentimental authors, we can glean a richer sense of the contradictory and complex ways in which sentiment could be deployed as a method of re-interpretation and critique.

Wheatley's "To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth" is arguably the most pertinent of her works to any analysis of sentimental anti-racist discourse. First published in *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773), the poem is noteworthy not only for its appearance in the sole volume of poetry by the first African American and second American woman to publish her verse. It is crucial, too, for its status as Wheatley's only explicitly abolitionist poem to be known in her own day—a status evident in the lines of the poem itself and cemented by its frequent deployment by the many nineteenth-century anti-slavery activists who consistently relied on Wheatley as an emblem of black potential. Abigail Mott (sister of the better-known Lucretia) reprinted it in her profile of Wheatley in *The Liberator*, and Lydia Maria Child, who featured Wheatley prominently in her chapter on black intellect in her fiery 1833 *Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans Called Africans* returned to the poem

throughout her long abolitionist career. While we cannot be sure that Hannah More encountered this poem, probable though it may be, its text is linked with "Yamba" as the two poems exist as two of the earliest depictions of pre-enslavement life and subsequent capture. The particular lines to which abolitionists were inevitably drawn read thus:

Should you, my Lord, while you peruse my song,  
 Wonder from whence my love of Freedom sprung,—  
 Whence flow these wishes for the common good,  
 By feeling hearts alone best understood,—  
 I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate,  
 Was snatched from Afric's fancied happy seat.  
 What pangs excruciating must molest,  
 What sorrows labor in my parent's breast!  
 Steeled was that soul, and by no misery moved,  
 That from a father seized his babe beloved.  
 Such was my case; and can I then but pray  
 Others may never feel tyrannic sway?<sup>11</sup>

The circumspection evident in these lines has of course not gone unnoticed. James Weldon Johnson wrote that the lines "cannot but strike the reader as rather unimpassioned," and his appraisal is among the kindest.<sup>12</sup> The speaker's equivocations about the "seeming cruel fate" that took her from "Afric's fancied happy seat" would seem to affirm Johnson's reading. Especially when read against "The Sorrows of Yamba," though, they seem to suggest a lack less in passion than in privilege. A Wheatley proclaiming, "Still with Afric's love I burn" is, alas, near impossible to picture. Yet within the constraints imposed upon her as a black woman poet, Wheatley was able to articulate a not so very different message while also experimenting with the same forms of sentiment we have seen throughout "Yamba."

The troubling couplet to which I alluded ("I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate, / Was snatched from Afric's fancied happy seat") stands out not only for its ambivalence but also for its status as one of only five slant-rhymed couplets in the 43-line poem, two others of which also appear in the crucial passage quoted above. Something, these formal disruptions suggest, is wrong with what is being said and needs a second look—a slower, more deliberate reading. This description of enslavement cannot conform to the elegantly ordered, impeccably correct structures so characteristic of Wheatley's broader oeuvre.

Then, too, there is the context of critique rooted in the emerging tradition of politicized sentimentality. Wheatley, like Yamba, works to dismantle existing power dynamics between black women and white Englishmen—though unlike Yamba, she speaks in the face of stakes that are all too real. Her direct address to William Legge, the titular Earl of Dartmouth, in some ways mirrors Yamba's strategic use of dialect, as both rhetorical techniques work to de-center the dominant white male perspective—and Wheatley's approach is arguably the far bolder choice. It is also the more sentiment-based, despite her general lack of alignment with this tradition. Pushing a powerful white English nobleman to identify and sympathize with a nameless black father (and the featured parent's gender is no accident) in fact lays the groundwork for a technique that would come to dominate nineteenth-century sentimental antislavery writing: a reliance on shared parenthood as a powerfully unifying force.

Wheatley's direct address to the Earl and staging of access to the subjectivity of her father should remind us of the ways in which the sentimental and the political go hand in hand and of the pivotal role Wheatley played in forging that connection, yet we can grasp the full extent of what her work and its afterlife reveal about the power and uses of sentiment only when we turn from her discussion of her father to her far subtler invocation of her mother—from what, in my discussion of "The Sorrows of Yamba," I figured as public performance to inward-looking, personal plea. Looming large in the lore surrounding Wheatley's life is a particular anecdote concerning the poet's sole memory of her pre-slavery childhood in Africa—or at least, the sole memory she chose to share. The oft-retold tale appears in most nineteenth-century biographies of Wheatley, including those by Margaretta Matilda Odell, Benjamin Bussey Thatcher, and most notably for our purposes, staunch abolitionist and tireless crusader for equity Lydia Maria Child.

Child recounts the story thus in the biographical sketch she wrote for her 1865 collection *The Freedmen's Book*, a fascinating and under-studied reader for newly emancipated slaves: "The poor little orphan ... could remember nothing about Africa, except that she used to see her mother pour out water before the rising sun."<sup>13</sup> Odell attributes this perceived "faithlessness of memory" to a lack in Wheatley herself. "The memories of most children," she tells us, "reach back to a much earlier period than their seventh year; but there are some circumstances ... which would induce us to suppose, that in the case of Phillis, this faculty did not equal the other powers of her mind."<sup>14</sup> Thatcher is still more dismissive. He claims, "That the child should retain the memory of this apparently trifling incident, when she forgot almost everything else, is not, perhaps, very remarkable. It is one which would be quite as likely to make an impression on the mind of a child, as a much more important event."<sup>15</sup> Child, in stark contrast, posits, "The sight of the great splendid orb, coming she knew not whence, rising apparently out of the hills to make the whole world glorious with light, and the devout reverence with which her mother hailed its return every morning, might naturally impress the child's imagination so deeply, that she remembered it after she had forgotten everything else about her native land."

Child's unique respect for Wheatley's history is noteworthy, but far more so is the way in which her text proceeds. Following her biography of Wheatley, mere pages after her vivid invocation of the poet's childhood memory, Child appends this excerpt from Wheatley's "Thoughts on the Works of Providence":

Arise, my soul! on wings enraptured rise,  
To praise the Monarch of the Earth and skies,  
Whose goodness and beneficence appear,  
As round its centre moves the rolling year;  
Or when the morning glows with rosy charms,  
Or the sun slumbers in the ocean's arms.

...

Adored forever be the God unseen,  
Who round the sun revolves this vast machine;  
Though to his eye its mass a point appears:  
Adored the God that whirls surrounding spheres,  
Who first ordained that mighty Sol should reign,  
The peerless monarch of th' ethereal train.  
Of miles twice forty millions is his height,



And yet his radiance dazzles mortal sight,  
 So far beneath,—from him th' extended earth  
 Vigor derives, and every flowery birth.  
 Vast through her orb she moves, with easy grace,  
 Around her Phoebus in unbounded space;

...

That wisdom which attends Jehovah's ways,  
 Shines most conspicuous in the solar rays.  
 Without them, destitute of heat and light,  
 This world would be the reign of endless night.  
 In their excess, how would our race complain,  
 Abhorring life! how hate its lengthened chain!

...

Hail, smiling morn, that from the orient main  
 Ascending, dost adorn the heavenly plain!  
 So rich, so various are thy beauteous dyes,  
 That spread through all the circuit of the skies,  
 That, full of thee, my soul in rapture soars,  
 And thy great God, the cause of all, adores!

...

May grateful strains salute the smiling morn,  
 Before its beams the eastern hills adorn! (Wheatley 1-62)

Though these lines are offered with not a word of editorial comment, Child's careful selection of Wheatley's references to "solar rays" and "smiling morn[s]" suggests a startling conclusion: that Child may well have been reading Wheatley's lines as invocations of her memory of her mother's act of worship. Encountered so soon after Child's vivid description of Wheatley's mother "hail[ing]" the return of the "great splendid orb ... rising apparently out of the hills to make the whole world glorious with light," the inclusion of Wheatley's own poetic "hail[ing]" of an "orb" whose "beams the eastern hills adorn" can hardly be coincidental. And indeed, Child subtly underscores the connection, cutting off the excerpt mid-stanza with a couplet that encapsulates the image of morning "salutation" and including two footnotes reminding her readers that Sol and Phoebus refer to the sun—this last in a text that has only seven footnotes sprinkled across its 277 pages.

Lengthy though the passage Child selects may be, it is as telling for what it doesn't include as what it does. Child does not reprint the wide-ranging poem's subsequent retelling of the Biblical creation story or its extended meditation upon "dreams how passing strange." In Child's hands, Wheatley's text becomes a poem solely about "the works of providence" in the form of "solar rays ... ascending [to] adorn the heavenly main."

While Devona Mallory, in an essay entitled "I Remember Mama: Honoring the Goddess- Mother While Denouncing the Slaveowner-God in Phillis Wheatley's Poetry," argues that Wheatley may link her mother with Aurora, the Roman goddess of dawn, and while John Shields, in a far more nuanced discussion, asserts that Wheatley's "unmistakable emphasis on solar imagery derives from her African culture's practice of hierophantic solar worship," the vast majority of critics from Wheatley's day to ours have joined with Michele McKay and William J. Scheick in dubbing the poet "bereft of her African heritage."<sup>16</sup> That Lydia Maria

Child, anticipating Mallory and Shields by nearly a century and a half, would discern in Wheatley's works a celebratory if circumspect nod to this "African heritage" and to a female lineage foregrounded by Child but seldom perceived by subsequent Wheatley scholars is a testament to Child's prescient and forward-thinking mind and also, perhaps, to the power of what Wheatley herself called the "feeling heart." Child, steeped in the tradition of sentimental activist literature, read Wheatley not as the anomaly she was so often thought to be but as a forbear of that tradition—one she figured as distinctly female. Boldly responding in her 1833 Appeal to Thomas Jefferson's famous criticisms of Wheatley's work with the suggestion that he "would have judged differently, had he been perfectly unprejudiced," Child wrote, "It would indeed be absurd to put Phillis Wheatly [sic] in competition with Mrs. Hemans, Mary Hewitt, Mrs. Sigourney, Miss Gould, and other modern writers; but her productions certainly appear very respectable in comparison with most of the poetry of that day."<sup>17</sup> This unlikely comparison, "absurd" though Child herself may find it, is nevertheless revealing. Reading Wheatley's work alongside the poetry of her nineteenth-century sisters, a group who often privileged the very heightened sentiment Wheatley's many detractors have found so glaringly absent from her work, is, I suspect, precisely what led to Child's insight about "Thoughts on the Works of Providence" and its whispered invocation of a sentimental mainstay: the mother/child bond.

In the end, then, what Child's reading of Phillis Wheatley shows us is simply this: More's "intellectual Sun" has dimmed, eclipsed by the "great splendid orb" made visible by the very ethos that More and Wheatley deployed strategically and that Child hailed with a more unambivalent welcome. Logic remains, surely, but it is the logic of sentiment—the "understanding" of Wheatley's "feeling heart." "All mankind can feel," wrote Hannah More, and in the years and decades that followed her assertion, "all mankind" would be made to do just that by the womankind that followed in More's—and Wheatley's, and Child's—footsteps. It is to these women, the carriers on of the sentimental-political poetic tradition, that the remainder of my project will turn.

## Notes

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6. More, Hannah. "The Sorrows of Yamba," *Selected Writings of Hannah More*. Ed. Robert Hole. Brookfield: Pickering and Chatto, 1996. lines 115-116, 1, 154, hereafter cited in text.
7. Smith, Eaglesfield. *Poetical Works by Eaglesfield Smith, Esq.* Second ed. *Monthly Magazine* 54 (Dec. 1822).
8. For a particularly powerful example of the lasting impact of the slave suicide poetic genre, see Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point."
9. We see in her *Letters from New York* that Child was a thoughtful reader not only of Wheatley but of More, whose work she occasionally mined for proto-feminist insights.
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Chapter 2  
 "Solely Through the Medium of Feeling": Indian Removal, Indigenous Resistance, and  
 Sentiment's Ambivalent Arbiters

In the early decades of the nineteenth century, sentimentality's popularity was at its height. To read was not only to weep but to be taught the ways of sympathy—of when and how the tear that might well serve as the emblem of the period could be applied and what it could do. Much like the maternal guidance that filled its pages, the literature of sentiment was often presented as instructive—an education in, to borrow *Uncle Tom's Cabin's* galvanizing phrase, how to "feel right."<sup>1</sup> Though not all sentimental writings were concerned with sociopolitical reform, "feel[ing] right" toward the down-trodden—the poor, the sick, the outcast, the oppressed—was unquestionably valorized. While justice for the slave would take hold of the sentimental imagination mid-century, its first decades saw a surge in interest in the precarious situation of the Native American, who had become the subject of a series of closely-followed political machinations culminating in Andrew Jackson's devastating Indian removal policy. Whether protesting this policy outright or spurred by its notoriety to chronicle Indigenous histories, sentimental poets both Indigenous and white took up the topic of the day.

This chapter will examine three such poets. In it, we will see how Felicia Dorothea Hemans, remote from the political turmoil thanks to her British status, sought to use Native speakers to think through questions about gender and representation. We will chart Lydia Huntley Sigourney's journey from political sentimentality's most acclaimed proponent to skeptic of sentiment's efficacy in the face of unrelenting white violence against Native Americans. And we will take up the poems of Jane Johnston Schoolcraft (Bamewawagezhikaquay), first known Native literary writer, whose original poetry, revision, and Ojibwe-to-English translation reveal layers of complexity missed by the two aforementioned white poets. Taken together, these three poets allow us to explore the continuation and refinement of the testing of sentiment begun by More and Wheatley. Through Hemans's formal departures, Sigourney's surprising evolution, and the contrasts and convergences illuminated by Jane Johnston Schoolcraft, we will see that even at its peak, sentiment was seen by the poets who deployed it as a force to be grappled with and questioned.

Felicia Dorothea Hemans's 1828 "The Indian Woman's Death-Song" offers an extended look into the dichotomies that riddled the anti-racist sentiment of its time. A British poem with an explicitly American setting and subject, the poem exists as a meditation on representation—on how best to evoke meaningful sympathy for its heroine, the titular Indian woman. Should it be her Indianness, her perceived difference, that is emphasized, or her womanhood, the quality that renders her akin to Hemans's female readers? In the end, the poem doesn't ask those readers to take action. As the Indian woman paddles her canoe down the Mississippi river, her infant daughter in her arms, drifting ever closer to her self-inflicted death in "the cataract's thunder," her fate surely saddens but does not demand systemic change.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, "anti-racist" seems a tenuous designation for the work. Yet the poem creates the sympathy it does not call for, forcing readers of its day to broaden their spheres of sentiment. Moreover, it is deeply thoughtful about the particular processes by which that sympathy is brought into being, experimenting with often competing formal techniques as it contemplates various approaches.

The central conflict that quietly animates "The Indian Woman's Death-Song" is evident from the beginning—from its two opening epigraphs. After an introductory note in which Hemans cites *Narrative of an Expedition to the Source of St. Peter's River*, published just four

years earlier, as the source of the Indian woman's tale, we are offered two quotations: the first from Schiller's tragedy *The Bride of Messina* in a French translation by Madame de Staël, the second from James Fenimore Cooper's *The Prairie*. The Schiller/De Staël epigraph reads, "Non, je ne puis vivre avec un coeur brisé. Il faut que je retrouve la joie, et que je m'unisse aux esprits libres de l'air" ("No, I cannot live with a broken heart. I must find joy again and unite myself with the free spirits of the air").<sup>3</sup> The Cooper quote, spoken by the "Sioux girl" Tachechana, who, like Hemans's Indian woman, has been deserted by her husband, reads, "Let not my child be a girl, for very sad is the life of a woman."

We begin, then, with an epigraph rooted in the universalism that is a hallmark of sentimentality—a claim of sisterhood that is an act of both solidarity and profound erasure. The Indian woman's story is timeless, placeless, emblematic of a distinctly female heartbreak found anywhere and everywhere. The at-first-glance odd choice to quote not Schiller's original German or an English translation thereof but Madame de Staël's French translation underscores the cosmopolitan nature of the poem's opening. The Indian woman's story, which is also the story of Schiller's Sicilian bride, exists across languages. Then, too, the inclusion of Madame de Staël primes readers to approach the poem that follows with an eye to gender politics. Hemans names neither Schiller nor Cooper, including only the titles of their works, but she is careful to name Madame de Staël, suggesting that the Indian woman's tale, and indeed, her own poem, exists within a broader tradition of women's voices and works—a suggestion underscored, too, by the fact that the "children" referenced in the poem's headnote become a single "babe," who, the Indian woman takes care to tell us, was "born, like me, for woman's weary lot" (34).

The second epigraph, in contrast, works to particularize the Indian woman's sorrow. She fits into a tradition, it suggests, that is not divorced from but tied to time, place, and crucially, race. What Cooper's Tachechana and Hemans's nameless Indian woman share is strikingly specific. Both are wives abandoned by their husbands, mothers fearful for the fate of daughters in a world where women are easily cast aside, and both are portrayed by their white creators as distinctly Amerindian, with everything from settings to speech patterns pointedly proclaiming their "Indianness." This strain, too, continues through the body of the poem, as we are asked to view the Indian woman alongside not only Cooper's Tachechana but also Catharine Maria Sedgwick's Magawisca, from whom the Indian woman borrows many of her metaphors, likening herself to bird and deer, and who, like the Indian woman, is last seen drifting away in a canoe, an image that encapsulates the then-prevalent idea of the sad but inevitable and deeply romanticized "disappearance" of Indigenous peoples.

In placing side by side these two epigraphs, the first a universalizing outcry of heartbreak that crosses continents and languages, the second a voicing of kinship rooted in circumstance, Hemans deconstructs and interrogates the notion of sympathy that Hannah More came to rely on and that Phillis Wheatley wove into her often-deemed-emotionless work. The poem presents two competing forms of sympathy, asking whether its implicit advocacy on behalf of both Native Americans and women will be best served by presenting its principal speaker as akin to white European readers and fundamentally representative of all women or by emphasizing her exoticism and the particularity of her experience as a Native woman. Other poets will propose answers to the question, as we will see; Hemans herself does not. But in the text of the poem, she continues to ask it with urgency and formal prowess.

We see this perhaps most clearly in the poem's multiple meters. Its first fifteen lines, spoken by a narratorial speaker who introduces the Indian woman and her sleeping baby, "borne leaf-like" toward their death in the woman's "frail bark," are written in conventional blank verse

(4-5). At line 16, the speaker changes, and with it, the meter of the poem. The Indian woman sings her "wild proud strain, her Song of Death" (15) in rhymed lines of iambic heptameter:

Roll swiftly to the Spirit's land, thou mighty stream and free!  
 Father of ancient waters, roll! and bear our lives with thee!  
 The weary bird that storms have toss'd would seek the sunshine's calm,  
 And the deer that hath the arrow's hurt flies to the woods of balm.  
 Roll on!—my warrior's eye hath look'd upon another's face,  
 And mine hath faded from his soul, as fades a moonbeam's trace ... (16-21).

