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# Historical Sisters: Black Feminist Actions Across History and Literary Studies

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# HISTORICAL SISTERS: BLACK FEMINIST ACTIONS ACROSS HISTORY AND LITERARY STUDIES

by

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ABSTRACT

Historical Sisters: Black Feminist Actions Across History and Literary Studies

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Jazz A. Milligan

Advisor: James Wilson, Ph. D

This thesis seeks to understand how the actions of Black women from the past have inspired the modern Black female literary movement. This thesis focuses on three historical women: Phillis Wheatley, Elizabeth Freeman, and Cathay Williams, and their literary sisters: bell hooks, Barbara Smith, and Patricia Hill Collins. By viewing the lives of these historical women through a modern-day lens, we can understand how their actions created a ripple effect that Black women are still discussing today. Black feminism did not start in a vacuum, and the actions of everyday Black women have pushed us forward to being more accepting of different ideas and understanding of being a woman. This thesis is a part of the ongoing Black feminist literature archive that continues to grow and challenge negative notions of Black women. These three historical Black women went against the status quo and challenged the normative thinking of their respective times.

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## Introduction

When scholars discuss the contributions of black women in American society, they usually write about well-known figures such as Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Rosa Parks, Angela Davis, and other women. They rarely focus on the women who did not make grand speeches or do dangerous activities in the name of liberating their people. Instead, there were women who used their voices through different mediums such as writing, legal cases, or using their bodies physically to liberate themselves from the oppressive patriarchy and uplift the legacy of black women. Women like Phillis Wheatley, Cathay Williams, and Elizabeth Freeman all went against the societal norms of their times and put themselves into situations where there were none like them before.

My thesis focuses on these three women and the literary sisters that they each have. Each woman has a unique story and historical importance for their contributions to changing gender and racial expectations. They also have a unique connection to Black feminist writers who have articulated their own experiences and created an understanding about the complexities of Black women's lives. The first woman is Phillis Wheatley, known as the first African American poet. Writers and scholars have researched Wheatley's life and impact through her poetry, yet Wheatley's accomplishment of publishing a book of poetry should not go unnoticed. Scholars have not gone far enough into researching how Wheatley penetrated the white, male world of literature and challenged racist and sexist stereotypes about black women. My thesis fills in the gaps in the study of Wheatley and spotlight how she put herself in the world of literature and made a place for herself as a black woman in the white realm of literature. There have been many critics of

Wheatley who state that she steeped her work in Christian ideas and for her lack of racial discussion in her work. With my thesis, I detail how Wheatley's poetry was her own protest against the white, male literary establishment and it showcased her intelligence and understanding of her world, which was radical for her time. Her poetic narrative paved the way for other Black writers such as Harriet Jacobs, Frederick Douglass, and others to write their stories and created the new genre of Black Literature.

The second chapter in my thesis centers on Cathay Williams. Williams was a former slave who disguised herself as a man and joined the Army after the Civil War. Her life and story are examples of how she went against the traditional gender stereotypes that were placed upon her during slavery and created a new life for herself. Unlike Wheatley, there is not much information about Williams, so my research not only establishes a biographical story for Williams, but also an academic lens for her life and its impact on the history of Black women. My chapter also studies Williams's life after military service and how living once again as a woman highlighted the racial and gender roadblocks black women faced in the post-bellum period.

Following the chapters on Wheatley and Williams, the third chapter centers on the life of Elizabeth Freeman. Freeman was a female slave who sued the Massachusetts legislature, in the case *Brom and Bett v. Ashley* (1781), which argued that slavery went against the state constitution and won. My thesis details Freeman's life and how her lawsuit established that black women were both human and women entitled to freedom. Slavery stripped Black women of their humanity and their womanhood, relegating them sub-human status. When Freeman sued Massachusetts for her freedom, she declared she was a human being and equal to the same liberties as any other white person. As with Williams, there is not much written about the life of Freeman, so my thesis dives into her life and the court case that granted her freedom and helped to abolish slavery in

Massachusetts. I use bibliographical and academic sources to view Freeman as a woman who went against the US legal system, which historically has disenfranchised Black Americans, to assert her right to freedom.

Literary Review

For my thesis, I use bibliographical sources to establish a narrative for the women I am writing about. The chapter on Wheatley uses Henry Louis Gates's book *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley: America's First Black Poet and her Encounters with the Founding Fathers* (2009) Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious, and Moral* to establish a background of Wheatley's life and publication history. To add upon this work I use bell hooks's chapter "Oppositional Gaze" from her book *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992), and a blog by Babette Thomas from Brown University titled, "A Black Gaze: An Oppositional Gaze or In Opposition to the Gaze?". hooks's work delves into how black women used their "oppositional gaze" to upend the white, male gaze that permeates society. In her work, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, hooks discusses how black women have an "Oppositional Gaze" " when viewing films and this logic can apply to Phillis Wheatley's work. Wheatley's work is part of the "oppositional gaze" because she wrote from her perspective and values which were against the white, male narrative that permeated literature. She used her life experiences to form poetry that addresses the same issues that her white counterparts are writing about. In addition, I use black feminist texts such as Geneva Moore's chapter, "Phillis Wheatley's Seminaked Body as Symbol and Metaphor," which details how Wheatley's body is symbolic of a new interpretation of femininity for black women. With these sources, I argue that Wheatley's work gave readers a black woman's view on matters and, whether her work was provocative enough, that she published poetry was enough to disrupt the white literary world.

