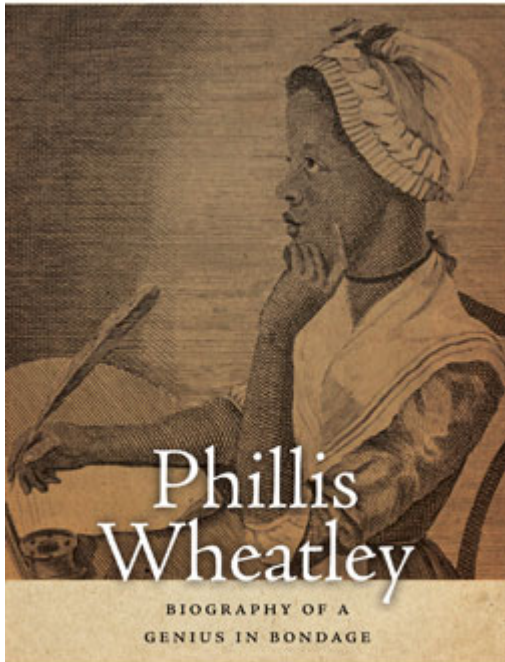
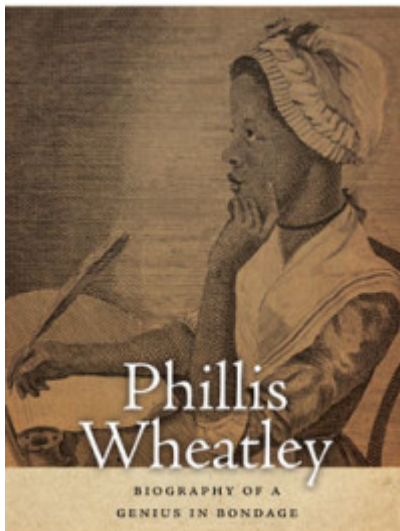


# The life of Phillis Wheatley, finally!



Vincent Carretta

Who is Phillis Wheatley? I have often wondered about the possible answers to this question. Sure, I already know that she's recognized as the first black woman to publish ever. I have read the highly anthologized "On Being Brought from Africa to America" and questioned just how this enslaved black woman could love God and America so much. I have stared upon the frontispiece and looked closely at the brief autobiographical note that John Wheatley writes for her collection, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773). Because I have read these introductory remarks, I know that she was a "Negro Servant to Mr. John Wheatley, of Boston;" not long after her voyage from Africa to America, she learned to read and write in English. At a young age, she wrote poems and letters, too. These simple facts of geographic origin and intellectual ability narrate the life of a woman whose travels—in print and in person—crisscrossed the Atlantic and found her in conversation with the likes of Voltaire, George Washington, and of course, the 18 men of the famed attestation that preceded her poems. But this is all; this is where Wheatley's story begins and ends, with a vague account of a birth, a voyage, and a compilation of poems and several letters that do little to tell us who Phillis Wheatley is. Every time I read through her collected writings, it seems her story ends rather abruptly on the last pages of my Penguin edition (or Margaretta Odell's brief and troublesome account of Wheatley's life). Hers was a story that left me with more questions than answers. That is, until now.



Vincent Carretta

Vincent Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011. 279 pp., \$29.95.

Vincent Carretta's *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage* challenges the presumption that where there is a lack of information, there is no story or at least not enough evidence to tell one. This first full-length biography explores the question, "who is Phillis Wheatley?" as it gathers and sifts through the ephemeral and quotidian stuff—the tax records, private letters, broadsides, poems, advertisements, subscription lists—required to answer it. It tells the story of a woman whose fame scholars and students know well but whose life remains largely unknown. Carretta takes up the questions that have puzzled us over the years: "Where did she come from? How did Wheatley overcome the odds against her to achieve transatlantic fame? How active a role did she play in the network of associations that included many of the most important people in North American and British military, political, religious, and social life? What more can be found about Phillis Wheatley's husband, John Peters?" (x) He thoughtfully narrates his answers, careful to speculate responsibly when necessary. The result accomplishes that which seemed impossible given the three paragraphs, short poems, and brief letters that archive her life.