In stark contrast to the blank verse with which the poem opens, this new meter was a surprising one, in Hemans's time as in our own, and its unexpected presence is telling. The Indian woman's iambic heptameter offers both the exoticism of the long line, which we seldom observe in nineteenth-century poetics, and the familiarity of the sound of ballad meter, to which it sounds identical. In choosing to use a verse form that is at once wholly foreign-looking and wholly familiar-sounding, Hemans gestures toward dualities that would remain at play throughout the nineteenth century. Readers are meant to be drawn in by the Indian woman's "strange[ness]" and "wild[ness]" as described in tones of condescension by the clearly white opening speaker, but also to hear echoes of themselves in the Indian woman's story and unmediated voice.

The use of iambic heptameter also brings the poem full circle, ending it, as it began, by posing questions about both tradition and translation. Though rare in the nineteenth century, as I have noted, the meter would have had one prominent association. It was the meter of the epic, and, very particularly, of George Chapman's acclaimed translation of Homer's *Iliad*—or, to quote the title of Keats's famous poem, simply "Chapman's Homer." While the poem is not an overtly political one, its metrical nod to Chapman and, through him, Homer does advance an equalizing claim: that the Indian woman, marginalized for the race and gender foregrounded in the poem's title and all the intersections thereof, is worthy of the same poetic treatment as epic heroes like Achilles. Whether or how this treatment should be taken up beyond the realm of poetry is unclear, but this poem is less concerned than others I analyze about the possibilities of real-world application. As underscored by the echo of the "fourteeners" that characterize Chapman's translation of the *Iliad*, what it is concerned with is translation—translation across language as in the opening epigraph, across genre as in the rendering of prose into epic verse, and from fact to poetic fiction, which is the fundamental project of the poem as a whole. Like Madame de Staël and Chapman, Hemans is translating—making others' stories new. Her act of translation, though, is both more expansive and more ambivalent, torn between the sentimental impulse to translate individual experiences into perceivedly universal ones and a nascent consciousness of the erasures and inequities that impulse brings to light.

While More's *Yamba* incorporates these competing strategies as separate strands that interrupt and contradict one another, Hemans manages to meld them into an uneasy coexistence. Here, they are interwoven, sometimes barely distinguishable, each strand containing within it shades of the other, as we see in a return to the poem's epigraphs, where Schiller and Madame de Staël's "spirits of the air" might put readers in mind of the Great Spirit while Tachechana's lament, though likely chosen for its very particular context, is ultimately a comment on the lot of all women. In short, where More's poem shows sentimental-political poetics at their generative yet inchoate beginnings, Hemans's work builds on More's to display new heights of technical

subtlety and formal confidence even as the theoretical ambivalence remains, a hallmark of the tradition.

If More forces sentiment to clash with other modes and Hemans places it in tandem with them, Lydia Huntley Sigourney, often dubbed "The American Hemans," takes up the task of testing sentiment's efficacy but does so not within a single poem but over the course of her long and prolific career. Reading the various invocations of Native or Native-aligned women across her oeuvre allows us to chart a trajectory from an early embrace of conventional sentimentality to a subsequent and gradual disillusionment with its tenets in the face of continuing white aggression. The growing uncertainties her poems reveal are not unlike those found in "The Indian Woman's Death-Song." Does the seemingly benign notion of cross-racial, cross-cultural sisterhood elide generative difference? Are there more nuanced ways to evoke productive sympathy? And what are the implications of speaking for or even as another? Yet the fact that Sigourney, the poet who most explicitly embraces sentiment as a strategy for sociopolitical change, asked these questions in extended and increasingly insistent ways over the course of her career is particularly telling. Even she, whose writerly persona is that of an upholder and diffuser of sentiment's key tenets, understood and grappled with her chosen mode's complexities and implications.

If Hemans's "The Indian Woman's Death-Song" is arguably the least overtly activist poem in my project, Sigourney's "The Cherokee Mother" may well be the most. Written in 1831 on the heels of the Supreme Court's decision to force the Cherokee to leave their ancestral lands, the poem was published in the *Cherokee Phoenix*, where Indigenous and white authors and their Cherokee and English words appeared side by side. Sigourney's poetic appeal was accompanied by a still more direct prose plea—a "Letter to the Delegation of the State of Connecticut" penned by Sigourney "at the request of an Association of Ladies," protesting President Andrew Jackson's soon-to-be implemented Indian removal policy, which would come to be known as the Trail of Tears.<sup>4</sup> The poem, printed directly after the open letter or "memorial," is a clear continuation of the sentiments expressed in the petition to the delegates, while the petition, conversely, serves to both contextualize and comment on the poem. Its most trenchant comment, at least for our purposes, reads, "It will probably be alledged [sic] that we have viewed this subject solely through the medium of *feeling*. This was our intention."<sup>5</sup> Sigourney's clear and conscious choice to deploy "the medium of feeling" to both awaken "holy sympathies" and plead for action ("Exert your influence") needs little explication. It is proclaimed directly and with pride.

The poem that follows its author's commentary epitomizes sentimental-political activism at its purest. It is rooted in the notion of family both literal and universal, as the titular "Cherokee Mother" addresses first her questioning "child," then her "moaning babe," and finally her "father ... old and blind," before gesturing outward to address the broader "you" comprised of white oppressors with the same direct, maternal admonition.<sup>6</sup> The soon-to-be displaced Cherokee, the poem makes clear, are members of families much like the reader's own as well as members of the human family. Their kinship with readers is made evident in other ways, too. The Cherokee mother and all those encompassed in her "we" are "patriots" (2), farmers who tend their "corn-clad grounds" (7), and most crucially of all, devout Christians loathe to go "Where no blest Church with hallow'd train, / Nor hymns of praise, nor voice of prayer, / Like angels soothe the wanderer's pain" (17-19). The strategy of invoking sympathy by asserting likeness is not particularly subtle, nor are the results it is meant and expected to have. As we see with particular clarity in the poem's closing line, when the Cherokee mother asks whether her "crush'd nation's deep despair" will "find no memorial with our God" (45, 48), the poem and the petition—the



"memorial"—share the same goal: to ask those in power to see, sympathize with, and remedy the wrongs done to Native Americans. Though the poem ends with a question-mark, there is nonetheless a sense of faith in its own efficacy. If humans do not seek redress, its logic dictates, surely God will.

Yet in 1838 the Indian removal policies against which Sigourney protested began to take devastating effect, and ten years after she composed "The Cherokee Mother," she would write another poem that reflected a growing sense of disillusionment with her own poetic-activist techniques. In the titular poem of her 1841 collection *Pocahontas, And Other Poems*, the "medium of feeling" Sigourney had so emphatically embraced becomes not unifying but fractured in a way reminiscent of Hannah More's "The Sorrows of Yamba." In "Pocahontas," feeling no longer bridges racial or cultural divides but rather foregrounds them as the poem offers two conflicting narratives: one of self-aggrandizing white celebration of an idealized American origin story, the other of one Native woman whose struggles expose what the first, hegemonic narrative troublingly erases.

Unfolding in fifty-five slightly modified Spenserian stanzas, "Pocahontas" begins in strains all too familiar to any American school-child or Disney fan. Pre-European America waits in a "trance of infancy" for "Europe's lordly race" to "extend ... the sceptred hand."<sup>7</sup> "Roving hordes of savage men" and "fair-hair'd Saxon[s]" meet and clash (20, 26). The poem's opening stanzas read like parodies of the Eurocentric retellings of that first white/Indigenous encounter that have been so ubiquitous ever since. Certainly the cross-racial sympathy and familial bonds that undergird "The Cherokee Mother" are nowhere to be found.

With Pocahontas's appearance in the poem's seventeenth stanza, Sigourney resumes her signature voice and rhetoric. Pocahontas's intercession on behalf of John Smith, here presented merely as an unnamed "captive," is dispatched in a single couplet, and the iconic image of the "forest-child" ready to receive the fatal blow meant for Smith is passed over in favor of a narrative much more in keeping with Sigourney's ethos (157, 145). In her version of the story, Smith is "rescued with a tear" (187). Pocahontas's transformation into a sentimental heroine does not end here. Her experience of captivity gets only the briefest of mentions (like John Smith, she is a "captive," but with no explanation beyond this single-word allusion), and the poem hurries on to detail her conversion to Christianity and marriage to John Rolfe—a union which, here as elsewhere, is seen as emblematic (271). The wedding is described as follows:

A throng is gathering; for the hallow'd dome  
 At evening tide is rich with sparkling light,  
 And from its verdant bound each rural home  
 Sends forth its blossom'd gifts, profusely bright;  
 While here and there, amid the clustering flowers,  
 Some stately chief or painted warrior towers,  
 Hail'd as a brother mid the festal rite:  
 Peace waves her garland o'er the favour'd place  
 Where weds the new-born West, with Europe's lordly race (289-297).

Here again, Sigourney does not seek to veil her content's implications. The final line of the above passage, which figures Pocahontas and Rolfe as representative of their respective "worlds," and the foregoing lines in which the "festal rite" brings unlikely "peace" and "brother[hood]," makes clear that this alliance should be read as not just between two individuals but also between their

two races. At both levels, the coming-together would have served as a happy ending in Sigourney's day if an unsettling one in ours.

Yet the poem, true to Pocahontas's story, does not end happily by any measure. Instead, it proceeds to imagine in detail a seldom-dramatized season in Pocahontas's life: her visit with John Rolfe and their infant son to England. It is here, in scenes far from America and often mentioned merely as an afterthought, where the poem begins to undercut the worldview that has thus far upheld it. In this section, characterized by back-and-forth about-faces and multiple stanzas beginning with "but" or "yet" in a move that echoes More's "The Sorrows of Yamba," notions of cross-racial familial harmony are implicitly called into question. Consider the following stanza, which describes Pocahontas's voyage to England:

Out on the waters! On the deep, deep sea!  
 Out, out upon the waters! Surging foam,  
 Swell'd by the winds, rolls round her wild and free,  
 And memory wandereth to her distant home,  
 To fragrant gales, the blossom'd boughs that stir,  
 To the sad sire who fondly dreams of her;  
 But kindling smiles recall the thoughts that roam,  
 For at her side a bright-hair'd nursling plays,  
 While bends her bosom's lord with fond, delighted gaze (325-333).

Buried in the middle of the stanza, the three lines about Pocahontas's wandering "memory" are striking. They constitute the poem's first attempt to explore and express its heroine's consciousness. On the surface, they seem a small concession. Of course Pocahontas would recall her home and family. Yet they signal a shift in thinking. Here, the invocation of the familial suggests not newfound peace but that which is lost in seeking that peace—left behind by the prevailing narrative not unlike the temporary peace itself would be.

It is as if the poem is aware of its spiral into something new and unintended. It follows the above-quoted stanza with one that returns with almost frantic urgency to the dominant narrative of sisterly solidarity rooted in shared experience. After Pocahontas is recalled to the present by the sight of her son and husband, the speaker muses:

And this is woman's world. It matters not  
 Though in the trackless wilderness she dwell,  
 Or on the cliff where hangs the Switzer's cot,  
 Or in the subterranean Greenland cell:  
 Her world is in the heart (335-338).

Devoid of context, these lines are Hemans's universalizing impulse torn from its ambivalence and taken to the extreme. Place, race, the "roam[ings]" of memory—none of these should matter to Pocahontas in the face of her "bright-hair'd nursling" and "bosom's lord." But of course these things do matter, thanks to the very "heart" the poem tells us dictates that they shouldn't. The cross-racial family unit Sigourney has tried to create fails to encompass everyone, and Pocahontas, by the logic of this poem and so many literary renderings the mother of that family unit, remains keenly aware of who is left out.

Pocahontas is struck with "delighted awe" by "glorious" and "gorgeous" England (352, 343, 353). And yet there is another yet, as we see in the following stanza:

Yet, mid the magic of those regal walls,  
 The glittering train, the courtier's flattering tone,  
 Or by her lord, through fair ancestral halls,  
 Led on, to claim their treasures as her own,  
 Stole back the scenery of her solitude:  
 An aged father, in his cabin rude,  
 Mix'd with her dreams a melancholy moan,  
 Notching his simple calendar with pain,  
 And straining his red eye to watch the misty main (361-369).

As anyone familiar with Pocahontas's story knows, the "aged father[']s" watchings would be in vain. Pocahontas would die before returning to America, and in Sigourney's rendering, she would die with her "warm affections pin[ing]" for her "first home," her "green childhood's land" (376, 378). On the one hand, Pocahontas's thoughts are not unlike the Cherokee mother's. Both are women who value family, home, tradition, who, as Sigourney says of women in her 1831 memorial, "associate every hope that cheers, every charity that sweetens life with the idea of *home*, [and] involuntarily sympathize with those who may be exiled from its sanctuary," and who risk just such exile as a consequence of white encroachment. But where "The Cherokee Mother" maintains faith, "Pocahontas" falters. Where "The Cherokee Mother" figures unity as just a sympathetic "feeling" away, "Pocahontas" questions whether unity can ever be attained at all. And where "The Cherokee Mother's" sentimentalism is meant to lead to political action, "Pocahontas's" questioning thereof leads to a startlingly personal revelation. After detailing Pocahontas's death, our speaker becomes pensive and reflects on the fate of the Indigenous peoples her race continues to oppress. Her musings begin conventionally enough. She laments, "Like the fallen leaves those forest-tribes have fled," first intimating the departure was as inevitable as the changing of the seasons and then going still further to suggest with the verb "fled" that the exodus was, at least to some extent, a choice (451). However, she continues in a vein far different:

I would ye were not, from your father's soil,  
 Track'd like the dun wolf, ever in your breast  
 The coal of vengeance and the curse of toil;  
 I would we had not to your mad lip prest  
 The fiery poison-cup, nor on ye turn'd  
 The blood-tooth'd ban-dog, foaming, as he burn'd  
 To tear your flesh ... (460-466).

It is not just the acknowledgment of violence that is telling here, though certainly that is striking. Less obvious but equally revealing are the pronouns chosen. The "I" renders this passage deeply personal in a way traditional laments for the "vanishing Indian" are not, and the "We" is a clear expression of responsibility, even guilt. Once again following in the footsteps of More in "The Sorrows of Yamba," the alternative imagined to the bloodshed deplored in this passage is one that remains oppressive. She wishes that her ancestors had "thrown in kindness bless'd / The

brother's arm around ye, as ye trod, / And led ye, sad of heart, to the bless'd Lamb of God" (466-468). Yet Sigourney did not stop imagining, and her next iteration of an Indigenous-identified woman's voice would not only grapple with this notion of conversion as the way forward but move still farther from the tenets of sentimentality even as she continued to be seen as the arbiter of the mode.

The adjective "Indigenous-identified" is of course an odd one, and I use it advisedly. Sigourney's "The Lost Lily," from her 1854 collection *The Western Home, And Other Poems*, is, importantly, about not a Native woman but a "white woman found in Indian tents" who, after being taken captive as a child, becomes a fully acculturated member of her Native community, much like real-life captives-turned-community-members like Eunice Williams and Mary Jemison whose stories took hold of the nineteenth-century imagination (91). Startling and strange, this poem is among Sigourney's most under-studied and intriguing works and is effectively a dismantling of the sisterhood, sympathy, and sentimentality so vital to its author's earlier work.

The poem begins with an extended evocation of the sentimental tropes it will go on to interrogate. We are introduced to yet another mother, who entrances and instructs her three young children with recollections of her "native clime / Her own, beloved New-England," complete with schoolchildren "mindful of the rules," "church ... with snowy spire," and of course "maternal ... precepts pure / Of love to God and man."<sup>8</sup> Little Lily, "Pale," "Fair," and "Fragile" (22-23), could hardly receive a more thorough or wholesome sentimental education, and Sigourney takes care to make clear to us that she is a willing pupil, observing her mother with "an intense regard, / And the quick, intermitting sob that shows / The listening spirit" (19-21). But this idyllic scene is interrupted by Lily's captors, who kill the mother, take the little girl, and leave the father, brother, and sister to mourn their lost. Years pass; the family searches indefatigably but in vain for their "lost Lily." The father dies, the siblings grow old, and finally they receive word of "a white woman found in Indian tents / Far, far away" (91-92). The woman is indeed Lily but is no longer the "feeble" being of the poem's beginning (17). Her voice is one of power and protest—and one that speaks back not only to her pious siblings but to the very ethos Sigourney herself has espoused.

It is Lily's demeanor that first signals to us her bold rejection of her former life. We are reintroduced to her "coarsely mantled in her blanket-robe, / The Indian pipe between her shrivell'd lips" (106-107), but more telling still are the descriptions of her expressions, which, as we are told again and again, underscore her defiant departure from the sentimental framework. To her siblings' "wild sobs" of overjoyed greeting, we learn that "no responding tear / Moistened her cheek" (116, 120-121). In response to their pleas that she return with them to their home and to white society, "She wept no tears" and "show'd / Slight touch of sympathy" (159, 161-162). The brotherhood and sisterhood that "Pocahontas" questions is here rejected outright by Lily if not by the poem—and this quite literally as her notably tearless state is in direct response to her biological siblings. It would be easy to conclude that the poem sees this change in Lily as yet another loss—a loss predicated on stereotypes of the time that saw Natives as perennially stoic. These stereotypes are unquestionably invoked. Her lack of sympathy is attributed in part to her possession of "the moveless spirit of the race she loved" (160). And yet, Lily is permitted to defend her unresponsiveness in words far more powerful than her siblings' ineffectual sobs and pleas—and words that reveal her as perhaps the truest proponent of the very ethos the poem presents her as rejecting. Of her choice to remain with her Native family, including her deceased husband and sons along with two living daughters, she says, in full, this:

Upon my head  
 Rest sixty winters. Scarcely seven were past  
 Among the pale-faced people. Hate they not  
 The red man in their heart? Smooth Christian words  
 They speak, but from their touch we fade away  
 As from the poisonous snake.  
 Have I not said  
 Here is my home? and yonder is the bed  
 Of the Miami chief? Two sons who bore  
 His brow, rest on his pillow.  
 Shall I turn  
 My back upon my dead, and bear the curse  
 Of the great Spirit? (163-175)

The inexorable logic of her first two lines and the indictment implicit in the following series of questions are difficult to dispute, and her siblings do not try. They return home, "Steep'd in tears," praying "That God would keep in their lost Lily's soul / The seed her mother sow'd, and by His grace / So water it that they might meet in heaven" (196, 198-200). With this the poem ends, but between the opening and closing evocations of the mother and the Christian faith she has instilled in (two of) her children, Lily's voice emerges and both expands and exceeds the sentimental framework that tries and fails to contain it. Her incisive critique of Christian hypocrisy and expression of steadfast adherence to the new versions of faith and family she has found remain unanswered and indeed unremarked upon by the poem, left to ring in our ears long after the siblings' "earnest prayer[s]" (197).