In my chapter about Williams, I apply several feminist, sociological, gender studies, and theoretical sources to construct a complete biography and view her life through a black feminist lens. I use the article “The Cathay Williams Story”" from the *St. Louis Daily Times* to base most of my biographical information on Williams because the article is an interview that was conducted with Williams herself. For a critical race studies foundation, Patricia Hill Collins’s book Black Feminist Thought, strengthens my argument that Williams established new definitions of blackness and femininity outside the white patriarchy post-Civil War. Collins’s work stems from the mainstream feminist movement leaving out Black women and the Black power movement not acknowledging gender disparities. Collins’s work connects how Cathay Williams used the disguise of a man to gain access to the racial and gender segregated U.S. Army and how her infiltration showed that Black women are more than the biases put on them. The sociological sources I use for this chapter are Michael Hatt’s “Making a Man of Him: Masculinity and the Black Body in Mid-Nineteenth-Century American Sculpture” which discusses what created masculinity in the nineteenth century. Another article I analyze is Deniz Kandiyoti’s “Bargaining with Patriarchy” ", which delves into how women who live within strict gender constructs assert their independence while adhering to gender rules. This applies to my argument that Williams’s choice of living as a man was both going against gender stereotypes and simultaneously adhering to them to provide a cover for her gender switch. My thesis addresses how Williams's choice to live as a man defied the white patriarchy that only saw Black women in domestic spheres.

The chapter on Freeman creates a picture of her life and her impact. To create that picture, I have the *Brom and Bett v. Ashley* case, articles about the legal impact of Freeman’s case, and biographical sources that establish basic information about Freeman. The work of Barbara Smith, black feminist scholar, whose work deals with the issues of black women’s experiences and how

they have asserted their womanhood and blackness against the white patriarchy that tries to deny their agency, provides the theoretical lens. Smith's work directly correlates to Freeman's suit because Freeman fought to not be property but a free individual, an idea that black women continue to fight for. Smith's book *The Truth That Never Hurts: Writings on Race, Gender, and Freedom*, gives insight into the creation of Black Feminism and is essential to my argument that Freeman's suit for her freedom signified the difference between black and white women and how she corrected it. Also, the book *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, edited by Smith, features chapters that help to conceptualize the way we look at Freeman and how Black feminists wrote about themes that we can see in Freeman's life.

To summarize my work, I look at the ways these three women are similar and how their lives mirror the way that Black women have been treated throughout history. Wheatley's and Williams's lives both had more tragic endings, but Freeman's had a more pleasant one. I discuss this and how Black women today are carrying the torch that these women passed on and what it means for the Black community today. This thesis will hopefully contribute to an expansion on writing about unknown Black women.

This thesis contributes to the ongoing black feminist scholarship that seeks to tell the contributions of black women towards gender and racial issues. My chapters on Williams and Freeman specifically create a biographical and scholastic foundations future scholars can build upon. My chapter on Wheatley continues the reintroduction of Wheatley into United States history and her contribution to the Black literature canon. All three women that I highlight deserve to be acknowledged for their contribution to American history and have their place in the black feminist archive along with their historical sisters.

## Chapter 2:

## Phillis Wheatley and the Perseverance of Black Female Writers

Thy various works, imperial queen, we see,
How bright their forms! how deck'd with pomp by thee!
Thy wond'rous acts in beauteous order stand,
And all attest how potent is thine hand.
-Phillis Wheatley, "On Imagination"

In March 2020 on the cusp of a global pandemic and racial unrest, poet Honorée Fanonne Jeffers published a book on Phillis Wheatley (1753- 1784) titled, *The Age of Phillis*. The book sought to give readers a different view of Wheatley that other books have. Since the publication of her book *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* in 1773, Wheatley has been both praised and critiqued because of her personal life and work. Wheatley's life as of late has become popular because of the renewed interest in Black history, particularly Black women's history. Books such as Jeffers's, *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley: America's First Black Poet and Her Encounters with the Founding Fathers* (2003) by Henry Louis Gates, *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage* (2011) by Vincent Carretta, and others have been written about Wheatley and her work since her death in 1784. The changing conversation surrounding Wheatley is indicative of the shift in how we talk about historical figures, especially Black women. Before the twentieth century, Wheatley was spoken of negatively and accusations of her work not having a strong abolitionist theme or not showing pride in her African heritage spread frequently. Since the birth of Black feminist studies in the 1970s, there has been a more sympathetic approach to Wheatley and her collection of poetry. The attitude toward Wheatley now is of praise and respect as a foremother of Black women literature and as a Black woman who stood behind her work in the face of criticism. Wheatley's legacy is that of a Black woman writer who entered the white, male

literary landscape and carved out a space for herself. In doing so she changed the narrative that Black people were incapable of critical thinking and established a Black female literature archive that continues today with writers such as bell hooks.