Despite the limited extant documents penned in Wheatley's hand or published in her name, Carretta finds her almost everywhere, in church records, letters, newspaper articles, subscription lists, and elsewhere. With each chapter titled after a verse or phrase from a letter, Carretta tracks her name through these records from the time she disembarks off the ship (*Phillis*—it's the same name!) from the west coast of Africa until her obituary appears in the *Independent Chronicle and Universal Advertiser* some thirty years later. Carretta reconstructs the many missing pieces of Wheatley's life. He finds her date of arrival to Boston (July 11, 1761), her church home and date of baptism (August 18, 1771, at Old South), her earliest writing, her location during the revolution and thereafter, her thoughts about London and her closest friend

(shout-out to Obour Tanner). He makes note of Wheatley's choice to "live in sin" with her eventual husband, John Peters. He finds the dates, places, and persons that shape this story. Take the example of Wheatley's friend, Obour Tanner. Between 1772 and 1779, these two African women exchange letters that document the mundane realities of their lives and their religious faith in particular. Wheatley's surviving letters don't say much about who Tanner is, yet each letter evidences their "increasingly affectionate epistolary relationship" (43). Carretta takes up the mystery of Tanner and locates her in church records in Newport, Rhode Island. He plots their points of connection, maybe through her master, "James Tanner's link with Boston" (43). Carretta not only sheds light on Wheatley's friendship with Obour Tanner, he also redeems the name of John Peters, formerly the no-count husband that had done Wheatley wrong. Carretta offers an alternative ending to Wheatley's life. Instead of a dead-beat, Carretta tells the story of a hard-working man who provides for Wheatley as best he can as a shopkeeper (177) and a laborer (184). Peters sues those that owe him money, in particular "Joseph Scott, a Boston merchant and ironmaster" even though he is never able to recuperate his losses (177). Thus, Carretta excavates the lives of two people, Tanner and John Peters, that speak to the dimensionality of Wheatley's life. She wasn't just a servant girl to the Wheatley family. She was also a friend to Tanner and a live-in girlfriend and later, wife, to John Peters.

Carretta anchors the facts of Wheatley's life to the histories (of Boston, of London, of the Atlantic world, of the Wheatley family, and others) that take shape around the poet. Where he cannot find an answer, he constructs the spaces within which she must have moved and lived. For example, in chapter five, "A Farewell to America," Carretta rebuilds the sociopolitical climate of the London to which Wheatley travelled: the racial demographics, the size of the town, and the most important issues of the day. In so doing, Carretta situates Wheatley within a diasporic space through which he charts her movements and the growth of her transnational network that included abolitionist Granville Sharp, the Countess of Huntingdon, Israel Maudit, and Benjamin Franklin. In London, Wheatley has the opportunity to reap the benefits of the *Somerset* case (which granted freedom to the enslaved brought to England from the colonies). Carretta speculates that this case may have prompted Wheatley's trip (109). Though she does return to the colonies without her freedom guaranteed, Carretta demonstrates the manner in which Wheatley uses both her words and her movements in a particular space to shape the course of her life.

Where we cannot find her name, Carretta asks us to imagine her as she participates in the mundane makings of history, namely, going to church, reading, traveling overseas, or writing letters to a friend. In chapter two, "Thoughts on the Work of Providence," he documents her religious education and its importance to her development as a poet. He provides a brief history of religious practice in Boston, and then speaks to the "extraordinary opportunity" that Wheatley has because of her faith and the faith of the Wheatleys (37). Together with Carretta, we become responsible speculators in that journey through time and space and into the center of a colonial and later

an American marketplace of ideas and culture. There, Phillis Wheatley is the poet, the servant, the slave, the churchgoer, or the wife. Carretta takes a woman whose life once existed outside of the archive and remembers a place for her at the heart of the makings of an American literary and national tradition. He reminds us that she was there when a nation was made. She wrote her poems from the front lines and made meaning out of a revolution that used the language of slavery and freedom to free itself from colonial bondage, but not her or those who looked like her. She continued to write even as her husband went to and from debtor's prison and as her fame waned. Sure, she made a literary tradition, but Vincent Carretta asks us to consider, even if only for a moment, the life that made her.

I like this book. I like this book a lot because of the audacious manner in which it finds Wheatley wherever her name may appear and in whatever form it may take (Phillis, Phyllis, Wheatly, Wheetly, etc.). It does not seem deterred by the limits of the archive and instructs us to consider new approaches to lives that seem to evade our need for clear documentation. Even as I celebrate the 279 pages of her life, I acknowledge what Carretta cannot and does not do. He cannot make Phillis Wheatley speak where and when she is silent or lost to time. Many of the records and the extant materials that feature her name do not leave us with her voice, penned or otherwise. Carretta uses those records, which document her presence, but they don't give us her thoughts, reactions, or even the mundane intentions that guided her days. Herein lie the flaws of the archive and the stories it holds. I don't hold this against Carretta's biography. He leaves us with a point of entry, a place upon which to build and to speculate (albeit responsibly) about the life of a woman who changed the world in which she lived with the power of her word.

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Tara Bynum is an assistant professor of English at Towson University. She is currently working on a book manuscript that examines the curious relationship between reading hearts and reading books in early African-American literature. Her articles on Phillis Wheatley and pleasure have appeared in [Commonplace](#) and [The Feminist Wire](#).