Sigourney's trajectory from "high priestess of sentimentality" to creator of this odd and decidedly not sentimental poem should not be overstated. Sigourney continued to write in the sentimental vein for the duration of her career, and as with all of the poems we have looked at, we must follow the poetry's lead in allowing competing narratives to exist in tension side by side. But "the medium of feeling" was not a mode Sigourney took for granted or deployed without serious consideration—not in "The Cherokee Mother," when it was used with proud "intention," not in "Pocahontas," when it quietly undermined the dominant narrative the poem initially seemed to uphold, and certainly not in "The Lost Lily," when adherence to its tenets of faith and family leads Lily to make a choice unimaginable to but ultimately justified by the sentimental logic of her day.

The Cherokee mother was an emblem, Pocahontas a mythologized memory, and Lily a fictional creation—though again, one surely based on the histories of real women. Yet being caught in the midst of cultural conflict was hardly unique to fictional women, nor was the impulse to work through that conflict poetically. We turn now to Jane Johnston Schoolcraft (Bamewawagezhikaquay), a poet who embodied the dualities at play in this chapter in her person as well as in her poetry. Raised by an Irish father and an Ojibwe mother, Schoolcraft grew up fluent in both English and Ojibwe and deeply immersed in white American and Native American cultures and the *métis* culture that emerged from the melding of the two. While her life is not always at the forefront of her poems, her work is consistently informed not only by her cross-cultural understanding but also by a sense of both conflict and multiplicity that, one can easily imagine, stemmed from her unique circumstances. It is hardly a surprise that among her most

fascinating is one entitled "The Contrast." In this work and her oeuvre as a whole, the contrast between Johnston's cultures functions as a source both of tension and of artistic inspiration, as we see not only in the content of her poems but, even more clearly, in her acts of revision and translation.

On the surface, the contrast central to the poem that bears its name is one of former happiness versus present pain. The 1823 self-proclaimed "splenetic effusion" begins, "With pen in hand I shall contrast, / What I have felt—what now has past."<sup>9</sup> The past, we then learn, was an idyllic youth spent among kind loved-ones, while the present sees the heroine's tranquility marred by her entry into "love's mazes" (26). Thus far, the poem is unremarkable. Yet Schoolcraft's 1823 "The Contrast: A Splenetic Effusion" is not the only version of the poem. Some time later (the exact timing is unclear), Schoolcraft substantially revised her poem, producing simply "The Contrast," a poem about loss of happiness due not to love but to white encroachment upon Native lands. The opening couplet and many of the subsequent lines contain only minor changes, but here, her pain is found not in "love's mazes" but in "The tree cut down—the cot removed, / The cot the simple Indian loved" (41-42). Like Hannah More in "The Sorrows of Yamba," Schoolcraft chooses to transform an existing poem and as with More, the fact that she does so makes a powerful statement.

By reframing a poem about personal turmoil as one of cultural loss, Schoolcraft subtly suggests that the elements Hemans and Sigourney would go on to present as fundamentally separate, even contradictory, are, for her, inextricably interwoven. The personal and the political, the universally sympathetic Everywoman and the woman tied to race and culture, may not, in fact, be a contrast but two facets of one complete, complicated life. In another parallel with the multiple versions of "Yamba," the second version of "The Contrast" is longer than the first, and the 54-line revision retains 20 lines of the original "Splenic Effusion's" 38. An essentially formulaic, seemingly apolitical love poem is transformed with surprising ease, then, into a timely commentary on the white man's invasive "new dominion" (52). Moreover, the second version of the poem darkens the conventional metaphors used uncritically in the first. The 1823 speaker's assessment of her own position as "Now shun'd—now priz'd above all gold" (32) becomes a more searing critique not of a fickle lover but of a flawed society—of "The busy strife of young and old / To gain one sordid bit of gold" (43-44). The contrast between the 1823 speaker as "Constrain'd to bear both heat and cold" (31) is quietly echoed in the later version's closing couplet: "And half in joy, half in fear, / [We] Welcome the proud Republic here" (53-54). As the "I" of the first version becomes the "We" of the second, the yet-again-contrasting "heat and cold" of an inconsistent courtship presage the "joy" and "fear" of a community Schoolcraft alternately identified with and condescended to (note her description of "the simple Indian" above).

The surprising if ambivalent "joy" expressed, as well as Schoolcraft's ability to use the words of this poem to address two apparently disparate topics, is made clearer with a glimpse into the poet's own life. The 1823 version of "The Contrast" was written shortly after she met and shortly before she married Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, a white man and the first federal "Indian agent" in Schoolcraft's beloved Michigan Territory. Even Schoolcraft's first poem, then, if we read it as an expression of her troubled love for her soon-to-be husband as its inclusion in the couple's letters to each other would suggest, is about colonial intrusion into Schoolcraft's métis/Ojibwe cultures, while even the second, though not on the surface a love poem, can be read as a comment on her marriage to the representative of "the proud Republic" whose arrival heralded a long history of attempts to destroy those cultures (54). As Robert Dale Parker puts it in the brief yet illuminating discussion of "The Contrast" found in his introduction to

Schoolcraft's collected works, "The second version of the poem implicitly includes and rewrites the first version's personal story in nationalist terms."<sup>10</sup> Thus, where Hemans and Sigourney work to reconcile the personal and the political while weighing the respective merits of each in effecting change, for Schoolcraft these two modes always already exist in tandem, themselves a tense and tenuous marriage not unlike Schoolcraft's own.

It is this understanding of the interplay between these various modes and aspects of her own identity that leads to what is arguably Schoolcraft's most powerful work: her poems written in Ojibwe and later translated into English. Fittingly, two of the three surviving Ojibwe poems are about her love for and eager return to what she called her "mother land" and to what is indeed the home, community, and culture she inherited from her Ojibwe mother Ozhaguscodawayquay or Susan Johnston. One expressing deep joy on first beholding pine trees after childhood travels abroad, the other deep sorrow at leaving her children at a boarding school far from home, the poems are arguably both her most poignantly personal and her most trenchantly political. Thus, where Hemans's opening epigraph (Schiller by way of de Staël) suggests a universality that transcends language, Schoolcraft suggests that the deepest love and loss can perhaps only be expressed in one's mother-tongue.

Indeed, she did translate one of her Ojibwe poems, "To the Pine Tree," into English herself, while her husband Henry Rowe Schoolcraft translated "On Leaving my Children John and Jane at School," and taken together, the two translations are revealing.<sup>11</sup> Jane's translation, though rendered in conventionally Western tetrameter, retains much of the flavor of the original. In both the Ojibwe and English versions, for instance, "Shing wauk" ("The pine") is exclaimed exactly eight joyous times. No such parallels appear in Henry's translation of "On Leaving my Children John and Jane at School." In it, the children central to the original are not even mentioned until line 21, and the separation that is lamented in Jane's Ojibwe is justified in Henry's English rendering: "It is learning that calls them" (25). The Ojibwe's heartbreakingly direct final line, "Ahh but I am sad," in Henry's hands becomes mere "sober regret" (34), while the love of home that is so personal in the original—"To my home I shall return / That is the way that I am, my being / My land / My land" (12-15)—is reduced to conventional descriptions of a "country so dear ... so lovely in aspect, in features so grand" (1, 4). We see, then, that while in Hemans's "Indian Woman's Death-Song" translation signifies cosmopolitanism, universality, and kinship across borders, in Schoolcraft it can just as easily become a tool of oppression and control.

For Jane Johnston Schoolcraft, the figures and experiences at the heart of the sentimental-political poetic tradition are both deeply personal and ultimately lacking. The inequities and insufficiencies of romantic love that drive Hemans's Indian woman to despair; the beloved "idea of home"—the "mother land"—that in such different ways guides the Cherokee mother, Pocahontas, and Lily; the maternal love and loss that shape all four women's stories—these fictions are all in many ways Schoolcraft's reality. But while their voices are mediated by narratorial speakers, introductory remarks, and the non-Indigenous status of their white creators, Schoolcraft's comes to us directly. Despite her husband's attempts to filter and soften her words through his act of translation, her voice emerges triumphant. Though one can only imagine with what personal difficulty, she is able, at least in her poetry, to reconcile strands her white counterparts view as irreconcilable, and her story ends not in death or displacement, be it real as in the Cherokee mother's case or only perceived as in Lily's. Rather, she exists as what Hemans and Sigourney sincerely try yet ultimately struggle to imagine: a multilingual, multi-cultural

Indigenous woman fully able, as she puts it in "The Contrast," to take "pen in hand" and tell her own story (1).

As we have seen, the poems of Hemans, Sigourney, and Schoolcraft share a long and wide-ranging list of concerns and commonalities. The three poets' works are peopled by sentimental mainstays: loving mothers, separated families, homes loved and lost, redemptive tears. Yet they are also bound together by traits typically deemed far removed from sentimental poetics: sophisticated formal experimentation, an interest in translation across both languages and genres, and a lingering sense of ambivalence about the possibilities and perils of their own chosen techniques. In short, the foremost poets of Indian removal and resistance, which include poets who even today are remembered as among the best exemplars of the sentimental poetic tradition, were working with thoughtfulness and urgency to better the genre, self-consciously striving to hone and harness not only its affective but also its political power. And even as mainstream (white) concern with the dispossession of the Native American began to wane in the face of the abolitionist movement and subsequent Civil War, the work went on undeterred, taken up and transformed by poets who were and in many ways still are seen as the artistic opposites of those considered in this chapter, as poets hailed for their anti-sentimentality continued to rely upon, question, and reshape "the medium of feeling."



## Notes

1. Stowe, Harriet Beecher. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Ontario: Broadview Press, 2009. 480.
2. Hemans, Felicia. "The Indian Woman's Death-Song." In *Records of Woman, With Other Poems*. Edinburgh: William Blackwood and London: T. Cadell, 1828. Line 6. Hereafter cited in text.
3. The French-to-English translation is my own.
4. Sigourney, Lydia. "Letter to the Delegation of the State of Connecticut." *The Cherokee Phoenix*, Vol. 3, No. 40, 1831.
5. Ibid.
6. Sigourney, Lydia. "The Cherokee Mother." *The Cherokee Phoenix*, Vol. 3, No. 40, 1831. Lines 13, 25, 29. Hereafter cited in text.
7. Sigourney, Lydia Huntley. "Pocahontas." In *Pocahontas, and Other Poems*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1841. Lines 12, 297, 9. Hereafter cited in text.
8. Sigourney, Lydia Huntley. "The Lost Lily." In *The Western Home, and Other Poems*. Philadelphia: Parry and Macmillan, 1854. Lines 26-42. Hereafter cited in text.
9. Schoolcraft, Jane Johnston (Bamewawagezhikaquay). "The Contrast." In *The Sound the Stars Make Rushing Through the Sky: The Writings of Jane Johnston Schoolcraft*. Ed. Robert Dale Parker. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. Lines 1-2. Hereafter cited in text.
10. Parker, Robert Dale. "Introduction." *The Sound the Stars Make Rushing Through the Sky: The Writings of Jane Johnston Schoolcraft*. Ed. Robert Dale Parker. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. 53.
11. For both of these poetic translations, as well as the useful literal translations referenced hereafter, see *The Sound the Stars Make Rushing Through the Sky: The Writings of Jane Johnston Schoolcraft*. Ed. Robert Dale Parker. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007.

### Chapter 3 "Some Women Weep and Curse": Anti-Slavery and the Anti-Sentimental

In some ways, the three authors this chapter takes up are the antitheses of Hemans, Sigourney, and Schoolcraft. Where Hemans's status as an Englishwoman afforded her a distanced vantage point from which to view American issues, Elizabeth Barrett Browning addressed those issues head-on, speaking directly to her "brothers ... across the sea."<sup>1</sup> Where Sigourney is recalled as the strongest proponent of "the medium of feeling," at least in the realm of poetry, Sarah Piatt is most invested in subverting sentimental tropes. And where Jane Johnston Schoolcraft forged a new poetic language, melding Anglo-American and Ojibwe rhetorical traditions in ways never before seen, Sarah Mapps Douglass focused on the established, responding with power and passion to existing literary works. In other ways, the three poet-activists this chapter considers worked alongside Hemans, Sigourney, and Schoolcraft, striving for shared goals if not always with shared techniques. These poets, too, grappled with questions about how best to use their poetry to bring about social and political change, but where Hemans, Sigourney, and Schoolcraft pondered sentimentality's efficacy as lauded exemplars of the genre, Barrett Browning, Piatt, and Douglass did so as outsiders. Barrett Browning and Piatt are remembered as innovators who eschewed sentimental convention, while Douglass, as a Black woman pushing back against sentimentality, was largely overlooked as a poet, though less so as an activist. Critics of sentimentality though they were, however, sentimental literary activism remained a touchstone of their work—a ubiquitous presence about and against which they had much to say.

By the middle of the nineteenth-century, slavery had superseded Indian removal as the evil at the forefront of public consciousness, not, of course, because Indigenous peoples had been granted any form of justice, but because between the 1833 Emancipation Act's abolition of slavery in the British colonies and the galvanizing 1850 U.S. Fugitive Slave Act, the spotlight had simply shifted. As we will see, though, for the three poets this chapter considers, slavery was not only a public concern but also a profoundly personal one. Two daughters of slave-holders, one a free-born descendant of slaves, all three used their poetry, to varying extents and in varying ways, as spaces to work through feelings of complicity and guilt. Thus, we see here a body of poems that operate on two overlapping registers, seeking at once amelioration and absolution, using personae and dialogue to both seek a more just future and speak back to the pasts that haunt their authors.

In 1845, Elizabeth Barrett Browning recounted her family history by letter to her future husband, fellow poet Robert Browning, declaring, "I would give ten towns in Norfolk (if I had them) to own some purer lineage than that of the blood of the slave!—Cursed are we from generation to generation!"<sup>2</sup> While the ambiguous reference to "the blood of the slave" has led scholars like Julia Markus to speculate that Barrett Browning had (or believed herself to have) enslaved ancestors, she was more likely concerned less with bloodlines and more with the blood on her family's hands. From her great-great-grandfather Samuel Barrett, who, she wrote to Robert, "flogged slaves like a divinity,"<sup>3</sup> to her own father, Edward Moulton Barrett, who worried the West Indies would be "irreparably ruined" when the 1833 Emancipation Act declared an end to slavery in the British colonies, her family was deeply enmeshed in the slave economy.<sup>4</sup> They owned over 10,000 acres of Jamaican plantations, and far worse, they "owned" human beings—a fact that haunted Elizabeth Barrett Browning throughout her life. As she

reiterated to John Ruskin in 1855, "I belong to a family of West Indian slave-holders, and if I believed in curses, I should be afraid."<sup>5</sup>

The motif of the curse looms large in Barrett Browning's anti-slavery poetry, of which there is a small but significant body. Her complicity weighed on Barrett Browning in ways both profound and personal, and so, too, did the responsibilities it engendered. Her role as an abolitionist poet was one she continually questioned and refined. Though she admired abolitionist works like Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which she called a "glory full of healthy influence & benediction to the world," her adherence to the sentimentality that underpinned such works was far more tenuous.<sup>6</sup> Not only that, she was preoccupied, too, with the many overlaps and tensions between poetry, politics, and gender, thinking deeply about how poetry could shape the world and about her place in that world as a woman. Ultimately, her poems about the "curse" of slavery, read alongside the extended ruminations on poetry, politics, and gender found in her "novel-poem" *Aurora Leigh*, reveal a body of work that is less "unsentimental" than "anti-sentimental" as it explores the limits of sentimental-political writing.

Published in the American abolitionist gift book *The Liberty Bell* in 1848, Barrett Browning's "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" upends the conventions of the sentimental-political poetry considered in previous chapters. The authors and speakers of those poems show by their own examples the power and primacy of what Phillis Wheatley called the "feeling heart." Barrett Browning's runaway slave suggests a far different lesson: that the "feeling heart" cannot survive in the face of the systems it seeks to eradicate—systems that preclude the development and practice of a sentimental worldview. In stark contrast to the exemplary mothers we have thus far been introduced to (More's Yamba, Sigourney's Cherokee mother, Jane Johnston Schoolcraft's poetic avatar), the mother in this poem, the titular runaway slave, commits the ultimate sentimental taboo: killing her infant child. In relating the circumstances surrounding this act, she places herself beyond reach of the sentimental framework, but rather than turn away from it altogether, she subtly yet ringingly insists that it is not she who has betrayed sentiment, but sentiment that has betrayed her. As Katherine Montwieler puts it, "Idealized sentimental relationships are not possible in this scene of national trauma."<sup>7</sup>

This is the case throughout the poem. After narrating the violently enforced departure—perhaps murder—of her lover, she tells the "pilgrim-ghosts," whom she apostrophizes this:

Wrong, followed by a deeper wrong!  
 Mere grief's too good for such as I:  
 So the white men brought the shame ere long  
 To strangle the sob of my agony.  
 They would not leave me for my dull  
 Wet eyes!—it was too merciful  
 To let me weep pure tears and die.<sup>8</sup>

The attack on the runaway slave's body implied by the "deeper wrong" and confirmed by the "too white" baby she later gives birth to is narrated as an attack on her ability to mourn for her lost lover—to exist as a sentimental heroine (99, 116). Other tragic figures like the Indian woman and Pocahontas, that is to say, can at least take part in those two most quintessentially sentimental rituals: to "weep pure tears and die" (105). The runaway slave cannot. Her "sob[s]" are "strangle[d]", and her way forward cannot be guided—or confined—by sentimental conventions (102).

Yet even as those conventions are rejected, they are still at every turn invoked and held up to scrutiny. The simile the runaway slave uses in revealing her baby's mixed-race parentage is telling. Her infant son is "As white as the ladies who scorned to pray / Beside me at church but yesterday, / Though my tears had washed a place for my knee" (117-119). Tears, then, are not only ineffective against the cruel "masters," but also against sentimental-political literature's primary audience: religious white women. The idea of cross-racial sisterhood—of sympathetic kinship rooted in shared experiences as women, mothers, and Christians—here falls far short. Her oft-repeated refrain, "I am black, I am black," asserted in truncated, spondaic lines that stand in striking contrast to the surrounding iambic tetrameter, reminds us again and again not of kinship but of difference between the runaway slave and (most of) those reading her words (22, 57, 106). The final iteration of this refrain explains its ubiquitous presence. This time, the runaway slave proclaims, "I am not mad: I am black" (218). Her powerful statement prefigures the more fully articulated claims of Black thinkers like Harriet Jacobs, who famously asserts that "the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standard as others"—that "the condition of a slave confuses all principles of morality, and, in fact, renders the practice of them impossible."<sup>9</sup> The runaway slave's actions exist outside of sentimental logic, dictated by a racist system that renders the "practice" of that logic "impossible" solely due to the color of her "black" skin.