In this chapter, I will examine how Wheatley's life and writing connects to the work of Black feminist bell hooks (1952-2021). Although Wheatley and hooks's lives seem so far apart, they are both part of a continuum of Black female writers who dare to challenge the literary genre. Wheatley's work helped to establish a Black American literary tradition that was continued by Harriet Jacobs, Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, Angela Davis, hooks, and many others. While Wheatley and hooks wrote in two different styles, their writing gave readers a new way of looking at the Black female viewpoint. With this chapter, as with the other chapters in this thesis, I will be creating a bridge between historical figures and modern Black feminist scholars. By analyzing Wheatley's life through the work of hooks we can determine how past Wheatley figures factor into the current Black feminist lexicon. With the publication of her poetry, Wheatley changed the image of the poetry genre and pushed against the white literary narrative. Poetry as a genre was dominated with white men before Wheatley. This is not to say that other non-white people were not writing poetry, but Wheatley was the first African poet to gain the same amount of attention and recognition. She defined the logic that Africans could not write, thus establishing an African literary narrative.

The question remains of why write about Wheatley at all. Her work is not as well-known as other writings by former slaves, but if offers a different perspective on slave life and Black women during the American Revolution. Her story is not one of extreme physical hardship but one of quiet defiance and perseverance through art. Black scholars have often pushed aside Wheatley's accomplishments because she did not exhibit strong abolitionist tendencies in her work. In 1974,

Black scholar Eleanor Smith wrote the article, “Phillis Wheatley: A Black Perspective” where she was less critical than her peers but still held Wheatley to a certain standard. Smith wrote,

> Phillis Wheatley did not help herself by following all the dictates of Whites nor did she contribute to the well-being of black people of her time. Her poetic talents deserve recognition, but it is unfortunate that this poetess did not channel her energies toward the benefit of those who, like herself, had been taken from Africa. (407)

Here Smith states the opinion of many other Black scholars during the nineteen sixties and seventies. For the longest time Black scholars did not include Wheatley in their lists of notable Black authors. However, with the Black feminist movement that started in the seventies and continues to this day, there has been a new viewpoint on Wheatley and therefore we need to write about her. If there can be multiple interpretations of various historical figures, then Wheatley can have multiple incarnations.

Wheatley’s background and circumstances can help understand how she started to write poetry. Born in what is known today as Senegal in 1753, Wheatley was taken from her home and put on the slave ship Phillis. After she arrived on the shores of Massachusetts, she was purchased by John Wheatley for his wife Susanna and named after the ship she was carried on. There is not much information on Wheatley’s life pre-enslavement and Wheatley herself did not write about it because she was so young when she was taken from her home. All we know is where she was born and when she came to the colonies, there is no information about her parents or relatives, but we do know that she does not see her biological family ever again. Due to her demure deposition and high intelligence, Phillis was quickly separated from the other slaves and given preferential treatment. Under the tutoring of John and Susanna’s daughter Mary, Phillis learned how to read and write in English, Greek, and Latin. Phillis’s poetry was inspired by Homer, Virgil, and Alexander Pope.

When Phillis was 20, her masters started pursuing donations to have Phillis' collection of poetry published. Phillis had a few poems and letters published in local newspapers prior to her book publication. Once her book, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, was released in England in the summer of 1773 and in America in November of that year, there were calls for her to be emancipated. The Wheatleys emancipated Phillis in November and that is when her luck ran out. As Gates writes, "Wheatley's freedom enslaved her to a life of hardship" (68). After her emancipation, Wheatley struggled to find benefactors for her second book of poetry. One could conclude that the white benefactors she had previously were more interested in funding a book by a slave but not funding a book for a free woman. Plus, she no longer had the support of her former masters; Susanna died in 1774 and John died in 1778, which meant she no longer had white people who could attest to others about her work. This is not to say that she needed them, but in that period, it would not have been easy for a free Black woman to get a book published without having a white person advocate on your behalf to get funding. Without funding for her book, Wheatley took domestic jobs to support herself and her family. She married a free Black man in 1778 named John Peters and had two children, both did not survive infancy. After her husband was imprisoned for debt in 1784, Wheatley died on December 5, 1784, at the age of 31.

The work of Black feminists today often looks back at the work of other Black women to understand how we have evolved our voice and how to interpret past work. Black feminist writer, critic, and scholar bell hooks has influenced countless other Black feminists and challenged the way we view race, gender, class, and history. Born Gloria Jean Watkins in Hopkinsville, Kentucky, hooks began writing at a young age and took the lowercase pen name inspired by the names of her mother and grandmother. The lowercase is meant to highlight "the importance of the substance of her writing as opposed to who she is." hooks received her B.A from Stanford

University in 1973, her M.A from the University of Wisconsin in 1976 and her Ph. D from U.C Santa Cruz in 1983. She is the author of 30 books with some books becoming staples of feminist literature such as *Ain't I a Woman* (1981), *Feminism is for Everybody* (2000), *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), and many more. The main theme in hooks's work is the liberation from white centered thinking and teaching. She often writes about her life and how her experience as a Black woman in America has impacted her viewpoint. hooks also takes inspiration from other writers and activists such as Sojourner Truth, Martin Luther King Jr., Brazilian writer Paulo Freire, and Malcolm X. Her writing has influenced many women and today hooks is considered a staple in Black feminist writing.