This contention, though anticipated, as we will see, by Sarah Mapps Douglass, was a stark departure from other anti-slavery literature of its day. Other authors—and other white authors in particular—acknowledged slavery's effect on the practice of established morals but still recognized the sentimental ethos as a governing principle. Consider the following passage in Harriet Beecher Stowe's galvanizing *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, published four years after "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" and four years before Barrett Browning and Stowe would first meet in person. In it, the enslaved Cassy narrates her choice to end her infant son's life, telling us:

In the course of a year, I had a son born. O, that child!—how I loved it! ... But I had made up my mind,—yes, I had. I would never again let a child live to grow up! I took the little fellow in my arms, when he was two weeks old, and kissed him, and cried over him; and then I gave him laudanum, and held him close to my bosom, while he slept to death. How I mourned and cried over it! and who ever dreamed that it was anything but a mistake, that had made me give it the laudanum? but it's one of the few things that I'm glad of, now. I am not sorry, to this day; he, at least, is out of pain. What better than death could I give him, poor child! <sup>10</sup>

Cassy, then, figures her act as a gift—a maternal sacrifice made with the clear purpose of liberating her beloved child from the "pain" of life as a slave. While the action is wholly alien to *Uncle Tom's Cabin's* unenslaved readers, the sentiments that lead to it are not. Cassy is a mother, like them, willing to forgo her own happiness to secure her child's. Her hand is forced, but her heart is unchanged. She is able to "mourn" and "cry" in precisely the way Barrett Browning's speaker cannot.

The trajectory of Barrett Browning's runaway slave is far more complex. Unlike Cassy, whose aim is unambiguously to save her child from the horrors and heartbreaks she herself has endured, the runaway slave's motivations are more multifaceted—and are not purely rooted in

the maternal love that saves Cassy from unalloyed censure. She explains her reasoning in the following pivotal stanza:

Why, in that single glance I had  
 Of my child's face, ... I tell you all,  
 I saw a look that made me mad!  
 The master's look, that used to fall  
 On my soul like his lash ... or worse!  
 And so, to save it from my curse,  
 I twisted it round in my shawl. (141-147)

Like Cassy, the runaway slave frames her choice as an act of salvation—but from what? The "curse" from which she chooses to "save" her son is slavery, yes, but just as much, it is her own revulsion at his existence and appearance. Hers is not just a story of a mother willing to trade her own happiness for her child's; it is a story of a woman traumatized and desperate to destroy the result and reminder of that trauma. Her act is in part one of love, but love acknowledged only once the "black earth" in which she buries her baby's corpse has turned him into "a dark child in the dark"—or as she later puts it, "the death dark where we may kiss and agree" (185, 186, 251). It is also, however, an act of self-preservation from the "too white" baby's "master's look" and latent "master-right" (144, 132). It is most of all an act of "exquisite pain," and it reminds us that the sacrificial, all-consuming motherly love revered within the sentimental framework is both precluded and superseded by the race-based and gender-based violence inflicted upon her—that her own ability to "feel right" is "strangle[d]" along with the stifled "sob[s]" that represent it (249, 102).

The "medium of feeling" here fails in the face of slavery's unspeakable horrors, and the poem turns instead to a far different rhetorical mode. "Whips, curses; these must answer those" (225). In these words that proclaim both reciprocity and inevitability, the runaway slave contends that the "whips" of slavery "must" be met with an equally searing and destructive force and a speech act to which Barrett Browning's anti-slavery poem returns again and again: the curse. The sentimental framework cannot contain and is not enough for the runaway slave. Her own voice, however powerful, is likewise not enough in the face of oppressive systems, and she ends the poem in a passive "swoon," ironically a common refuge of the sentimental Victorian heroines from whom she has gone to such lengths to differentiate herself (246). In her "broken heart's disdain," she revokes her curse on "the Washington-race," as the poem struggles to marshal its speaker's rage toward resolution (253, 221). Ultimately, then, the poem grapples with the efficacy of both of the forms with which it is in dialogue, sentimental-political literature and the curse itself, and finds both unsustainable.

Yet while "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" ends "curse-free," the remainder of Barrett Browning's poetry does not. Her 1856 "A Curse for a Nation," also published in *The Liberty Bell*, is as consumed with the idea as its title suggests. Where the runaway slave repudiates conventional Victorian womanhood, this poem begins by invoking it. The poem opens with a prologue in which its speaker sees an angel who commands, "Write! / Write a Nation's curse for me, / And send it over the Western Sea" (2-4). The bulk of the prologue consists of the "falter[ing]" heroine's hesitations, to all of which the angel answers implacably, "Therefore shalt thou write" (5, 13, 33, 41): she is "bound ... by love and blood" to her "brothers ... across the sea" (9-11), she is "heavy-souled" with her "own land's sins" (32, 19), and finally and for our

purposes, most importantly, she is a woman. She demurs, "To curse, choose men. / For I, a woman, have only known / How the heart melts and the tears run down" (38-40). This remark provokes the angel's most extended response:

"Therefore," the voice said, "shalt thou write  
 My curse tonight.  
 Some women weep and curse, I say  
 (And no one marvels), night and day.  
 And thou shalt take their part tonight,  
 Weep and write.  
 A curse from the depths of womanhood  
 Is very salt, and bitter, and good." (41-48)

Much is at play in this stanza. At first glance, we see the gendered logic at the heart of sentimental-political activism at its clearest. Sympathy is coded as the source of women's power. But this is more than a call for readers to "see to [their] sympathies." It is, in fact, perhaps the most trenchant interrogation of sentiment we have yet seen. Is it always sincere? Always sufficient?

A careful reader should already be skeptical of the speaker's claims. "I, a woman, have only known, / How the heart melts and the tears run down," she demurs (39-40). Yet what of her previous condemnation of the "sins" of her own land (19), with its "love of freedom which abates / Beyond the straits" (25-26), its "patriot virtue starved to vice on / Self-praise, self-interest, and suspicion" (27-28), and its "oligarchic parliament" (29)? If the prologue itself serves to obfuscate the speaker's agency as she positions herself as a mere amanuensis, these astute criticisms, too, suggest that the subsequent claim of having "only known, / How the heart melts and the tears run down" as likewise an abdication of responsibility. It is not that the speaker is unaware; her political acumen suggest far otherwise. Her refusal to act is deliberate. Her ability to sympathize does not move her to write wrongs but rather serves as an alibi for inaction. The speaker is complicit, and so is sentiment.

The angel, of course, shatters this complacency, reshaping the role and value of the speaker's melting heart and tears. Twice the angel references this "weeping" directly, and each use of this quintessentially sentimental verb is followed by an "and": "Weep and curse"; "weep and write" (43, 46). To weep must lead to something else—something more. It must, the angel and the poem itself assert, be followed by concrete action. If this has been implicit in our previous poets' choice to write in the first place, here it is not only modeled within the text itself but also figured as a direct command from Heaven.

Yet while that command is ringing, it is also complex. Though according to the angel it is the speaker's womanhood that renders her fit to "weep and write," not all women's tears are so effective. "No one marvels" at the women who "weep and curse"—women like the runaway slave who do not have the luxury of turning their weeping into written words and must find what recourse they can in a far different source of (still rhetorical) power. As we will see, that the consequences of weeping—of sentiment—are not at all the same for white and non-white women is a point that will be taken up by poets of color, most explicitly by Sarah Mapps Douglass, who shares this chapter with Barrett Browning for precisely this reason. Those poets of course embody the here unacknowledged truth that in fact Black women were writing and that a claim to speak for them was to risk speaking over them. "Thou shalt take their part," the angel

commands the speaker after invoking the women who do not write but curse. The particular phrase is revealing. The speaker is of course being told to take the women's side, but in doing so, what does she take from them? Tricia Lootens suggests that the phrase and the poem as a whole position the speaker as an "antislavery understudy to those whom [she] has already callously, futilely attempted to define out of womanhood."<sup>11</sup> It is a hazard the poem, though not its speaker, seems aware of.

The parallelism between "weep and curse" and "weep and write" is resonant not only for its commentary on weeping and the action it should, the poem contends, provoke. It also suggests a relationship between the phrases' other two verbs: "curse" and "write." In writing the curse that constitutes the second section of the poem, the speaker enters the domain of the "some women" who "weep and curse." She "take[s] their part," yes, but she also takes on and takes over the only identity the poem ascribes to them. We do not hear their voices—their curses. Indeed, this invocation of the "women [who] weep and curse" and the subsequent injunction to "weep and write" is the last we hear of these women. In effect, the speaker writes their cursing out of existence. Lootens notes that the curse the speaker issues is "doubly her own: hers, that is, by right of flattering angelic election, but hers, too, because this is a curse she herself has earned" through her initial unwillingness to speak against the status quo.<sup>12</sup> It is, but the poem pushes us to ask whether the speaker's act of cursing is one that absolves or adds to her complicity.

The curse itself, the poem's second section, is about neither women who curse nor women who write. We know that it is indeed a curse written by a woman only because of what has come before. Yet in passing along the curse, the poem implicates readers. This section derives its power in part from its unsparing enumeration of the hypocrisies of American slaveholders who celebrate freedom yet continue to oppress—and in subtler part, too, from its hypnotic, inexorable structure. Each stanza ends identically, with the words, "This is the curse. Write" (58, 64, 70). It is an utterance of command—of dictation by the angel of the curse that the reluctant speaker must write down. Yet it also arguably implies that to write is a part of the curse itself and that the cursing and the writing must continue after the poem's close. It is with this refrain that the poem concludes, a decree that both the curse and the writing of it have not ended with the poem's end. Rather, both extend beyond it into the real world, and the reader, too, is commanded not to weep (here, weeping is notably absent) but to bear witness and take action.

Still, the curse, though powerful, is often excised from anthologizations of this poem, which tend to reprint only the prologue. It is the speaker's faltering journey toward issuing these damning, disembodied words, with all its evasions, contradictions, and missteps, that has captivated readers. It serves as a reminder that even those deeply flawed can be capable of growth, and it instructs us as to how that growth might be attained. It is not so much unsentimental or even anti-sentimental as a poem that embraces but extends beyond sentiment's tenets.

"A Curse for a Nation" is far from Barrett Browning's only poem both concerned with and characterized by instruction, improvement, and exchange. Described by Barrett Browning as "the most mature of [her] works, and the one into which [her] highest convictions upon Life and Art have entered," *Aurora Leigh* was published in the same year as "Curse," 1856, and takes up, on a larger scale, its questions about who should write and the change that writing might effect.<sup>13</sup> It is not, at least on the surface, explicitly about race, slavery, or abolition, but it does, I argue, serve as Barrett Browning's most extended exploration of poetry as activism and of the possibilities and perils of working for change through the domain of feeling.

Race, though not central, is likewise not absent from the poem. In fact, it is consistently invoked at key points. In Book II, social reformer Romney Leigh, aspiring poet Aurora's cousin and suitor, warns her against joining the ranks of "female authors" who "play at art."<sup>14</sup> Justifying his remarks to an unsurprisingly outraged Aurora, Romney states of women:

The human race  
 To you means, such a child, or such a man,  
 You saw one morning waiting in the cold,  
 Beside that gate, perhaps. You gather up  
 A few such cases, and, when strong, sometimes  
 Will write of factories and of slaves, as if  
 Your father were a negro, and your son  
 A spinner in the mills. (2.189-196)

There is no question that Romney Leigh here functions as a stand-in for male critics skeptical of women's capacity both to create art and participate meaningfully in social causes. Less obviously, he voices, too, uncertainties present within the poems we have thus far considered. Recall Hannah More's rebuke to Aphra Behn: "Millions feel what Oroonoko felt."<sup>15</sup> Romney, like More, invokes the "million sick," but in his hands the point becomes wholly gendered (2.216). "Mere women," as Romney terms them, "personal and passionate," "weep for what [they] know" but are "hard / To general suffering" precisely because they "generalise ... nothing" (2.221, 213, 198-199, 183-184). That Romney's claim about women's art and activism centers abolition does not seem coincidental. The topic, after all, loomed large in Barrett Browning's mind as evidenced by the project she worked on contemporaneously with *Aurora Leigh*, "A Curse for a Nation." To write as if one's "father were a negro" is both an apt characterization of the conventionally sentimental poetry Barrett Browning's anti-slavery poems spoke back to and a counterpoint to the speaker of "Curse," who, "bound by gratitude, / By love and blood, / To [white American] brothers ... across the sea," uses claims of kinship toward a far different end. To Romney, the criticism he levels at women writers is purely an accusation. He believes in systemic and dispassionate thinking—though whether he sees abolition as worthy of that thinking is a question the poem leaves unanswered. The poem as a whole, though, thinks in more sophisticated ways about poetry as a potential catalyst for change and about the contributions of women poets.

In many ways, Aurora Leigh and Romney exist as the clearest embodiments of the poles our poets have interrogated and amalgamated: art vs. action, the personal vs. the systemic, heart vs. head, feeling vs. reason. Like the tensely coexisting voices in "The Sorrows of Yamba" and the competing narratives in "Pocahontas," the two represent a duality the sides of which both chafe and come together. Aurora's poetic subjects are often not traditionally sentimental. Indeed, her "critic Stokes" objects to her tendency toward "abstract thoughts," advising her instead to "call a man, John, a woman, Joan" in a move that should remind us of sentimental-political poets' frequent habit of creating and often speaking through individual characters designed to evoke sympathy (the Cherokee mother, the runaway slave; 3.82-83). That said, while her techniques may depart from convention, her faith in the power of poetry to "change the world / And shift its morals" is wholly familiar (7.856-857). Poetry, for Aurora, does tangible good by elevating its readers' feelings. "Art's a service," she proclaims, and her "vocation" constitutes "most serious work, most necessary work / As any of the economists'" (9.915, 2.459-460, 455). That work is



specifically tied to the notion of helping readers "learn to feel" (9.922). It is a claim she returns to again and again. She chides Romney:

'Tis impossible  
 To get at men excepting through their souls,  
 However open their carnivorous jaws;  
 And poets get directlier at the soul,  
 Than any of you economists:—for which,  
 You must not overlook the poet's work  
 When scheming for the world's necessities. (8.532-538)

Her conviction that poetry leads to soul-elevating feeling that in turn leads to tangible, necessary good is clear, though her unflattering description of the masses' "carnivorous jaws" hints at the limits of her own sympathetic feeling that become more apparent elsewhere in the poem.

Romney, of course, sees things differently. "Elbow-deep / In social problems," he is quick to dismiss Aurora's poetic aspirations (2.1216-1217). He tells her:

While you sing  
 Your happy pastorals of the meads and trees,  
 Bethink you that I go to impress and prove  
 On stifled brains and deafened ears, stunned deaf,  
 Crushed dull with grief, that nature sings itself,  
 And needs no mediate poet, lute or voice,  
 To make it vocal. (2.1200-1206)

It is Romney himself, in his own estimation, who "mediates," while Aurora's poems, which he has yet to read, are mere "happy pastorals," devoid of bearing on the "long sum of ill" that preoccupies him (2.309). Yet while he claims that he "was a man chiefly" to "sympathise with man," his sympathy suffers from the very thing he claims makes it superior: his propensity to generalize (2.294-295). Aurora's characterization, though arguably not unbiased, is apt. He is:

Romney Leigh, who lives by diagrams,  
 And crosses out the spontaneities  
 Of all his individual, personal life  
 With formal universals. As if man  
 Were set upon a high stool at a desk,  
 To keep God's books for Him, in red and black,  
 And feel by millions! (3.743-749)

Both Aurora and Romney, then, feel in excess—Aurora as she "instruct[s] mankind" as they "learn to feel" through her work and Romney as he "feel[s] by millions" (1.864, 3.749). And yet, neither's feeling is quite sufficient. Aurora struggles to grasp the social problems that preoccupy Romney ("Is the world so bad / While I see nothing of it through the trees?"; 2.305-306), and when she does see them, idealizes art as a panacea while glossing over more immediate material needs ("Plant a poet's word even, deep enough / In any man's breast," she says, and "you have done more for the man, / Than if you dressed him in a broad-cloth coat / And warmed his Sunday

potage at your fire" 6.225-229). Romney, on the other hand, rejects all that falls outside his "social theory"—namely here both the poetic and the personal (2.410). As these two argue over whether to "make bread or verses," to use their mutual friend Vincent Carrington's incisive phrase, they personify the dialogic impulse that characterizes so much of the poetry we have thus far considered (7.636). The conclusion lies in a tempering—in a synthesis the "novel-poem"'s amalgamative form has presaged. Romney becomes "as tender surely for the suffering world, / But quiet," no less caring but humbler and less rigid, while Aurora, in writing the book that bears her name, faces head-on the realities she once dismissed, learning from the "daughter of the people" Marian Erle to see and sympathize with practical struggles not ameliorated by poetry: poverty, rape, abuse, mental illness (9.575-576, 3.806).

Marginalized on the basis of class but not of race, Marian Erle serves as a counterpart to the numerous white-authored women characters of color we have encountered. The broad contours of her story, for instance, parallel those of the runaway slave. Both suffer thwarted loves (in Marian's case, with Romney); both survive brutal mistreatment and sexual abuse; and both give birth to sons fathered by their abusers. Here, of course, their stories diverge. Where the runaway slave's motherhood appears as sheer trauma, unalloyed and unendurable, Marian's works as a redemptive force, sustaining her not only through the all-consuming love she feels for her child but likewise through the "sisterhood" she builds with Aurora—a less performative, more practical sisterhood than we have thus far seen, as the two women join together as the "half / An orphan" child's "two mothers" (7.117-124). Then, too, where Marian, who twice shares with Aurora extended glimpses into her past, is at first treated much like the spoken-over "women [who] weep and curse," she is ultimately allowed to tell her own story. The first narrative, told by Aurora Leigh with "fuller utterance" and in third-person narration, is arguably commented on and quietly corrected by the second, unmediated narrative (3.829). Marian's portrayal, when read alongside Barrett Browning's portrayals of enslaved women, thus serves as a stark reminder of how much more even this boldly forward-thinking poet could imagine for the white women in her work than for the Black ones.

Yet still the figure of the Black mother remains, uneasily in the background both because of the unsettling moments we glimpse it in the poem and because of what we know about Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 1856 abolitionist focus. Soon after Romney's crucial comment that an activist woman poet at her best might write "as if / [Her] father were a Negro," Aurora offers an indirect response of sorts. Speculating that her identity would be subsumed were she to marry Romney, she muses:

He might cut  
My body into coins to give away  
Among his other paupers; change my sons,  
While I stood dumb as Griseld, for black babes  
Or piteous foundlings; might unquestioned set  
My right hand teaching in the Ragged Schools,  
My left hand washing in the Public Baths ... . (2.790-796).

The passing allusion to "black babes" is odd and yet easily passed over among the litany of hypotheticals that surround it. For our purposes, though, it of course bears pausing over. As Aurora envisions her body monetized ("He might cut / My body into coins") and inventoried into labor-producing parts (the right and left hands), it's not surprising that she would consider a third

form of bodily subjection. The image of a woman watching helplessly as her children are taken from her should remind us of enslavement, and the "black babes" underscore the parallel. It is a moment that at once invokes the sympathetic identification we have come to expect between white women poets and the oppressed non-white women whose causes they take up, reveals that sympathy as something that can leave all involved bereft, and registers lingering anxiety about the extent to which identification might be taken too far, veering into the realm of what Lootens, playing on the "telescopic philanthropy" of Dickens's *Bleak House*, dubs "crazed philanthropy." It is a moment, in short, that encapsulates questions central to the poet-activists here analyzed.