One of her most influential books, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992), discusses how films and other media represent race and ethnicity and how it these ties into current American culture. The essay "The Oppositional Gaze" from that book details how Black women have had to disassociate from media, which inherently has a white, male gaze, to enjoy it. The idea that media has a white, male gaze goes back to film critic Laura Mulvey's article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" from 1975 where she states that,

> In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. (364)

hooks argues in her piece that Black women have created an "oppositional gaze" in media to reflect their viewpoints and make space for themselves in media. She focuses on the art of filmmaking and how the stereotypes of Black women are reflective of their poor treatment by society and their oversexualization. hooks advocates for more Black feminist film critique and more Black female

directors so their work can counteract the male gaze. She understands that when Black women enter white spaces, their presence upends the status quo and start conversations that expose inequality. She states, "We do more than resist. We create alternative texts that are not solely reactions. As critical spectators, black women participate in a broad range of looking relations, contest, resist, revision, interrogate, and invent on multiple levels" (128). When Black women are put in spaces where they have not been before (film, literature, etc.) it affects the audience. The audience is now forced to see the world from a different perspective that does not reinforce traditional ideas, but instead holds them up to a mirror for self-reflection. Therefore, Wheatley's poetry was important, it allowed for an alternative perspective to be had and questioned traditional notions of the time.

Wheatley's poetry was controversial at the time because she was an African slave writing in a genre that did not want her. Before her, there were no known African poets in the colonies and other Africans had not published a book either. Poetry was seen critical writing and Africans were not considered critical thinkers. With the publication of Wheatley's book, the public was given a new perspective on colonial life and religious beliefs. Even though her work was not explicitly abolitionist or what we would call feminist, her work was an introduction to African literature and what it could be. Examining Wheatley through the lens of hooks's oppositional gaze ideology, we can state that Wheatley did two things. The first thing was giving the reader poetry from the African slave standpoint, forcing them to reconsider what poetry is. The second thing was challenging their notions of who could be a poet. When Wheatley was published, people could not believe that an African had written that work. It went against their preconceived notion that poetry was written from the position of white people, specifically white men. With this new voice in poetry, Wheatley changed the way poetry was received. No longer did white men have the say in

what is or is not poetic. She redefined what one could write poetry about. Most of Wheatley's poems were written about people whom she had met or had heard of. Some of her poems discussed topics such as virtue and slavery. Wheatley wrote about topics or people that she felt were important to her, going against the notion that only white men could determine what was worthy of writing about. Her work gave the readers the "oppositional gaze" that was missing in poetry. Wheatley's work introduced African focused poetry which was radical for a time when slavery persisted across the colonies and the world. The work of African people could finally be put on a national stage and be recognized as valid.

Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* was released to mixed reviews but highlighted the possibility of African American writing in the world. This book was the first foray into public writing for Wheatley and her book made her a major literary star. The book itself starts off with a letter from John Wheatley certifying that Phillis wrote the following texts, again showing how Black people needed the cosign of white people to gain entry to the public sphere. The topic of the poems varies from Phillis praising several officials to commenting on topics and news of her time. Poems was first released in England and the English people could not believe that and African had written those words. The book's popularity spurred conversation over the possibility of Africans writing and upended some previous notions that Africans were not intelligent, let alone write poetry. The most famous poem that came from the book was "On Being Brought from Africa to America," which told of Wheatley's perspective of growing up as a slave. This poem was and still is used to market her as agreeing with the perspective that slavery was beneficial to Africans. In the last two lines of the poem she wrote, "Remember Christians, Negros, black as Cain / May be refin'd [sic] and join th' angelic train" (18). These two lines represent two ideas. The first being that white people should remember that Black people were present at the

beginning of time with the reference of Cain the son of Adam and Eve. Since most of the events of the Bible take place in the Middle East, the people that are referenced in the Bible were most likely darker in skin tone and not as fair as white people of the time would believe. The second idea being that Black people can become "civilized" once they turn to Christianity, a rhetoric that was frequently stated during slavery. Although what Wheatley wrote can be interpreted as being pro-forced conversion for slaves, she was writing from her perspective: that religion helped her life and probably the lives of other slaves. Regardless of how or what she wrote, Phillis Wheatley defied the odds and published poetry, a genre that historically has not had a lot of African Americans.

Conversation surrounding the authorship of the book spawned a hearing in Massachusetts that highlighted the power of Wheatley and how she changed the minds of the white, male elite. Gates's book delves into the hearing and gives details on the circumstances surrounding it. He details how in October 1772 Boston; Wheatley was summoned before a panel of white men who were there to judge her and determine whether she her wrote book of poetry. The men on the panel were considered authoritative figures in the colony: Thomas Hutchinson, governor of Massachusetts; Andrew Oliver, lieutenant governor; Reverend Mather Byles, Joseph Green, satirist, Reverend Samuel Cooper, minister to Boston's elected officials, James Bowdoin, published poet, John Hancock, statesman, Patriot, and first governor of Massachusetts; Reverend Samuel Mather; and around 10 other men who were not as famous but still influential. Almost all the men present owned slaves in some capacity, which would have given them preconceived notions of Africans before the occasion. Prior to the hearing some members of the panel had visited Wheatley at John and Susanna's home to get a personal understanding of Wheatley. One member of the panel, Thomas Woolbridge, wrote,

I was present when she wrote and can attest that it is her own production; she shewd me her

> Letter to Lady Huntington [sic], which, I dare say, Your Lordship has seen; I send you an Account signed by her master of her Importation, Education &.c They are all wrote in her own hand. (28)

There is no transcript of the hearing against Wheatley, but we do know that by the end of it, all of them were convinced that she had written the poetry published. The eighteen men signed an affidavit stating that Wheatley wrote the poems herself, she had successfully defended her writing and intellect to a group of white men who probably doubted she could think critically let alone write poetry. The statement is as follows:

> We whose Names are under-written, do assure the World, that the Poems specified in the following page, were (as we verily believe) written by Phillis, a young Negro Girl, who was a few Years since, brought an uncultivated Barbarian from Africa, and has ever since been, and now is under the Disadvantage of serving as a Slave in a Family in this Town. She has been examined by some of the best Judges and is thought qualified to write them. (29-30)

This statement solidified Wheatley's place in literature and history. She proved to those white men who probably believed they knew everything about literature, that they were wrong in doubting her intellect and capacity to write poetry. She may not have completely changed their minds in topics related to slavery, but she did create the spark that there was more to Africans than physical labor.