Certainly the concerns it highlights undergird the work of our next poet, Sarah Morgan Bryan Piatt. Indeed, Piatt, a poet frequently compared to Barrett Browning, takes up, distills, and re-orientates many of the questions that animate Barrett Browning's work. In Piatt's 1880 poem, "His Mother's Way," for instance, we see again *Aurora Leigh's* dialogic nature, its interrogation of differing approaches to addressing social ills, and its emphasis on how gender informs and intersects with those approaches. Like *Aurora Leigh*, "His Mother's Way" presents opposing responses to suffering, but unlike *Aurora Leigh*, it is directly concerned with sentiment, endorsing it over the proposed alternative even while remaining wryly critical of its limits. As such, this poem is useful to us as a direct and relatively straightforward iteration of contrasts and conundrums that appear in more nuanced and complex ways in her poems about race and slavery. Where those poems, informed by her lived experience as both a daughter of slaveholders and a denouncer of slavery, are intensely and painfully personal, "His Mother's Way" offers a more dispassionately expressed glimpse into Piatt's understanding of the interplay between sentiment, gender, poetics, and social change.

The premise of the poem is simple: the "babbl[ing]" young boy who speaks the bulk of the poem's 48 lines encounters, with his parents, a cold and unhoused "ragged fellow."<sup>16</sup> The boy-speaker juxtaposes the reactions of his mother, who "just knows how to cry," and his father, who "cannot cry at all / For he's a man, and that is why!" (1, 11-12). "Mamma's" tears are ineffectual and indiscriminate. She cries at the tramp's plight, but also at "an old glove or a ring" or "the shabbiest shawl / Because it costs too much to buy," and the only tangible result of her tears is to "almost spoil" the lace curtains through which she "peeps out" at the man (2, 9-10, 22-23). "Papa's" colder response, though, comes across as callous indifference. His impulse to protect his family from the unoffending "fellow" "with both the pistols" seems equally inappropriate to the situation at hand and, the poem suggests, less excusable than the mother's excess of fruitless sympathy, which at least calls attention to and wishes, however passively, to relieve the tramp's suffering (18). This is confirmed when, near the poem's end, the voice of the boy is replaced by the voice of an adult speaker, her potent wisdom underscored by the thrice-repeated refrain "I know" (33, 44). This new, authoritative speaker chastises anyone inclined to "laugh ... at such grief as" the titular mother's, directly addressing the "sweet sirs" who dismiss "such women[s] foolish" tears from their privileged place of "ease, / Lamp-light leisure, jests, and wine" (29-32, 45-46). In keeping with many of Piatt's works, the people depicted in this poem are aware but fundamentally passive. The mother cries "til both her eyes are red" and notes the sad specifics of the man's situation ("She says he looks so cold, so cold, / And has no pleasant place to stay"), but she makes no more effort to offer tangible aid than do her husband or the "Sweet sirs" who view her emotion with disdain (5, 25-26). We see here, then, that while Piatt is hardly a Harriet Beecher Stowe, substituting profound, pervasive ambivalence for Stowe's blazing conviction, she is inclined to echo Stowe's emphasis on "feeling right," even without the logical next step of taking concrete action.

As will become a common refrain, however, Piatt remains uncertain, even critical, about her own conclusion, relentlessly aware of its—and her—shortcomings. In "His Mother's Way," sentiment may be endorsed by this strikingly unsentimental poet, but it is done so grudgingly, with lingering reservations. The man is still out in the cold, the mother, though defended, is hardly a heroine, and ultimately, nothing has changed. It is easy, for both reader and poem, to conclude that the mother's response is lacking—that her awareness of inequity, though commendable, is not sufficient. Yet that claim becomes less clear-cut when, in other poems, Piatt herself begins to occupy the mother's position—keenly aware of injustice and of her own complicity in it but never fully ready to act on that awareness.

As Piatt reflects in her most frequently reprinted poem, "The Palace-Burner," she is perennially caught between her admiration of those "brave" individuals who fight for justice and her own inaction born of what she describes as her "languid and worldly" soul, with its "dainty need / For light and music."<sup>17</sup> "The Palace-Burner," the title of which was taken by Paula Bernat Bennett as the title of her groundbreaking anthology of Piatt's works, joins "His Mother's Way" in depicting a woman—again, a mother—who is both profoundly aware of the inequities she sees and steadfastly loathe to act on that awareness. This mother begins the poem as a version of the paragon mother seen in poems like "The Lost Lily," patiently instructing her young son and dutifully teaching him to "respect the laws" (15). When the boy, drawn to a newspaper article about a pétroleuse ("Petroleum thrower" or "Palace-burner" in the short-lived 1871 Paris Commune), asks whether his mother would, like the pétroleuse, "burn palaces," this sunny image of conventional motherhood gives way to—or more precisely, is revealed to encompass—something far more turbulent and complex. The boy's question both disturbs and intrigues the mother-speaker, who, after dismissing her young interlocutor, turns introspective, musing, if only for a moment, on the potential similarities between her and the pétroleuse:

Can he have seen my soul more near than I?  
 Ah! in the dusk and distance sweet she seems,  
 With lips to kiss away a baby's cry,  
 Hands fit for flowers, and eyes for tears and dreams.  
 Can he have seen my soul? (21-25)

Framed by the mother-speaker's questions about the nature of her "soul," her description of the pétroleuse is telling. The speaker imagines her as suited to the domestic sphere—a mother ("With lips to kiss away a baby's tears"), a subject of romance and likely a wife ("Hands fit for flowers"), and an affective kindred spirit (the habitual "tears"). Indeed, her vision is confirmed by the text of the Harper's Weekly article that inspired Piatt's poem, in which the pétroleuse is noted to be an "industrious, well-behaved woman, with a husband and children."<sup>18</sup> For this moment, the speaker and the palace-burner come together, their perceived kinship leading the speaker to question her own revolutionary potential and desires. In tones of regret, she ultimately rejects her affinity for the pétroleuse and all she represents, concluding:

Would I burn palaces? The child has seen  
 In this fierce creature of the Commune here,  
 So bright with bitterness and so serene,  
 A being finer than my soul, I fear. (32-36)

For Paula Bernat Bennett, whose recovery of and work on Piatt paved the way for all future discussions, this ending, and the poem as a whole, testifies to Piatt's "ironic awareness of the blatant gulf between sentimentality's social and its domestic vision," refuting the assumption "that domestic virtue automatically translates into social virtue."<sup>19</sup> Thus, the poem serves as a kind of dissection of sentimentality on multiple levels, both finding within it rebellious potential and recognizing that to "feel right" is not necessarily to act or to ameliorate. There is not, in the end, much difference between this self-ironizing mother-speaker and the mother in "His Mother's Way" who "just knows how to cry." One may be sophisticated and unsparingly self-aware where the other is merely "foolish," but both conclude the poems where they began, passive in the face of inequity and craving change they refuse to help create.

It is a position with which Piatt was intimately familiar, as both her biography and her poems about the South and slavery make abundantly clear. Much like Barrett Browning, Piatt was born into a life made possible by and inextricably bound up with slavery. Born in 1836 on her father's Kentucky plantation, she lost her mother at the age of eight and went on to live with various relatives, accompanied by her enslaved nurse, who would become, in Piatt's poetry, an embodiment of the mingled guilt and longing with which she portrayed her Southern childhood. Often writing from the Ohio home to which she moved shortly after her 1861 marriage to John James Piatt, she observed her Southern home from a Northern vantage point not only figuratively but quite literally, too, viewing her home state from across the Ohio river that separated slave state and free.<sup>20</sup> As Paula Bernat Bennett aptly puts it, "No white writer of her period had better credentials to take apart the 'Dark and Bloody ground' that served as this nation's foundational landscape."<sup>21</sup> As we will see, Piatt herself was painfully aware of the complexities of her position. She used her poetry to grapple with her untenable nostalgia for a time when, she well knew, her happiness was made possible by the subjugation of others. Her sense of complicity haunts her poetry, both implicitly, as in her above-considered depictions of women who see injustice but fail to act, and explicitly, as in two under-analyzed but deeply important poems, both written in 1872, the same year as her signature "The Palace-Burner": "Over in Kentucky" and "The Black Princess."

"Over in Kentucky" is perhaps her most explicit articulation of the conflicts both internal and external that animate her work. As in "His Mother's Way," the poem begins straightforwardly enough, in the voice of a child, in this case expressing a simple wish to visit the former home of the poem's primary speaker, presumably the child's mother, "over in Kentucky." This passing comment inspires in the mother-speaker a train of thought that in many ways encapsulates Piatt's dilemmas both poetic and personal. She muses:

Perhaps I thought how fierce the master's hold,  
 Spite of all armies, kept the slave within;  
 How iron chains, when broken, turned to gold,  
 In empty cabins, where glad songs had been  
 Before the Southern sword knew blood and rust,  
 Before wild cavalry sprang from the dust,  
 Over in Kentucky.

Perhaps — But, since two eyes, half full of tears,  
 Half full of sleep, would love to keep awake  
 With fairy pictures from my fairy years,

I have a pliant pencil that can make  
 Shadows of moons, far back and faint, to rise  
 On dewier grass and in diviner skies,  
 Over in Kentucky.<sup>22</sup>

Much in these stanzas should by now seem familiar—the repeated "perhapses," the about-face marked by the "but" (15, 22). These rhetorical moves make clear Piatt's place in the tradition begun by Hannah More. Yet much is also new. Though called into question by the opening "perhaps," the initial discussion of the "fierce ... master's hold" could be found in virtually any of the abolitionist poems we have encountered thus far, but the next image, the "iron chains" that "when broken, turned to gold, / In empty cabins, where glad songs had been," is quintessential Piatt, wholly unique (15-18). The all-too-literal chains of slavery are palpably present but at the moment of their breaking become something else—something troublingly idealized. Where poems like Barrett Browning's "A Curse for a Nation" dramatize a journey toward acknowledgment of oppression and injustice, this poem, and the shift from "iron chains" to "chains of gold" in particular, performs an alternate trajectory, from knowledge to nostalgia, self-reproachful complicity to equally self-aware complacency. The trajectory continues in the second quoted stanza, in which Piatt acknowledges the idealized, perhaps even disingenuous, nature of the "fairy pictures" she creates with her "pliant pencil" (24, 25). Again in stark contrast to "A Curse for a Nation," her poetry is not a call to protest or reckoning but a pointed turn away from involvement—though of course this formulation is complicated by the fact that, in the poem before us, the "fairy pictures" and the "iron chains" exist side by side. In neither case is that existence fully comfortable. The vexing thoughts of slavery are book-ended by two "perhapses," not fully admitted to, while the "fairy pictures," the "shadows" conjured for a sleepy child, are presented in language that is lyrical but also dismissive, characterizing the productions of her "pliant pencil" as slight and insubstantial.

Piatt's viewpoint was in many ways a limited one, and her unsparing self-consciousness about this truth does not negate or excuse it. Clearly the perspective of the slave is not centered here. The "wild cavalry" springs and even the "Southern sword" knows, where the slave is simply "kept ... within," and the image of the "empty cabins, where glad songs had been" is a jarringly sad one with which to describe the broken chains in the line before—and an occasion today's readers know to have been momentarily joyous for so many (16-21). The self-centered depiction is and ought to be troubling, particularly given that the speaker's situation parallels in every respect Piatt's own, inviting the reader to conflate the two. Yet this poem is not an elegy—or rather, it is more than an elegy. It is more a poem of guilt than of grief, as we see most pointedly as the poem crescendos toward its climax. After the speaker has turned from her "perhaps" thoughts of the evils of slavery, and after she has offered up her "fairy pictures," she proceeds:

For yonder river, wider than the sea,  
 Seems sometimes in the dusk a visible moan  
 Between two worlds,—one fair, one dear to me.  
 The fair has forms of ever-glimmering stone,  
 Weird-whispering ruin, graves where legends hide,  
 And lies in mist upon the charmed side,  
 Over in Kentucky.

The dear has restless, dimpled, pretty hands,  
 Yearning toward unshaped steel, unfancied wars,  
 Unbuilt cities, and unbroken lands,  
 With something sweeter than the faded stars  
 And dim, dead dews of my lost romance, found  
 In beauty that has vanished from the ground  
 Over in Kentucky. (29-42)

The first three lines of this excerpt articulate the crux of Piatt's position. Her liminal existence "between two worlds," the divide between them aptly emblemized by the "river, wider than the sea" so arrestingly metaphorized as a "visible moan" (29-31). Were we to pause after the first period, it would be easy to assume, reading "fair" and "dear" as homonyms for just and costly, respectively, and noting the objectiveness of "fair" and the personal affection of "dear to me," that the "fair" world was the North and the "dear" the South (32, 36). Yet we see as we read on that the opposite is the case. Thus, "fair" Kentucky, an almost mystical realm with its "weird-whispering ruin" and hidden "legends," is figured as a space of aesthetic beauty divorced from moral or political obligation, while the speaker's newfound Northern home is "dear" because of the affective bonds it has fostered—the "restless, dimpled, pretty hands" must surely belong to her children, likely including the one whose innocent comment opened and inspired the poem (32-36). The dichotomy between a slave state on the one hand and a realm of maternal love possible only outside of its confines on the other is one we have seen before ("The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point") and will see again (the works of Sarah Mapps Douglass). What is unique to Piatt is the extent to which for her "fair" and "dear," the beautiful and the valued, art and activism exist in tension. Hers is the debate between Aurora Leigh and Romney played out on an internal scale, struggling to coexist within one conflicted mind. Where other poets deploy their art in the service of their activist aims, Piatt grapples with the ethics of art that, however well-intentioned, is based upon the suffering of others.

The perils Piatt exposes are made particularly evident when she attempts to speak on behalf of others. Both in "Over in Kentucky" and elsewhere, it is her Black nurse whose voice she co-opts in ways whose problematic nature is initially unquestioned but ultimately interrogated. Consider first the following stanza from "Over in Kentucky":

Then one whose half-sad face still wore the hue  
 The North Star loved to light and linger on,  
 Before the war, looked slowly at me too,  
 And darkly whispered: "What is gone is gone.  
 Yet, though it may be better to be free,  
 I'd rather have things as they used to be  
 Over in Kentucky." (8-14)

While admittedly we have no record of what the woman here ventriloquized may or may not have said or felt, we would do her a disservice to read this stanza as anything other than pure fantasy—wishful thinking meant to excuse the speaker's longing for a bygone era rooted in cruelty. One might search for more in the stanza. Is the characteristic equivocation in the description of the nurse's "half-sad face" meant to add depth or ambiguity to her remark (8)? Are

the references to the "North Star" and "before the war" veiled allusions to the Underground Railroad, and if so, do they undercut the comment that comes after (9, 10)? Ultimately, though, Piatt's choice to force a real woman subjected to the horrors of slavery to join her, in this poem, in yearning for "things as they used to be" cannot be made palatable or explained away (13). In this poem so centrally concerned with harsh reality on the one hand and nostalgic storytelling on the other, this stanza is merely another "fairy picture," and not a particularly pretty one at that.

Yet as much as Piatt's poetry deals in self-appeasing fictions, it never forgets—or allows us to forget—that they are indeed fictions, and it is centrally concerned with dissecting and interrogating those fictions, as we see in "The Black Princess," another poem featuring the never-named nurse. Where in "Over in Kentucky" the nurse's voice is troublingly ventriloquized, in "The Black Princess" it is troublingly silenced. The "old Kentucky nurse," announced by the poem's subtitle as the subject of Piatt's self-described "true fable," is depicted as an enigmatic, even otherworldly, figure:

I knew a princess, she was old,  
Crisp-haired, flat-featured, with a look  
Such as no dainty pen of gold  
Would write of in a fairy book.  
So bent she almost crouched, her face  
Was like the Sphinx's face, to me,  
Touched with vast patience, desert grace,  
And lonesome, brooding mystery.<sup>23</sup>

Here, the princess-nurse is many things: a curiosity, her "feature[s] described in exoticized detail" (2); a sufferer, her body "bent" from years of labor and her face "touched with vast patience" (5, 7); and most of all, an enigma, her "sphinx's face" full of "lonesome, brooding mystery" (5, 8). For better or for worse, the poem doesn't seek to solve this perceived "mystery"—to imagine what the "Black princess" might be thinking or feeling. Instead, the speaker is quick to remind us of her own presence and point of view, from the poem's opening "I" to the above "To me" to its final "I think" (1, 6, 43). It is a study less in perspective than in perception.

In this way, the princess-nurse's voice is at once de-centered and also left unappropriated—a paradox of which the poem is aware and with which, I argue, it seeks to grapple. Indeed, this poem, like "Over in Kentucky," is fundamentally one of paradox as it reckons not only with a past Piatt portrays as both beautiful and brutal but also with a subject, the princess-nurse, who for Piatt epitomizes both strength and suffering. Introduced to us in the poem's very title as simultaneously subjugated and empowered, this "black princess" continues to be depicted in contrast after contrast. She is (by today's standards distastefully) described as "beautiful, though black" (28), she is "sad" and "sorrowful" yet with a "precious smile" (26, 10, 22), and we are told that "at her side the whitest queen / Were dark—her darkness was so fair" (23-24). Most importantly for our purposes, even her enslavement is presented in terms of stark contrast:

This princess was a slave, like one  
I read of in a painted tale,  
Yet free enough to see the sun,  
And all the flowers without a veil.



Not of the lamp, not of the ring,  
 The helpless, powerful slave was she,  
 But of a subtler, fiercer thing—  
 She was the slave of slavery. (13-20)

"Helpless" and "powerful," the "slave of slavery," described elsewhere as "obedient to a burning will," yet "free enough to see the sun, / And all the flowers without a veil" (18, 20, 12, 15-16). In short, our speaker, whom again we are invited to think of as a poetic rendering of Piatt herself, is seeking to reconcile contradictory understandings of her idolized nurse—to acknowledge both her unspeakable oppression and her innate agency and strength. Where "the helpless, powerful slave" is a poignant phrase, a paradox rooted in truth, the "free enough" formulation is of course more unsettling. It comes across as a self-serving attempt to justify the notes of guilty nostalgia so often present in the poetry of this anti-slavery daughter of Southern slave-holders, but, in yet another manifestation of Piatt's signature, unsparring self-analysis, it also registers its own insufficiency. The "helpless, powerful slave" may be "free enough," but at least when the poem or, as its title suggests, the "fable" is read aloud, the at first glance unintuitive "without a veil" reminds us that the princess-nurse's freedom is also "without avail"—not enough at all. For Piatt, this series of contradictions is, as we know, deeply personal, but it also raises questions both political and aesthetic. If oppressed subjects are positioned as "helpless" and in need of readers' sympathy, must we consequently deny that these subjects can remain "powerful"? And conversely, will acknowledging the powerful potential of the oppressed attenuate our sympathy—and by extension, though Piatt is less concerned with this, our sense of the need for social action?