The poetry of Wheatley examines the human condition and helps us understand how Wheatley's background influenced her writing style and content. Before her book was published in 1773, some of Wheatley's poems were published in the local newspapers. Wheatley's first published poem was "On Messrs. Hussey and Coffin" and it appeared in Rhode Island's *Newport Mercury* newspaper on December 21, 1767. In the local newspapers she regularly wrote

dedications and eulogies to prominent people in Massachusetts. One notable poem is titled "To the University of Cambridge, in New England," which was published before her book. In this poem, Wheatley encourages the students at the university (later known as Harvard University) to keep studying and maintain good behavior because their actions will be reported to God and that they are chosen to study the world around them. She wrote in the original text, "Improve your privileges while they stay/ Ye pupils, and each hour redeem, that bears / Or good or bad report of you to heav'n" (21-23). In the final stanza of the poem, Wheatley identified herself as an "Ethiop." This is notable because here she is recognizing her ethnic difference between herself and the college students and using that difference to encourage them to stay away from sin. Wheatley used her dual identity as an African and a religious woman to write poetry that spoke to heart of her readers. Most of her poetry is written from the perspective of a woman who understands that her position in society as an enslaved woman is different than white people to whom she wrote to. This understanding is what makes her work important. Her writing helps us see why her work mirrors her life and her beliefs.

Other famous poems and writings of Wheatley's allow us to glance into her personal relationship with religion and her relationship with the world around her. The poem that opens this chapter "On Imagination" is such an example. In the poem, Wheatley personified imagination and wrote about its energy and swiftness. The way she wrote reminds the reader of a young person who is full of life and imagination, no pun intended. Wheatley exhibited a carefree nature that is often not seen in Black literature of that time. There is also the letter that Wheatley wrote Reverend Samson Occum on March 11, 1774. In this letter, Wheatley wrote of the hypocrisy of religious people to cry for freedom for the colonists from England yet still promote slavery. She wrote, "…for in every human Breast, God has implanted a Principle, which we call Love of Freedom; it is

impatient of Oppression, and pants for Deliverance…. How well the Cry for Liberty, and the reverse Disposition for the exercise of oppressive Power over others agree." (Wheatley) Here in this letter, we can see Wheatley's understanding of the contradiction of the Revolution and those advocating for freedom yet keep people in bondage. This is the most vocal that Wheatley was on the topic of slavery, and we can see that she knew that slavery was contradictory to the ideals of those in power.

Wheatley's work continues to inspire new ways to gazing at her poetry and what it means for Black women now. Gender and race studies professor Geneva Cobb Moore's book *Maternal Metaphors of Power in African American Women's Literature: From Phillis Wheatley to Toni Morrison* (2017) analyzes how Black women writers shaped their own version of feminine and maternal traits. Moore's work focuses on the literary tradition of Black female writers like Wheatley, Morrison, Zora Neale Hurston, Jacobs, and others. She starts off the book by summarizing her main point, "…. Black women writers from Wheatley to Morrison have created feminine and maternal metaphor of powers to unhinge oppressive forces against blacks and women and others, and to assert women's innovative powers of authority." (2) It is important that Moore started her book with Wheatley. This shows that Phillis' work in now canon within Black feminist literature and has broken into the mainstream literature movement. Moore's chapter "Phillis Wheatley's Seminaked Body as Symbol and Metaphor" analyzes Wheatley's poems and offers a different take on them than other scholars. Moore explains how Wheatley's poems rejected the racist and sexist stereotypes put upon her and asserts her own ideas. She writes that Wheatley, "constructs the sociopolitics of civic mothering, caring, and nurturing others and fostering a sense of community" (10). A good part of the article is dedicated to explaining how Wheatley's naked body correlates to the conversation around Blackness and how the Black body is interpreted.

Moore's theory that Blackness was attached to ideas of heathenism played a role in how Wheatley's work was attacked. The trial against Wheatley can be seen as a physical embodiment of the whiteness in literature pushing back against any new mindsets that upset the status quo. The men that were involved in the trial were all considered important figures in the state of Massachusetts and were consulted on various matters. A trial of this nature was not procured for white authors who published, only Wheatley was subjected to questioning about her intelligence, literary influences, and overall background to prove in the eyes of these white men that she was the person who wrote the poetry. Wheatley had to prove that she was an author and mentally capable of writing poetry. The trial was not the only negative response that Wheatley received about her work; Thomas Jefferson was also highly critical of the young poet. In Gates's book, he talks about the scientific racism that influenced Jefferson's and other people's skepticism. Jefferson, known as the author of the Declaration of Independence, was an established intellectual and his opinion must have been sought out regularly. He was given Wheatley's work by secretary to the French mission in the United States, Francois Marbois. Marbois commissioned Jefferson to write a report on various American states that would be sent to the Continental Congress. He sent Jefferson pieces of Wheatley's work to review, and his response was appalling. Jefferson wrote of Phillis,