"The Black Princess" attempts to navigate these questions and this delicate balance, and while at moments it succeeds, it does not end on a note of triumph. After paying extended homage to the princess-nurse, and after chronicling her life as a slave and her eventual death, the poem returns to the purely personal, concluding in tones of sheer, childlike longing. The final lines read, "On me, I think, far, faint, and fond, / Her eyes today look, yearning, down" (43-44). As Faith Barrett aptly observes, Piatt's poetry so often hovers "on a knife-edge between irony and sincerity," and here that "knife-edge" balance is especially apparent.<sup>24</sup> The ambivalent "I think," a characteristic Piatt interjection reminiscent of "Over in Kentucky's repeated "perhapses," calls the poem's ending into question, at least reminding us of the speaker's limited perspective, and at most undercutting all that has come before by exposing the self-absorbed nature of the speaker's affection for and tribute to her "old Kentucky nurse." Whether wryly self-critical or an expression of her own, sincere "yearning," these closing lines remain uncertain, unsettling, reminding us that the princess-nurse is used as a vehicle for the speaker's desires, be they for self-reproach, absolution, or merely nostalgia. It is not until we turn to the poems of the third and final poet in this chapter's gathering, free-born Black poet Sarah Mapps Douglass, that white desires and perspectives are truly and unequivocally de-centered.

Where Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Sarah Piatt question the efficacy of sentiment as a poetic and political strategy, Sarah Mapps Douglass comes to denounce it entirely. Born in 1806 in Philadelphia to a prominent Black abolitionist family, Douglass took on many roles in addition to that of poet, among them teacher, lecturer, natural historian, medical student, and painter. Liberation and equity were unfailingly at the forefront of her work both poetic and otherwise, and where poets like Piatt were characterized by ambivalence, Douglass's poems are marked by blazing certainty. While her prose pieces generally adhered to the sentimental

conventions of her day and abolitionist circle, her pseudonymously-published poetry is far angrier and more subversive. Publishing variously as "Zillah," "Sopanisba," and "Ella," Douglass used her poetry to respond directly to sentimental literature by white abolitionists, carefully and powerfully refuting its assumptions to expose a bleak reality where affective bonds and sympathetic identification are no match for a system of pervasive and premeditated cruelty.

As with so many of the poet-activists featured in this project, including, of course, both Barrett Browning and Piatt, Sarah Mapps Douglass's work takes up the all-important figure of the mother. Douglass was keenly aware of the power accorded to this figure by the rhetoric of her day, and her early prose pieces continue to present shared motherhood as the primary path to cross-racial sympathy between women and, in turn, to social change. In her 1832 piece "A Mother's Love," published in Garrison's *Liberator* under the pen-name "Zillah," Douglass detailed the abuses faced by a slave mother beaten for pausing in her work to nurse her child, concluding, "American mothers, can you doubt that the slave feels as tenderly for her offspring as you do for yours? Do your hearts feel no throb of pity for her woes? Will you not raise your voices, and plead for her emancipation, her immediate emancipation?"<sup>25</sup> The three questions posed are as apt a schema as any for the progression of sentimental logic: the "American mothers" reading Douglass's text are asked first to acknowledge shared feeling by way of shared motherhood, then to allow themselves to "pity" the cruelly-treated slave mothers' "woes," and finally to be spurred by their sympathy to take action, particularly though not only rhetorical action ("Raise your voices, and plead"). As Douglass's career progressed, however, she raised her own voice in ways that differed widely from the above-quoted quintessentially sentimental passage. Indeed, her poem "The Mother and her Captive Boy," published as "Ella," the sole pseudonym not known during her lifetime to belong to Douglass, serves as an extended rebuttal of the literary trappings of sentiment—though perhaps not, as we will see, of its core tenets.<sup>26</sup>

The poem exists as an implicit response to all sentimental abolitionist literature, but also as a strikingly direct rebuke to one particular work. Published in the October 8, 1836, edition of the *National Enquirer*, it begins with an epigraph taken from "The Negro Mother: To her Child, the Night before their Separation," a poem published anonymously, also in the *National Enquirer*, just two months earlier, on August 17. As "Ella," Douglass reprints the poem's fifth stanza, which reads:

Wilt thou, when long years roll o'er thee,  
Years of toil, and woe, and scorn,  
Still remember her who bore thee?  
Still when thou art most forlorn?<sup>27</sup>

Douglass's reference to the earlier poem is by no means an approving one. She minces no words in her assessment of the quoted lines.

No, he will not! — they who can rend apart  
The strongest chords that bind the human heart,  
They, in whose breasts no mercy e'er is found,  
Will crush his feelings, — pois'ning as they wound. (1-4)

The second sentence of the passage trenchantly lays out the poem's central claim, introducing its unsparing enumeration of the ways in which slavery systemically destroys "each tender,

generous impulse" of those subjected to its horrors, yet the exasperated, four-word exclamation with which the passage (and the poem proper) begins are even more telling: "No, he will not!" (5, 1). The emphatic "No" is as characteristic of Douglass's poetry as the previously considered interjections of uncertainty are of Piatt's, and they serve as an apt summation of her potent, uncompromising rage.<sup>28</sup> That rage, though, is as much directed to her fellow abolitionists as it is to Southern slave-holders. As we know, she is far from the only poet to point out that among the countless evils of slavery is its cruel disregard for familial ties and the mother-child bond in particular. This point, as we have seen, was ubiquitous—and in fact, was the very point of the poem against which Douglass pushes back. Here, though, it takes on new anger and urgency. It is not just that, as in Wheatley, for parent and child to be separated was a "cruel fate." Nor even is it just that, as in Barrett Browning, slavery perverts and destroys maternal feeling. Rather, it is quite pointedly a commentary on the limits of the sentimental imagination—on the capacity for empathy not just of those who defended slavery, but just as much, of those like the probably-but-not-necessarily white "Negro Mother" author, who decried slavery in romanticized language designed to evoke sympathy at the expense of conveying slavery's brutal reality. No, Douglass tells us, there is no hope of idealized affective bonds for this "captive boy," and to fantasize about the possibility—or to make space for readers to fantasize about the possibility—is facile and dismissive, trivializing the magnitude of all slavery took from its victims.

As the poem continues to detail systematically the abuses endemic to slavery, it continues, too, to take issue with the ways in which language and literature minimized or softened those abuses. Through its ongoing use of quotation, the poem's central device throughout, we are reminded again and again of the gap between rhetoric and reality. Consider these lines, with their prevalence of quoted phrases:

In this "happy land,"  
Which owes its boasted freedom to a hand  
That fought against oppression, there are found  
Thousands of men — of souls in fetters bound.  
Souls that too soon forget the pure, the mild,  
Unsullied feelings of a "sinless child,"  
And turn to bitterness; for "woe and scorn,"  
Are all they meet, — and how may these be borne? (14-21)

Here, the quotation marks are less about distinguishing the words of others and more a distancing, even an ironizing, mechanism. The patriotism of "Happy land" is meant to ring hollow, and the "Sinless child," though not yet the title of the popular Elizabeth Oakes Smith poem that would be published seven years later, was a phrase in the air that in this context appears privileged and naive (14, 19). The quoted phrase "Woe and scorn" calls for more consideration (20). It is, of course, a direct echo of the epigraph with which the poem opened, with its reference to "years of toil, and woe, and scorn." The poem, nearing its end, thus doubles back on itself, asking us, in words less subtle but no less powerful than its opening "No," to see the epigraph in a new light. After the poem's catalog of the myriad of ways in which slaves are "Oppress'd, degraded, beaten and reviled" (7), we should realize, the poem intimates, that the epigraph's vision of the "captive boy" steadfastly clinging to the memory of his mother and the safety and happiness she represents is, however pleasing and however politically expedient, a fiction that does not do justice to the particular and painful facts of slavery. There is no safety

and happiness on which to reminisce; "woe and scorn" are all there is, and that truth, in the hands of Douglass, holds no pathos, no romance. It is simply too painful to "be borne" (21). Douglass thus presaged by more than a century the notion that, in the influential words of Karen Sánchez-Eppler, "Domestic and sentimental antislavery writings [were] implicated in the very oppressions they [sought] to reform."<sup>29</sup> Sánchez-Eppler made this claim in reference not to Douglass but to her acquaintance Angelina Grimké, yet Douglass's work both presages Sánchez-Eppler's and takes it a step further.

The "implicated" status Sánchez-Eppler describes is one Douglass saw and spoke out against in others' writings, but also perhaps a strand she detected in her own. If we briefly return to her 1832 piece "A Mother's Love," we find rhetoric that presages the very epigraph that sparked the outrage of "The Mother and her Captive Boy." The work begins with another epigraph, this time a rosy tribute to "a mother's fondness," followed by another response, this time an approving one that applies the quoted words to the specific situation of slave mothers. Douglass writes, "And dost thou, poor slave, feel this holy passion? Does thy heart swell with anguish, when thy helpless infant is torn from thy arms, and carried thou knowest not whither? When thou hast no hope left that thou shalt ever see his innocent face again? Yes, I know thou dost feel all this."<sup>30</sup> With its "thou"'s and "thy"'s, its grandiloquent rhetorical questions, and most of all, its exaltation of maternal love, this excerpt shares much with the "Negro Mother" poem Douglass was so quick to chastise. As was the case with many of our poet-activists, thus far most notably Lydia Huntley Sigourney, Douglass's stance on sentimental literature seems to have evolved over time, taking her from the heights of sentiment she reached in the above-quoted 1832 passage to the impassioned critique of it she penned just four years later in "The Mother and her Captive Boy." It is easy to imagine that Douglass, increasingly subjected to prejudice from white abolitionists as her status in the movement grew, grew, too, in her frustration with white abolitionists' equivocations and hypocrisies.<sup>31</sup> It is equally plausible that "Ella," whose identity remained unknown in Douglass's lifetime, could speak out in ways not available to the better-known and more circumspect "Zillah."

Whatever the reasons for her changing stance, the conclusion Douglass reaches in "The Mother and her Captive Boy" seems clear: as Paula Bernat Bennett puts it in her brief yet illuminating discussion of the poem, "Sentimental poetry [is] simply not an adequate discursive vehicle for the communication of slavery's evils."<sup>32</sup> We have seen that Bennett is right. Yet as the poem comes to a close, its powerful certainty falters. After detailing the litany of horrors to which the "captive boy" will be subjected, the poem returns to "the mother," who, though she shares the title with her son, does not go on to be the subject of the poem, all but disappearing after the epigraph.

The poem's final couplet reads thus: "Death, only death, can purchase peace and joy, / For her that's parted from her captive boy" (28-29). Preceded as they are solely by discussion of the boy, the lines feel jarringly abrupt, and they signal a striking shift not only in the poem's subject but also in its underlying ethos. Rage turns to resignation as the poem retreats to a trope inextricable from the sentimentality it decries: the notion of death as welcome solace. Like the deaths of More's Yamba, Sigourney's Pocahontas and "Lost Lily," Hemans's "Indian woman," Barrett Browning's "runaway slave," and Piatt's "Black princess," Douglass's slave mother's imagined death brings, if not the "access of power" Jane Tompkins identifies as the result of death in nineteenth-century sentimental literature, at least a measure of comfort.<sup>33</sup> Just how Douglass and her slave mother fit within this lineage remains an open question. Does the poem find value in sentimentality despite itself, even as it rejects the genre's more flowery trappings?

Was death, sentimental or otherwise, simply the only form of resolution in a time when even the most forward-thinking of poet-activists struggled to imagine a world in which earthly "peace and joy" was fully attainable to women of color? Or are the lines a continuation of the poem's previous stance, their strikingly unadorned, almost terse phraseology framing death not as a sentimental triumph but merely a bleak truth? The poem ends on a note of ambivalence more typical of Piatt than of Douglass, but one thing is clear: for Douglass, sentimentality was a dynamic, ever-shifting concept, a concept demanding continual interrogation and ultimately, though perhaps not altogether unnecessary, a concept wholly insufficient in the face of the staggering evils it was often deployed to eradicate. Had more white abolitionist authors bothered to read Douglass's words, the trajectory of nineteenth-century women might have looked vastly different.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Sarah Piatt, and Sarah Mapps Douglass are seen as innovators, experimenters, breakers with tradition. And rightly so. All three produced work that was strikingly original, even daring. Yet though they transformed it, they did not do away with sentimental convention. Rather, it continued to undergird their writing, a bedrock questioned and defied but enduringly at the forefront of their artistry and activism. Just as sentimentality's acclaimed proponents wrestled with its implications as seen in the previous chapter, its apparent detractors were drawn back to it again and again, grappling constantly with its possibilities as well as with its pitfalls. In the next and final chapter, we will see that even as the prevalence and popularity of both sentimentality and political poetics waned near the nineteenth century's end, the questions the interlinked genres raise and the preoccupations, techniques, and often specific works of the writers we have thus far considered remained deeply important to the group of women who crafted a new iteration of activist poetry.

## Notes

1. Barrett Browning, Elizabeth. "A Curse for a Nation." In *Liberty Bell*, 1856. Line 11. Hereafter cited in text.
2. *The Brownings' Correspondence, Vol. 11, July 1845-January 1846, Letters 1982-2177*. Ed. Philip Kelley and Scott Lewis. Winfield, KS: Wedgestone, 1993. 252.
3. *The Brownings' Correspondence, Vol. 13: May 1846-September 1846, Letters 2384-2615*. Ed. Philip Kelley and Scott Lewis. Winfield, KS: Wedgestone, 1995. 24.
4. *The Brownings' Correspondence, Vol. 3, December 1832-January 1837, Letters 435-601*. Ed. Philip Kelley and Ronald Hudson. Winfield, KS: Wedgestone, 1985. 86.
5. *The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Vol. 2*. Ed. Frederic G. Kenyon. London: Macmillan, 1898. 220.
6. *The Brownings' Correspondence, Vol. 19, March 1853-November 1853, Letters 3174-3290*. Ed. Philip Kelley, Scott Lewis, and Edward Hagan. Winfield, KS: Wedgestone, 2012. 13.
7. Montwieler, Katherine. "Mother Cries: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Poetics of Maternity." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Vol. 38, No. 1, Spring 2019. 79-104.
8. Barrett Browning, Elizabeth. "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point." In *Liberty Bell*, 1848. Lines 99-105. Hereafter cited in text.
9. Jacobs, Harriet. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*. Ed. Frances Smith Foster. New York: Norton, 2018. 79-80.
10. Stowe, Harriet Beecher. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Ontario: Broadview Press, 2009. 405.
11. Lootens, Tricia. *The Political Poetess: Victorian Femininity, Race, and the Legacy of Separate Spheres*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017.
12. Ibid.
13. See *Aurora Leigh's* dedication, written by Barrett Browning on October 17, 1856, to her cousin John Kenyon.
14. Barrett Browning, Elizabeth. *Aurora Leigh*. London: Chapman and Hall, 1856. Book II, lines 240, 229. Hereafter cited in text.
15. Line 56 of Hannah More's "Slavery"; see discussion in Chapter 1.

16. Piatt, Sarah. "His Mother's Way." In *Palace-Burner: The Selected Poetry of Sarah Piatt*. Ed. Paula Bernat Bennett. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001. Lines 29, 19. Hereafter cited in text.

17. Piatt, Sarah. "The Palace-Burner." In *Palace-Burner: The Selected Poetry of Sarah Piatt*. Ed. Paula Bernat Bennett. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001. Lines 3, 19-20. Hereafter cited in text.

18. See Paula Bernat Bennett, *Poets in the Public Sphere: The Emancipatory Project of American Women's Poetry, 1800-1900*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003.

19. Ibid.

20. Indeed, John James Piatt had strong ties to the anti-slavery community, even taking a minor position in the Lincoln administration. It is worth noting, too, that Sarah Piatt later continued her career in Ireland, where her family lived from 1882-1893. While Piatt's Irish poems lie outside the scope of this project, the fact of their existence is a useful reminder of the ways in which transatlantic concerns animated the work of both British and American poets.

21. Bennett, Paula Bernat. Introduction. *Palace-Burner: The Selected Poetry of Sarah Piatt*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001.

22. Piatt, Sarah. "Over in Kentucky." In *Palace-Burner: The Selected Poetry of Sarah Piatt*. Ed. Paula Bernat Bennett. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001. Lines 15-28. Hereafter cited in text.

23. Piatt, Sarah. "The Black Princess." In *Palace-Burner: The Selected Poetry of Sarah Piatt*. Ed. Paula Bernat Bennett. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001. Lines 1-8. Hereafter cited in text.

24. Barrett, Faith. "'What witty sally': Phoebe Cary's Poetics of Parody." In *A History of Nineteenth-Century American Women's Poetry*. Ed. Jennifer Putzi and Alexandra Socarides. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

25. Douglass, Sarah Mapps. "A Mother's Love." In *The Portable Nineteenth-Century African American Women Writers*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates and Hollis Robbins. New York: Penguin, 2017.

26. For further reading on Douglass's various pseudonyms, see Jean Fagan Yellin and Cynthia D. Bond, *The Pen Is Ours: A Listing of Writings by and About African-American Women before 1910 with Secondary Bibliography to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Julie Winch, "'You Have Talents—Only Cultivate Them': Philadelphia's Black Female Literary Societies and the Abolitionist Crusade," in *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women's Political Culture in Antebellum America*, Ed. Jean Fagan Yellin and John C. Van Horne, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994; and Gay Gibson Cima, *Performing Anti-Slavery:*

*Activist Women on Antebellum Stages* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

27. Douglass, Sarah Mapps. "The Mother and her Captive Boy." In *Words for the Hour: A New Anthology of American Civil War Poetry*. Ed. Faith Barrett and Cristanne Miller. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005. Epigraph. Hereafter cited in text.

28. For another particularly powerful example of Douglass's characteristic opening move, see "The Boast of America," published in the *National Enquirer* in 1837.

29. Sánchez-Eppler, Karen. *Touching Liberty: Abolition, Feminism, and the Politics of the Body*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.

30. Douglass, Sarah Mapps. "A Mother's Love." In *The Portable Nineteenth-Century African American Women Writers*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates and Hollis Robbins. New York: Penguin, 2017.

31. For instance, Douglass and her mother Grace were forced to sit on segregated benches in the back of their abolitionist-frequented Quaker meetinghouse, famously to the chagrin of Angelina Grimke and her sister Sarah.

32. See Paula Bernat Bennett, *Poets in the Public Sphere: The Emancipatory Project of American Women's Poetry, 1800-1900*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003.