> Misery is often the parent of the most affecting touches in poetry. Among the blacks is misery enough, God knows, but not poetry. Love is the peculiar oestrum of the poet. Their love is ardent, but it kindles the senses only, not the imagination. Religion, indeed, has produced a Phillis Whatley [sic]; but it could not produce a poet. (44)

Wheatley's work did not need this criticism, her work and person did not need to be justified to Jefferson. Wheatley and Jefferson never met but one can imagine how that meeting would happen. In his criticism, Jefferson is exhibiting an air of authority of who can be a poet, he is also showing

how racism bleeds into every aspect of life. Wheatley's writing and her humanity was criticized by Jefferson who did not deny that she wrote her work but denied her any viable criticism. Jefferson's response to displays how Wheatley's accomplishments were diminished by those in power who did not want to see Africans succeed. Despite, the negative response of a few, Wheatley's work and person has stood against the racist remarks of those who wish to discredit Africans and state they cannot produce great work. Wheatley's persona and poetry has inserted itself into literature's narrow mindset and opened the doors for others to follow her.

Wheatley's work is now considered part of the modern poetic canon and her poetry is now seen as part of the anti-slavery literature tradition. This change in interpretation is due to the evolving narrative about history and how we view Black women, which was heralded by Black women. In an article for Brown University, Babette Thomas connects Wheatley and bell hooks and how Wheatley's work exemplifies hook's "oppositional gaze." She wrote that "Wheatley is strategically engaging with the classicist field, but also finds subtle yet ingenious wat to act in opposition to it-in opposition to a tradition that would look upon her and her voice as lesser" (Thomas). This is how we can describe Wheatley's oppositional gaze. Since Wheatley was a student of classical poets such as Homer, Alexander Pope, Virgil, and others she tried to emulate their style but also add her own voice to her work. By doing this she made her work become part of that classical grouping and redefine what classical poetry is. The idea of "classical" work in music, art, writing and other areas can be seen as rooted in colonialism. Who determined that works made by white men during a certain period were benchmarks of greatness? Wheatley shows us that writing by non-white people can be equally great and not center the white experience. By removing the white lens, we can see that Wheatley publishing poetry and challenging her readers to reconsider their prejudices was abolitionist in its own way. Although some of those English readers

may have viewed Wheatley as a rare exception to their racist ideas of Africans, some of them possibly had their minds changed by the poetry of a young African girl. Wheatley's work was later used by abolitionists to dispel notions that Black people could not achieve higher thinking. Along with Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, and other Black writers, Wheatley has been placed among the hallmarks of Black writing and is now getting her recognition as an abolitionist writer.

With the news of bell hook's passing, it is important more than ever to understand the impact that Black women and their writing and its perspective on how Black women experience America. hooks is celebrated as a Black feminist icon who opened the doors for other writers and activists to share their stories. It was fortunate that hooks was able to live to see her work be celebrated and was able to write about various topics. Wheatley did not live to see how her book would be celebrated; however, she was aware that people found her work interesting. Several publications state that people would visit Wheatley at John and Susanna's home to hear Phillis recite poetry and marvel at her intelligence. Wheatley's experience as an African woman in the American colonies influenced part of her writing and is what made her unique. Now, Wheatley is getting her due justice. There have been several books, fiction, and non-fiction, that reflect on her life and tradition. Most of the books written recently about Wheatley are children's books which would teach the next generation about her impact and why she is important to learn about. In higher education, there are more academic articles analyzing why Wheatley has been mostly forgotten and how her work should be considered part of a larger conversation about Black writers. In the public realm, there has been a push for more recognition of Wheatley's influence on future poets such as current National Youth Poet Laureate Amanda Gorman. Boston erected a Women's Memorial in 2003 that featured a statue of Wheatley sitting at a desk. (Figure 1) This public recognition of Wheatley in the town where she wrote most of her work is huge. Her history is now

being viewed as part of American history. Regardless of how people may feel about her work and whether it was anti-slavery enough, they cannot deny that Wheatley is American poetry and deserves to be seen as such.

*Figure 1 Source: Friends of the Public Garden, 2017*

## Chapter 3:

## Elizabeth Freeman and the Lawsuit that Changed History

*Any time, any time while I was a slave, if one minute's freedom had been offered to me, and I had been told I must die at the end of that minute, I would have taken it—just to stand one minute on God's airth [sic] a free woman— I would.*

— Elizabeth Freeman

Elizabeth Freeman, also known as Mum Bett, (c. 1744 - December 28, 1829) always stood up for herself and others. Before she sued for her freedom from the Ashley family in Massachusetts, Freeman was involved in an incident that helped define her legacy. Her owner Hannah Ashley had attempted to strike another slave named Lizzy. Freeman intervened and the result was her having a badly bruised arm, which she refused to cover up as a visible sign of the brutality she faced. Scholars and historians have used this story to show how Freeman stood up against the wrongful treatment she faced as a slave. This story is significant because it details that she knew that the violence she faced was wrong and she was an equal to her white, female owner. This belief led Freeman to sue for her freedom and help abolish slavery in Massachusetts, but her story and impact are much more. The writing of Black feminist scholar Barbara Smith (1946-) mirrors the life and choices that Freeman made and further discuss how Black women have made spaces for themselves within society.

Although Freeman lived in the 18th century, her spirit is evident in the writing of Black feminists such as Barbara Smith. We can claim that Freeman and Smith's lives are connected because they both relate to the foundation of Black feminist writing. The foundation of this stems from exclusion by the mainstream feminist movement, more specifically the second-wave feminist movement and the Black Power movement. Well known Second-Wave feminist writers such as Betty Friedan, Simone de Beauvoir, and others do not include the experiences of women of color

and how race factored into their oppression. Because of this exclusion, Black feminist scholars such as Barbara Smith, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and others created their own movement to accurately capture the experience that Black women face. Smith created the Kitchen Table Press, a publishing press that printed works by women of color to combat the whiteness of feminist texts available. The texts that Smith and others wrote spoke about freeing themselves from the racist and sexist ideology that permeates society. They wanted to state that Black women are equal in society and their experiences are valid. This is like what Freeman did with her lawsuit and helps connect Freeman to Black feminist scholars today.

Intention is the theme surrounding the chapter. Freeman intended to free herself from slavery and Smith intended to challenge ideas of feminism with her work. Freeman's actions helped to inspire a fighting essence that can be found in contemporary Black feminist texts. Black women have been silenced for so long that our actions must be louder than what we have to say. Freeman's story is another example of Black women not waiting to have their liberation handed to them. She and other female slaves sought their freedom through force, escape, or other means. The reason why Freeman's story is so different is because she used the law. Historically, the laws across the United States have not catered to the well-being of Black people. The laws have enslaved, abused, and robbed Black and brown people of their rights and humanity. So, the idea that someone would use the law for their own benefit is bold. Years later the case *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) would make racial segregation legal, undermining the gains that Freeman and other Black people had made so that black people would be considered on equal ground as white people. However, Freeman gained her freedom based on what the Massachusetts Constitution considered a "free man."

Freeman was born into slavery around 1744 in Claverack, New York. We know little about her early life, but we know her master Pieter Hogeboom gave her to his daughter Hannah Ashley,

as a wedding present. From the age of seven until her mid-40s, they enslaved Freeman at the Ashley home, along with other slaves. She spoke little about her time at the Ashley home, but we can use the incident described in the previous paragraph as evidence that her time in that home was turbulent. According to biographer Catherine Sedgwick, Freeman first learned of the possibility of being free from a village gathering house where the Declaration of Independence was being read. Freeman recounted to Sedgwick that she went to Catherine's father, lawyer Theodore Sedgwick, and said, "Sir, I heard that paper read yesterday, that says, "all men are born equal, and that every man has a right to freedom. I am not a dumb critter; won't the law give me my freedom?" (Sedgwick) Theodore Sedgwick later became Freeman's lawyer in the trial *Brom and Bett v. Ashley* (1781), the verdict granted her freedom and set a precedent for other cases to abolish slavery in Massachusetts. After they emancipated Freeman from her former masters, she took the last name Freeman as a signifier of her new free status. Freeman also began working for the Sedgwick family for a salary after being freed, which is how she met Catherine, who wrote about Freeman's life and later years. Outside of Catherine's account of Freeman's life, there is not much information about her. We can speculate that as a paid servant she enjoyed getting paid for her work and not being tied to servitude for the rest of her life. Freeman died on December 28, 1829, around the age of 85. We have not recognized her impact as much as it should. Most of the slave narratives we hear about feature stories of harsh treatment, abuse, and a daring escape, but Freeman's does not include that. Her story is about using the legal system that once enslaved her to free herself. Elizabeth Freeman saw her worth and did not stop until the law realized it. This thinking is at the core of Black feminist theory- that Black women's existence and ideas are equal and valid to their white counterparts.

The case at the heart of Freeman's legacy is *Brom and Bett v. Ashley*, connects to the legal and social ramifications of slavery and gender. Once Freeman decided she wanted to sue for her

freedom and sought Thomas Sedgwick, the issue was figuring out how to legally emancipate Freeman and her co-plaintiff, a male slave named Brom. Before this case, there were 30 cases of slaves suing their masters for freedom, however those cases closed, not because the courts believed the slaves were humans entitled to freedom but because there was a broken contract (i.e., promise of freedom that was not upheld) (Mass.gov). Sedgwick filed his case under the law that Massachusetts had outlawed slavery when it adopted its constitution. Colonel John Ashley, husband of Hannah, disagreed in court and refused to free his slaves. Even though slavey was not as extensive as it was in the South, slaves were still expensive in New England and racism was still rampant. We can assume that Colonel Ashley did not want to free his slaves for both financial reasons and for his belief that he had the right to own people. The verdict was handed down on August 22,1781 and ruled in favor of Brom and Bett. It declared that the two plaintiffs were free under Massachusetts law and gave them 30 shillings as payment. After this case, more cases were filed by slaves wanting to sue for their freedom and promises of freedom by their masters-most notably the Quock Walker cases in 1781 and 1783. The Brom and Bett case served as a catalyst for the ending of slavery in Massachusetts.