33. Tompkins, Jane. *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.



## Chapter 4 "Yet Stay": The Enduring Power of Sentimental Activist Poetics

As the nineteenth-century came to a close, attitudes toward sentimental literature shifted dramatically. What had once been a wildly popular genre was fast becoming, in the public imagination, nothing more than a joke. In 1885, the world was introduced to Emmeline Grangerford of Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, who epitomized the emerging image of the sentimental poet, hopelessly lachrymose and devoid not only of artistic skill but also, quite specifically, of the formal and theoretical acumen I have claimed to be a crucial element of nineteenth-century poet-activists' thought and work. After quoting her comically maudlin "tribute" to "Young Stephen Dowling Botts" whose "soul did from this cold world fly / By falling down a well,"<sup>1</sup> Huck Finn details Emmeline's writing process:

Buck said she could rattle off poetry like nothing. She didn't ever have to stop to think. He said she would slap down a line, and if she couldn't find anything to rhyme with it she would just scratch it out and slap down another one, and go ahead. She warn't particular; she could write about anything you choose to give her to write about, just so it was sadful.<sup>2</sup>

In this passage and in the depiction of Emmeline more broadly, the sentimental ethos is stripped of its power. It is no longer rooted in a belief in the rhetorical and political value of sympathy but rather in a morbid obsession with anything "sadful," no longer a genre marked by thoughtfulness and exploration but haphazardly "rattle[d] off" and "slap[ped] down" with little effort and even less reflection. This derisive and quite obviously gendered conception of the sentimental "poetess" would become the dominant one, prevailing for most of the twentieth century. It—and by "it" I mean not the figure of Emmeline Grangerford herself but rather the broader perception she heralds and embodies—is the reason the majority of the poets in this study were neglected until recent decades. As Jane Tompkins summarizes, "Twentieth-century critics ... taught generations of students to equate ... emotionality with ineffectiveness [and] implicitly, with womanly inferiority."<sup>3</sup>

Yet even as most readers and writers turned away from the sentimental, the genre was far from forgotten. A small but crucial body of women poets, and of women poets of color in particular, continued the tradition of both deploying and interrogating its tenets in the realm of activism. Frances E. W. Harper is for us a figure of transition, her work, and especially her sustained poetic engagement with Harriet Beecher Stowe, exemplifying both the shift in attitudes toward sentiment and its enduring relevance even in the face of fin de siècle skepticism. E. Pauline Johnson (Tekahionwake) is one of continuity, her poems' dialogues, contradictions, and about-faces recalling Hannah More's work and the conversation it began. And Ruth Margaret Muskrat brings us forward into the twentieth century, reminding us that even though the voices this project has amplified were spoken over, they were never fully silenced. Together, these three poets leave us with a clear sense that the principles and contributions of the author-activists we have thus far considered had a lasting legacy, even as the popularity of both their works and their poetic and political techniques waned.

Born free in 1825 in Baltimore, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper began her career with perhaps the most wholehearted embrace of the sentimental we have encountered. Not only a prolific poet but also a novelist, orator, and teacher, the bulk of Harper's work was devoted to

seeking justice for her fellow Black Americans. Many of her early poems pay tribute to fellow justice-seeker Harriet Beecher Stowe and her wildly popular, deeply galvanizing *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a work many have seen as the pinnacle of sentimental activist writing. In the years just after *Uncle Tom's Cabin* 1851-52 serialization, Harper published three poetic responses to the work in *Frederick Douglass's Paper*: "To Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe," "Eliza Harris," and "Eva's Farewell." The first poem's effusive opening stanzas exemplify the unstinting praise ever-present in these early poems to Stowe:

I thank thee for thy pleading  
For the helpless of our race;  
Long as our hearts are beating  
In them thou hast a place.

I thank thee for thy pleading  
For the fetter'd and the dumb;  
The blessing of the perishing  
Around thy path shall come.

I thank thee for the kindly words  
That grac'd thy pen of fire,  
And thrilled upon the living chords  
Of many a heart's deep lyre.

For the sisters of our race  
Thou'st nobly done thy part;  
Thou hast won thyself a place  
In every human heart.<sup>4</sup>

Harper's outpouring of gratitude to Stowe continues and needs little explication. Her belief in the power of Stowe's "pen of fire" and in a particular, gendered brand of solidarity between Stowe and "the sisters of our race" is clear (10, 13). Speaking both as an "I" and as a representative of "our race" (2, 13), Harper voices admiration that is abundant and wholly unambivalent. The same can be seen in both "Eliza Harris" and "Eva's Farewell," in which Harper retells in verse two of *Uncle Tom's Cabin's* most memorable scenes: Eliza's harrowing escape from slave-traders across an ice floe-filled Ohio river and Little Eva's untimely and famously affecting death. Unlike the poetic re-imaginings we have seen up to this point (More's "Sorrows of Yamba," for instance, or Sigourney's "Pocahontas"), Harper's poems are works less of commentary and more of sheer celebration—less about transforming our perceptions and more about affirming the value of what is already clear in the original: Eliza's bravery, spurred by her love for her child, and Little Eva's saintly spirit.

When Harper returned to Stowe's work twenty years after the publication of these early poems, her approach was far more subtle and sophisticated. The six poems at the heart of her 1872 collection *Sketches of Southern Life* are written in the voice not of paragon mother Eliza or impossibly good Little Eva but of Aunt Chloe, Uncle Tom's wife and a character who despite her relatively scant page-time, is arguably *Uncle Tom's Cabin's* most outspoken critic of the very sentimentality the novel so ringingly espoused. In highlighting and strengthening Aunt Chloe's

critique, Harper continues the focus on revision and correction we have seen from figures like More, but she also does something new. Anticipating my own work in the very project in which she now appears, Harper offers keen insight into the ways in which *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the apex of sentimental activism, at times questioned, contradicted, and even undermined its core sentimental tenets.

Identified by Frances Smith Foster as "the first black female protagonist, outside the tragic mulatto tradition, to be presented as a model for life"<sup>5</sup> and posited by the editors of the Norton Anthology of African American Literature to be perhaps Harper's "most important contribution to American letters,"<sup>6</sup> Aunt Chloe has a perspective both fresh and powerful. Picking up after the events of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the six Chloe poems recount their heroine's painful separation from her two young sons sold like Uncle Tom himself to pay off plantation debts, her close observation of the Civil War's unfolding and her joy at the North's victory and her subsequent freedom, and her incisive commentary on Reconstruction politics and Black community—a community that, by the poems' end, includes her two long-lost sons, now grown. For Paula Bernat Bennett, Harper's sharp-tongued and often unabashedly angry Aunt Chloe functions as an antidote to the "ideal slave-victim" Uncle Tom, with his steadfast refusal to condemn his white oppressors.<sup>7</sup> What Bennett does not point out—and what Harper subtly does—is that Stowe's Aunt Chloe was already portrayed, albeit hesitantly and always only in brief though powerful moments, as the character who served this role. Indeed, many of Tom's early expressions of forgiveness toward his enslavers are made to an unconvinced Chloe.

"Pray for them that spitefully use you, the good book says," says Tom.

"Pray for 'em!" said Aunt Chloe; "Lor, it's too tough! I can't pray for 'em."<sup>8</sup>

Yet the relationship that interests Harper is not Chloe's with Tom (indeed, the latter is never once alluded to), but rather, Chloe's with her "mistress," and understandably so. Stowe's Chloe has two interactions with Mrs. Shelby, one near the novel's opening, the other toward its close, that question but ultimately uphold the idea of cross-racial sisterhood—interactions on which Harper draws. The first occurs in the moments before Uncle Tom, sold to pay the debts of his owner, is taken from Chloe and the rest of his family:

One of the boys called out, "Thar's Missis a-comin' in!"

"She can't do no good; what's she coming for?" said Aunt Chloe.

Mrs. Shelby entered. Aunt Chloe set a chair for her in a manner decidedly gruff and crusty. She did not seem to notice either the action or the manner. She looked pale and anxious.

"Tom," she said, "I come to—` and stopping suddenly, and regarding the silent group, she sat down in the chair, and, covering her face with her handkerchief, began to sob.

"Lor, now, Missis, don't—don't!" said Aunt Chloe, bursting out in her turn; and for a few moments they all wept in company. And in those tears they all shed

together, the high and the lowly, melted away all the heart-burnings and anger of the oppressed. (141-142)

The second passage echoes the first, repeating each move of its trajectory. Set just after Chloe has learned of the death of her husband Tom, whose freedom she had been working to purchase, it reads:

The party entered the supper-room. The money, of which Chloe was so proud, was still lying on the table.

"Thar," said she, gathering it up, and holding it, with a trembling hand, to her mistress, "don't never want to see nor hear on't again. Jist as I knew 'twould be,—sold, and murdered on dem ar' old plantations!"

Chloe turned, and was walking proudly out of the room. Mrs. Shelby followed her softly, and took one of her hands, drew her down into a chair, and sat down by her.

"My poor, good Chloe!" said she.

Chloe leaned her head on her mistress' shoulder, and sobbed out, "O Missis! 'Scuse me, my heart's broke,—dat's all!"

"I know it is," said Mrs. Shelby, as her tears fell fast; "and I cannot heal it, but Jesus can. He healeth the broken hearted, and bindeth up their wounds."

There was a silence for some time, and all wept together. (473)

By both passages' ends, the cleansing tears so central to *Uncle Tom's Cabin's*—and sentimentality's—rhetorical strategy have worked their magic, healing and bringing together. Affective bonds remain unbroken, and Chloe and Mrs. Shelby serve as yet another illustration of "feeling right," as Aunt Chloe forgives and forbears and Mrs. Shelby sympathizes and consoles. Yet before we reach this tidy if implausible resolution, in each scene Chloe comes perilously close to overturning the sentimental logic that underpins the novel. By first rejecting Mrs. Shelby's futile sympathy ("She can't do no good; what's she coming for?") and then asserting the unromanticized truth of her husband's death ("Sold, and murdered on dem ar' old plantations!"), Chloe exposes the cracks in the novel's sentimental worldview, allowing us to glimpse the justified rage it elides in the service of its vision of cross-racial unity.

It is this strand of Aunt Chloe's character that Harper amplifies and expands, and the specific ways in which she reworks Chloe's relationship with her mistress are especially telling. Consider the opening of the sequence's first poem, entitled simply "Aunt Chloe":

I remember, well remember,  
That dark and dreadful day,  
When they whispered to me, "Chloe,  
Your children's sold away!"

It seemed as if a bullet  
 Had shot me through and through,  
 And I felt as if my heart-strings  
 Was breaking right in two.  
 And I says to Cousin Milly,  
 "There must be some mistake;  
 Where's Mistus?" "In the great house crying —  
 Crying like her heart would break.  
 And the lawyer's there with Mistus;  
 Says he's come to 'ministrate,  
 'Cause when master died he just left  
 Heap of debt on the estate.  
 And I thought 'twould do you good  
 To bid your boys good-bye —  
 To kiss them both and shake their hands  
 And have a hearty cry.  
 Oh! Chloe, I knows how you feel,  
 'Cause I'se been through it all;  
 I thought my poor old heart would break,  
 When master sold my Saul."<sup>9</sup>

Here, as in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, tears are ubiquitous, but their effect is vastly different. "Mistus" may be "in the great house crying," but neither she nor Chloe thinks of crying together, and the progression of the lines leaves the cause of her tears unclear. Is it the pain about to befall Chloe and her children? Her husband's death? His "heap of debt"? Certainly her tears do not lead to the catharsis Stowe's Chloe and Mrs. Shelby share. Meanwhile, Harper's Chloe shares her sorrow—and is urged to share a "hearty cry"—not with her mistress but first with Cousin Milly, a fellow bereaved slave mother, and later with her sons. The fast-flowing tears that emblemize the sentimental ethos do retain meaning and value, but they do not absolve "Mistus" of complicity as they do not assuage Chloe's grief. We are left with sentimentality emptied of its facile glossing over of power imbalances and stripped down to its essential belief in the transformative power of sympathy—but sympathy rooted not in an idealized coming-together of "the high and the lowly" but rather in solidarity possible only among the oppressed.

As the Aunt Chloe sequence progresses, Chloe does in fact find value in "Mistus's" tears, but not in the way readers familiar with Stowe might be likely to expect. In the second and longest Chloe poem, "The Deliverance," which chronicles her experience of the Civil War and its aftermath, Chloe tells us:

Mistus prayed up in the parlor  
 That the Secesh all might win;  
 We were praying in the cabins,  
 Wanting freedom to begin.  
 Mister Thomas wrote to Mistus,  
 Telling 'bout the Bull's Run fight,  
 That his troops had whipped the Yankees  
 And put them all to flight.

Mistus' eyes did fairly glisten;  
 She laughed and praised the South,  
 But I thought someday she'd laugh  
 On tother side her mouth.  
 I used to watch old Mistus' face,  
 And when it looked quite long  
 I would say to Cousin Milly,  
 "The battle's going wrong;  
 Not for us, but for the Rebels." (2.81-2.97)

Aunt Chloe's use of her mistress's glistening eyes and long face as a barometer for the hopes said mistress so pointedly does not share is a clever reversal of Stowe's—and sentimentality's—emphasis on cathartic communal feeling. The inclusion of Aunt Milly again underscores the fact that Chloe is not rejecting altogether the affect-fueled sisterhood so central to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, but rather revising it into a kinship rooted in far more than merely shared womanhood—a sisterhood of enslaved and oppressed Black women and mothers in which "Mistus" can have no part. Still more pointed is a remark Chloe makes in the sequence's final poem, "The Reunion," in which for the first time in several poems she returns to the subject of "Mistus" and her aforementioned son Mister Thomas:

I'm richer now than Mistus,  
 Because I have got my son;  
 And Mister Thomas he is dead  
 And she's nary one. (6.29-6.32)

Where in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* the shared experience of maternal bereavement brings together women of varying races and backgrounds, in Aunt Chloe's hands it does quite the opposite. We are asked to think not of loss shared but loss inflicted, as Chloe's caustic words remind us that while "Mistus" has endured loss, she has also forced it upon others. We have seen the acknowledgment of white women's complicity before time and again, but strikingly new in this instance is the way in which Harper's Chloe sees and fully realizes Stowe's Chloe's transient yet justified rage, expanding and transforming it with her unapologetic refusal to render it in terms meant to center or make comfortable her white female readers. Even the titular slave mother in Sarah Mapps Douglass's "A Mother's Love," after all, ultimately reconciles with and even cares for her former mistress, though it is easy to imagine a later, angrier Douglass disavowing that narrative.<sup>10</sup> Aunt Chloe, though unequivocally an aspirational figure who leads her newly freed community in embracing education, religion, and civic-mindedness, displays no patience with such facile happily-ever-afters. Where Stowe's Aunt Chloe ultimately acquiesces, however grudgingly, to her husband's—and the novel's—creed of forbearance and forgiveness, Harper's Aunt Chloe refuses to conform to—and often directly overturns—Stowe's vision of shared emotion that "melt[s] away" past wrongs.

That Harper chose to transform Stowe's Aunt Chloe into a poetic speaker at all might well be seen as a corrective to *Uncle Tom's Cabin's* rather patronizing amusement at its Aunt Chloe's "particular fancy for calling poultry poetry" (296-297). ("'La sakes!' she would say, 'I can't see; one jis good as turry,—poetry suthin good, any how;'" and so poetry Chloe continued to call it.") In Harper's hands, Chloe's understanding of poetry and language is presented as vastly

more sophisticated. Indeed, where Stowe's Chloe remarks resignedly, "Words is so curis, can't never get 'em right" (297), Harper's Chloe suggests a direct throughline from literacy to self-sufficiency. In the sequence's fourth poem, "Learning to Read," Chloe, "rising sixty" and eager to read her Bible (4.35), concludes:

I got a pair of glasses,  
And straight to work I went,  
And never stopped till I could read  
The hymns and Testament.  
Then I got a little cabin—  
A place to call my own—  
And I felt as independent  
As the queen upon her throne. (4.37-4.44)

Learning to read leads seamlessly to feeling "as independent / As the queen upon her throne," and this literate and proudly independent Chloe has built a life Stowe's Chloe could only dream of. The Aunt Chloe readers once chuckled at is now wholly admirable, and the Aunt Chloe Stowe repeatedly silenced and chastened has been given a voice that demands to be heard and respected.

Yet if Harper's project is one of transformation, so, too, in a way, is Stowe's Chloe's. As much as Chloe exists in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as an inconveniently disruptive force, and as much as the novel refuses to engage in any sustained way with her bursts of anger, she does, at least in one key moment, display perhaps more explicitly than any other character the power of the work's central image—the image, of course, of the freely flowing tear. This moment occurs early on in the novel, when as Chloe bids her husband goodbye as he prepares to leave his cabin with the slave-trader Haley, it is remarked that "her tears seem[ed] suddenly turned to sparks of fire" (142). Here, the central, arresting metaphor of "tears ... turned to sparks of fire" is an apt summation of the transformative power the novel finds in tears and the empathy they stand for, as well as of the transformation of Stowe's Chloe at Harper's hands. Harper does not, as Stowe does, choose to quench her Chloe's "fire." Rather, her Chloe sequence takes a character whose fire was latent, suppressed, transitory and renders that very fire her central characteristic. Harper's Chloe, in short, is allowed to give voice to the anger from which *Uncle Tom's Cabin* so hurriedly turns away, not in a way that dismisses the incendiary potential of sentimentality inherent in Stowe's metaphor, but rather in a way that allows that potential to reach its fullest, white-hot expression.

Thus, even as Harper shifted from writing poetry that embraced sentimentality and its proponents and tenets to creating works like the Aunt Chloe sequence that in many ways chafe against sentiment, sentimental works, techniques, and worldviews remained integral to her artistry and activism. Like Elizabeth Barrett Browning's, Sarah Piatt's, and Sarah Mapps Douglass's, her writing was less unsentimental than anti-sentimental. Always sentiment remained a palpable presence. Yet where Barrett Browning, Piatt, and Douglass engaged with sentimentality to probe its limits and prove its insufficiencies, Harper did so to mine it for what was valuable, powerful, even revolutionary. Considered as part of the long trajectory of sentimental anti-racist women's poetry, then, what Harper's poetic responses to Stowe show us is quite simply that even as its ubiquity waned, sentimentality never fully disappeared from the conversation.

Emily Pauline Johnson (Tekahionwake) joins Harper in testifying to sentimentality's enduring power. The first and only Canadian poet featured in this project, Johnson draws on the techniques of the body of poets we have previously analyzed, showing their continued relevance specifically to the colonized position the British and American poets we have thus far considered were vacating. Born in 1861 on the Six Nations Reserve near Brantford, Ontario, Johnson was the daughter of the Mohawk chief and interpreter George Henry Martin Johnson and the English-born Emily Susanna Howells Johnson. E. Pauline Johnson witnessed Canada's inception as a self-governing so-called "dominion" but died (in 1913) nearly twenty years before the 1931 recognition of her country's legal independence and equality. Raised, much like Jane Johnston Schoolcraft, in a multicultural and cosmopolitan household, Johnson, who later adopted the Iroquois name Tekahionwake professionally, famously wrote across cultures, deploying her poetry and her dramatic performances thereof to present Indigenous experiences and concerns to white Canadian, American, and English audiences. Yet she also wrote across genres. Written in 1885 and published a decade later in her 1895 collection *The White Wampum*, Johnson's most famous poem and signature performance piece, "A Cry from an Indian Wife," exemplifies this claim, repeatedly pivoting between embracing and rejecting a sentimental ethos grounded in shared feeling and cross-racial sisterhood.

Brief enough to reprint in its entirety, "A Cry from an Indian Wife" reads as follows:

My forest brave, my Red-skin love, farewell;  
 We may not meet to-morrow; who can tell  
 What mighty ills befall our little band,  
 Or what you'll suffer from the white man's hand?  
 Here is your knife! I thought 'twas sheathed for aye.  
 No roaming bison calls for it to-day;  
 No hide of prairie cattle will it maim;  
 The plains are bare, it seeks a nobler game:  
 'Twill drink the life-blood of a soldier host.  
 Go; rise and strike, no matter what the cost.  
 Yet stay. Revolt not at the Union Jack,  
 Nor raise thy hand against this stripling pack  
 Of white-faced warriors, marching West to quell  
 Our fallen tribe that rises to rebel.  
 They all are young and beautiful and good;  
 Curse to the war that drinks their harmless blood.  
 Curse to the fate that brought them from the East  
 To be our chiefs—to make our nation least  
 That breathes the air of this vast continent.  
 Still their new rule and council is well meant.  
 They but forget we Indians owned the land  
 From ocean unto ocean; that they stand  
 Upon a soil that centuries ago  
 Was our sole kingdom and our right alone.  
 They never think how they would feel to-day,  
 If some great nation came from far away,  
 Wrestling their country from their hapless braves,



Giving what they gave us—but wars and graves.  
 Then go and strike for liberty and life,  
 And bring back honour to your Indian wife.  
 Your wife? Ah, what of that, who cares for me?  
 Who pities my poor love and agony?  
 What white-robed priest prays for your safety here,  
 As prayer is said for every volunteer  
 That swells the ranks that Canada sends out?  
 Who prays for vict'ry for the Indian scout?  
 Who prays for our poor nation lying low?  
 None—therefore take your tomahawk and go.  
 My heart may break and burn into its core,  
 But I am strong to bid you go to war.  
 Yet stay, my heart is not the only one  
 That grieves the loss of husband and of son;  
 Think of the mothers o'er the inland seas;  
 Think of the pale-faced maiden on her knees;  
 One pleads her God to guard some sweet-faced child  
 That marches on toward the North-West wild.  
 The other prays to shield her love from harm,  
 To strengthen his young, proud uplifted arm.  
 Ah, how her white face quivers thus to think,  
 Your tomahawk his life's best blood will drink.  
 She never thinks of my wild aching breast,  
 Nor prays for your dark face and eagle crest  
 Endangered by a thousand rifle balls,  
 My heart the target if my warrior falls.  
 O! coward self I hesitate no more;  
 Go forth, and win the glories of the war.  
 Go forth, nor bend to greed of white men's hands,  
 By right, by birth we Indians own these lands,  
 Though starved, crushed, plundered, lies our nation low...  
 Perhaps the white man's God has willed it so.<sup>11</sup>

Much in these lines should strike us as familiar. The closing ambivalent, surely ironic "Perhaps" brings to mind Sarah Piatt. The twice-invoked curse is reminiscent of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Most notable, though, is the poem's resemblance to Hannah More's "The Sorrows of Yamba." Like Yamba, Johnson's unnamed "Indian wife" vacillates repeatedly and at lightning speed between contradictory emotional poles: rage and resignation, a longing for solidarity and a desire for vengeance. Marked by expressions like "Still" (20), "But" (40), and the urgently exclamatory, twice-repeated "Yet stay" (11, 41), the plethora of shifts in this poem that has been aptly referred to as "self-interrogating and self-interrupting" make clear that what was true of More, our first poet, is also true of Johnson, among our last: that sentimentality, whether gaining popularity or receding from cultural consciousness, was less a static state of being than a dynamic process of testing and questioning.<sup>12</sup>

For Johnson, the process failed because the sympathy that was its bedrock was never reciprocal. Of white colonizers, the Indian wife laments:

They never think how they would feel to-day,  
If some great nation came from far away,  
Wresting their country from their hapless braves,  
Giving what they gave us—but wars and graves. (25-28)

The "white man" (4)—and crucially, the white woman—thus fails to engage in precisely the kind of empathetic "thinking" the Indian wife demands from the husband she addresses. "Think of the mothers o'er the inland seas; / Think of the pale-faced maiden on her knees," the speaker bids her warrior husband (43-44). Peace—or at least a plea for it—is a palpable possibility. Yet it does not come to fruition due to the painful realization that the "pale-faced maiden" whose image she has conjured has no interest in the kinship the speaker acknowledges. "She never thinks of my wild aching breast, / Nor prays for your dark face and eagle crest," admits the Indian wife (51-52), and directly after coming to this understanding, she eschews her equivocations and protestations, vowing to "hesitate no more" and urging her husband, this time in tones of finality, to "go forth, and win the glories of the war" (55-56).

This closing certainty might seem to falter in the poem's final line, in which, after reflecting on her people's "starved, crushed, plundered" status, the Indian wife somewhat unexpectedly muses, "Perhaps the white man's God has willed it so" (59-60). Not unlike the arresting final couplet of Sarah Mapps Douglass's "The Mother and her Captive Boy," this jarring conclusion leaves us questioning the poem's previous readiness to disavow sympathy and sentiment. Yet when we take into account that, in yet another echo of More, this closing line was in fact one Johnson revised heavily, we see that it does not undercut but in fact recapitulates what has come before. The original line, "God, and fair Canada have willed it so," included neither the "Perhaps" nor, still more importantly, the distance between the speaker and the god she would later pointedly refer to as "the white man's God." Thus, read alongside its predecessor, the revised closing line portrays Christianity, like the broader sentimental worldview of which it constitutes a vital facet, as a potentially transformative force corrupted by white oppressors' unwillingness to live up to its ideals.

It is not a hopeful note to end on—for the poem or for this project. Yet it is a powerful reminder in general terms of the ongoing relevance and power of sentimental literature and activism—of the ways, more specifically, in which sentiment and sympathy can both act as revolutionary forces and serve to mask or soften angrier, more subversive currents. It is a reminder, in short, that the poet-activists this project has considered, though of course products of their time, left a lasting mark on the interlinked realms of literature and justice-seeking.

Our final poet, Ruth Margaret Muskrat, echoes and extends this reminder, ushering the figures who people this project into the twentieth century. Born in 1897 and remembered for her work in education and Indigenous rights activism as well as her poetry, Muskrat (Cherokee) allows us to conclude our exploration where it began—with the transatlantic, cross-racial dialogue that is ultimately at its heart. We began with Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the profound effect her "Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" had on Charlotte Forten Grimke. So, too, we will end with Barrett Browning, this time considering her influence on Muskrat—or perhaps more precisely, Muskrat's use of Barrett Browning. Muskrat paid explicit homage to Barrett Browning in her sequence "Sonnets from the Cherokee (May Mrs. Browning Pardon Me)," of

course alluding in her playfully self-deprecatory title to Barrett Browning's iconic "Sonnets from the Portuguese." Her affectionate nod to Barrett Browning, and her interest in historical events from Barrett Browning's era, serves as a fitting final tribute to the ongoing value and power of the community of forgotten women poet-activists who inspired not only Muskrat but this project, too.

First published in 1922 in the University of Oklahoma Magazine, Muskrat's four-sonnet sequence is not activist literature—though it is literature written by an activist. Her "Sonnets from the Cherokee" are love poems, pure and simple. The sequence's first sonnet—and arguably its strongest—reads as follows:

My heart is like an opal, flashing fire  
 And flaming gleams of pointed light  
 At thy approach; or lying cold and white  
 When thou art gone; robbed of a dream's desire  
 Is left moon-white and dull; no darting flame  
 Or sapphire gleam to mark a sweet suspense.  
 But only still, benumbed indifference  
 Unwaked at thy soft whisper of my name.  
 Come now, I tire of waiting to know love;  
 Teach me to know indifference white and dim  
 For I would drain life's cup of joy or strife;  
 Would play to the lost chord the vibrant hymn  
 That passion sings; my heart lifted above  
 Dull apathy; pulsating; knowing Life.<sup>13</sup>

This poem, like the rest of the poems in the sequence, is less a direct response to or revision of Barrett Browning's work than a straightforward recognition, perhaps even celebration, of felt kinship. (Recall what Charlotte Forten Grimke so enthusiastically proclaimed of Barrett Browning: "I may never see her face, but the thought of her makes my heart beat quicker, and I feel that she is indeed my *friend*.") Nor is the poem particularly "Cherokee," its Indigenous provenance apparent only in its title. Yet as the sequence continues, the speaker is revealed to be centrally concerned with the passage of time and interconnectedness across "ages," as we see in its second sonnet:

A thousand, thousand years ago I lived  
 And waited for your coming then, as now,  
 Before the wailing waters taught me how  
 To weep; nor never knew how sad I grieved,  
 Nor with what empty pain my soul, bereaved  
 Through need of you, lifted its throbbing brow;  
 Until the softly whispered plighted vow,  
 Of sighing trees, from branches silver-leaved  
 Swept through my soul and waked me from my sleep.  
 Since then I've roamed a thousand worlds, I think  
 Seeking your face, too hungry souled to wait  
 For you to come to me; too sad to weep:

While chains of ages pass me, link by link;  
Knowing that I shall find you soon or late.<sup>14</sup>

Here, the speaker's trademark melancholy takes the form of a preoccupation with times past, from its opening "thousand, thousand years ago" to its closing "chains of ages" that "pass [her], link by link." This final image is an apt one for Muskrat's place in this project. However obliquely, she does indeed invoke a "chain of ages" in which she joins Barrett Browning as a "link."

Muskrat's retrospective tendency continues, as seen in another 1922 poem, "The Trail of Tears," in which Indigenous themes are evident not only in the title but throughout the content of the poem. The brief poem reads in full:

In the night they shriek and moan  
In the dark the tall pines moan  
As they guard the dismal trail.  
The Cherokees say it is the groan,  
Every shriek and echoed groan  
Of their forefathers that fell  
With broken hopes and bitter fears  
On that weary trail of tears.

Broken hopes and broken hearts  
A quivering mass of broken hearts  
Were driven over the trail.  
Stifling back the groan that starts  
Smothering back the moan that starts  
Full four thousand fell;  
But still the Great Spirit his people bears  
As they travel the trail of tears.

From the homes their fathers made  
From the graves the tall trees shade  
For the sake of greed and gold,  
The Cherokees were forced to go  
To a land they did not know;  
And Father Time or wisdom old  
Cannot erase, through endless years  
The memory of the trail of tears.<sup>15</sup>

As its final lines make clear, the poem is not about the horrific events of the Trail of Tears as much as its lingering aftermath—the never-to-be "erase[d]" "memory of the trail of tears" (23-24). Even the poem's structure, based as it is upon repeated words taking the place of conventional rhymes, is fundamentally concerned with how that which we have known and experienced remains ever with us—how past shapes present, continually revisited and recontextualized. This, ultimately, is precisely what Muskrat's poetry accomplishes. Through invoking Elizabeth Barrett Browning and through returning to the history that poets like Lydia

Huntley Sigourney documented as it occurred, she adds another "link" to the "chain of ages," the heir to a vital lineage the memory of which, too, cannot be blotted out by the passage of time to which she so often alludes.

The phrase that echoes most persistently through this poem, and the one from which, of course, it takes its title, "The Trail of Tears," was a relatively new one when the poem was published. Its first recorded use in English in the context of Indian removal came in 1914, just eight years before the 1922 publication of Muskrat's poem, when Rachel Caroline Eaton noted that "the road the exiles traveled on [their] fateful journey was known to the Indians by a name in their language meaning the 'Trail of Tears'" and looked forward to the day when "some great poet of humanity" would "find in the tragic story of the expatriation of these children of the forest the theme for an epic or a drama surpassing grandeur and pathos which may stir all mankind to pity for their sorrows and their virtues."<sup>16</sup> "The Trail of Tears" went on to become the standard designation for the forced removal of the Cherokee and Choctaw nations in the early 1920s in Oklahoma, precisely where Muskrat lived and wrote. It comes as no surprise, then, that the poem's many references to "The Trail of Tears" are among the first recorded uses of the phrase, a connection reinforced when later in 1922, mere months after the poem's publication, Helen Hagler reprinted it in *The Lyre*, literary magazine of sorority Alpha Chi Omega, citing it as "one of [Muskrat's] most characteristic poems," as representative of her "many verses on Indian themes," and linking it with her more overtly political work as "student of national and international problems, as traveler, social worker, [and] educator."<sup>17</sup> Praising Muskrat herself as "one of the foremost women of her race," Hagler understood the poet's influential status and the importance of the "Trail of Tears" poem in particular.

Tears have charted a different sort of trail across this project and the field of sentimental-political poetry it has explored. The poems we have analyzed are replete with images of tears—cleansing tears that redeem and bring together, bitter tears of shadowy, nameless slave women "weep[ing]" as they curse, tears "turned to sparks of fire" that galvanized movements for change. Tears, then, for us have been always public, always political. Ruth Margaret Muskrat reminds us of this truth and also renders it yet more explicit. With her poetic reflection on the Trail of Tears and her role in popularizing its painfully evocative titular phrase, she has brought tears irrevocably into the realm of political discourse—into the language in which we retell the centuries of racial oppression our poets have chronicled. Thus, even as the popularity of sentimentality waned, its most potent symbol and enduring core tenet continued to shape poetics and politics alike.

And with that, Muskrat's "chain of ages" continues, moving forward, "link by link," into the present day. Author-activists carry on the long tradition of turning to poetry to seek social and political change. In 2019, Joy Harjo, another Native American poet from Oklahoma, became America's first Indigenous poet laureate, recognized not only for her written poetry but for her musical album entitled, "Red Dreams, A Trail Beyond Tears."<sup>18</sup> In 2021, Amanda Gorman took the world by storm when, at President Joe Biden's inauguration, she read a poem based in part on her own story as "a skinny Black girl, / Descended from slaves and raised by a single mother" who "can dream of becoming president / Only to find herself reciting for one."<sup>19</sup> Mere weeks after her triumphal inauguration appearance, Gorman took to Twitter to remind us of another young Black poet who "recit[ed]" for a president. She wrote, "Whenever I feel unable to write, I remember that Thomas Jefferson singled out young black poet Phillis Wheatley with shallow disdain: 'Among the blacks is misery enough, God knows, but no poetry.' Then I crack my knuckles and get to work."<sup>20</sup> Gorman's invocation of the racist words of founding father

Jefferson felt particularly poignant voiced in the wake of much of the most egregious state-sanctioned violence against people of color in living memory. Much has changed, her bold refutation of Jefferson reminds us as she says outright what Wheatley could only intimate, yet too much has stayed the same. The criticisms leveled at Wheatley are not, in the end, so very different, from the words of Gorman's detractors, in response to whom the above-quoted Tweet was composed.<sup>21</sup> There is much work left to be done—and we can look to poets like Wheatley, and like every poet profiled in this project, to guide us as we move forward.

The pleas for compassion in the poems we have considered may move us as contemporary readers, but perhaps still more importantly, their questions shape and presage ours. Their conversations are there for us to join, the contradictions with which they grappled there for us to wrestle with, as we take up the causes they held so dear and worked for with such endless dedication. And so, like Amanda Gorman, we crack our knuckles and get to work.

## Notes

1. Twain, Mark. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Ed. Thomas Cooley. New York: Norton, 1998.
2. Ibid.
3. Tompkins, Jane. *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.
4. Harper, Frances E. W. *Frederick Douglass's Paper*. Rochester, January 27, 1854. Lines 1-16. Hereafter cited in text.
5. Foster, Frances Smith. *Written by Herself: Literary Production by African American Women, 1746-1892*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993.
6. *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. Eds. William L. Andrews et al. New York: Norton, 2003.
7. Paula Bernat Bennett, *Poets in the Public Sphere: The Emancipatory Project of American Women's Poetry, 1800-1900*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003.
8. Stowe, Harriet Beecher. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Ontario: Broadview Press, 2009. 100. Hereafter cited in text.
9. Harper, Frances E. W. "Aunt Chloe" et al. *Sketches of Southern Life*. Philadelphia: Merrihew and Son, 1872. Lines 1-24. Hereafter cited in text.
10. See Douglass, Sarah Mapps. "A Mother's Love." In *The Portable Nineteenth-Century African American Women Writers*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates and Hollis Robbins. New York: Penguin, 2017.
11. Johnson, E. Pauline (Tekahionwake). "A Cry from an Indian Wife." *The White Wampum*. London: John Lane, 1895. Hereafter cited in text.
12. Strong-Boag, Veronica and Carole Gerson. *Paddling Her Own Canoe: The Time and Texts of E. Pauline Johnson (Tekahionwake)*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000. 149.
13. Muskrat, Ruth Margaret. "Sonnets from the Cherokee (May Mrs. Browning Pardon Me)." *University of Oklahoma Magazine*, Vol. 10, 1922.
14. Ibid.
15. Muskrat, Ruth Margaret. "The Trail of Tears." *University of Oklahoma Magazine*, Vol. 10, 1922.

16. Eaton, Rachel Caroline. *John Ross and the Cherokee Indians*. Menasha, Wisc.: George Banta Publishing Co., 1914.
17. Hagler, Helen. *The Lyre of Alpha Phi*, Vol. 26, 1922. 412.
18. See "Joy Harjo Becomes the First Native American U.S. Poet Laureate," NPR, June 19, 2019, and Joy Harjo, "Red Dreams, A Trail Beyond Tears," 2010.
19. Gorman, Amanda. "The Hill We Climb: An Inaugural Poem for the Country." New York: Viking Books, 2021.
20. Gorman, Amanda (@TheAmandaGorman). "Tweet Message." Twitter, February 1, 2021. URL: [twitter.com/theadamagorman/status/1356346736915095553?s=21](https://twitter.com/theadamagorman/status/1356346736915095553?s=21).
21. See Sinha, Manisha, "Opinion: What This 18th Century Poet Reveals About Amanda Gorman's Success." CNN: Feb 1, 2021. URL: [cnn.com/2021/02/01/opinions/amanda-gorman-summons-phillis-wheatley-sinha](https://www.cnn.com/2021/02/01/opinions/amanda-gorman-summons-phillis-wheatley-sinha). Gorman's Tweet was in response to this article, which in turn was a response to the Jefferson-esque criticisms found in Melanie McDonagh's piece "Amanda Gorman was Let Down by a Bad Poem," *The Spectator*: Jan 21, 2021. URL: [spectator.co.uk/article/amanda-gorman-was-let-down-by-a-bad-poem](https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/amanda-gorman-was-let-down-by-a-bad-poem).



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