The question remains of how Freeman's experience as a female slave in the eighteenth century shaped her time and how it reflects Black feminist ideology. We often think of the female slave experience as being the same as other stories we have heard in the past, full of disappointment and pain, but the experience of being a slave is not monolithic. Slavery involves every aspect of society: capitalism, sexism, racism, politics, science, technology, etc. Black feminist ideology has sought to redefine the study and interpretation of the Black woman's experience across the board. The book *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave* (1982) seeks to remedy that gender studies scholars and historians have disregarded Black women for their contribution to history. This book goes over the various topics

that have left out the Black female perspective. One chapter titled, “Studying the Slave: Some Literary and Pedagogical Considerations on the Black Female Slave,” sought to understand the experience of Black female slaves and how to teach it to various audiences. Looking at this chapter we can glimpse into the daily life of Elizabeth Freeman and conceptualize how that experience inspired her quest for freedom and what Black feminist literature gets right and wrong about slave narratives.

In the chapter, Black feminist author Erlene Stetson states how some Black female slave narratives that were edited by white women sought to compare the oppression of the slave to the oppression that white women faced. She writes, “It seems that the Black female slave narratives written ("edited”) by white women are expressions of white women’s covert protest against their subordination, and their hostility toward men as well as toward the Victorian home” (71). Later in the chapter, Stetson discusses how white society compared female slaves to animals, used for breeding, and subjected to abuse. However, Stetson likens the suffering of female slaves to the oppression that white women faced. This is where the chapter cannot tell the true story of slave women. Even though Stetson cites *Incidents in the life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs, which describes the abuse that Jacobs experienced at the hands of her white mistress, Stetson still makes the link between slavery and gender discrimination. This claim is false and the incident where Freeman protected another slave from her mistress’s abuse is proof. It’s proof because Freeman knew that as a slave, she was subject to violence against anyone white, male, or female. Other Black feminist scholarship has disproven the myth of gender solidarity that Stetson claims and was the reason for the creation of Black feminist studies. Stetson gets the daily life of female slaves correct when she writes about them being compared to animals and being subjected to abuse from several sources. We can conclude that Freeman must have endured racism, sexism, ageism, and other discriminations while enslaved at the Ashley home based on the time she lived in, yet she

developed a sense of knowing her worth as a human being. Faced with this, she knew that the Massachusetts constitution should include everyone in its assertion that all men are created equal.

Freeman and other famous Black women such as Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman can be seen as the influence for The Combahee River Collective, a group of Black feminists that fought for the recognition and upliftment of Black and women of color through various media forms. The Collective, co-founded by Smith, was formed because of the need for an organization where Black women could convene and discuss how to address the social and political issues that Black women face. They wrote in their now famous statement,

> It was our experience and disillusionment within these liberation movements, as well as experience on the periphery of the white male left, that led to the need to develop a politics that was anti-racist, unlike those of white women, and antisexist, unlike those of Black and white men. (272)

This statement became a major point in the making of Black feminism. These women in 1974 Boston were making the statement that the notion of gender and racial community was false. With the formation of the Collective, Black women were claiming their own space, where their lived experiences, academic pursuits, and political moves are respected. Freeman's act of seeking legal counsel to secure her freedom was her way of establishing in eighteenth century New England that she was a Black woman who knew her circumstances were wrong and did something about it. This bravery aligns with the modern Black feminist movement because it shows that the fight for equality and recognition did not end with Reconstruction and the Civil Rights Movement. Racism and sexism are still prevalent, as it was when Freeman was a slave. The Collective's mission to set themselves apart to make a new movement for Black women is rooted in the actions of Freeman and other women who chose a different path to gain freedom.

The Combahee River Collective follows in the spirit of Black women resistance due where

the Collective gets its name in addition to its history. The Collective gets its name from the Combahee River in South Carolina where Harriet Tubman orchestrated and led a raid that freed 750 slaves on June 2,1863. Smith decided to pick this name because "It was a way of talking about ourselves being on a continuum of Black struggle, of Black women's struggle." (New Page) This statement is powerful. It directly connects the actions of enslaved women to Black women's activism and literature. Smith, along with other Black and lesbian feminists, are determining that their work and legacy is reflective of the resistance that Black female slaves exhibited. It also created a new way of looking at the Black female slave narrative academically. Often, Black women are portrayed as tragic and dehumanized in writings on slavery: they are painted as victims that had no agency and took whatever abuse was given to them. The Combahee River Collective flipped this perspective. They assert that Black women have done the work to free themselves and are not passive actors in their lives. Women like Freeman and Williams took an active role in securing their freedom and the Collective is continuing that resistance.

Smith's work connects to the legacy of Freeman because her work focuses on the lived experiences of Black women and how it relates to larger systemic issues and American history. Aside from being part of the Collective, Smith has published other articles and books focused on Black feminism. Her work deals with the social and legal position of Black feminists, specifically Black gay feminists, in mainstream social movements. One of Smith's most important works is her book *The Truth that Never Hurts: Writings on Race, Gender, and Freedom* (1998). *The Truth that Never Hurts* covers topics such as ally ship between white and Black lesbians, Black feminism studies, and reviews other work by Black female authors. The chapter that stands out is "Racism and Women's Studies." In this chapter, Smith details why racism needs to be discussed in women's studies. Smith writes that the reason why there has not been solidarity between white women and Black women along with other women of color is because white women have not done the work of

understanding their place in the patriarchy. This is a recurring theme throughout history and contradicts what Stetson said in her chapter. What Smith was arguing for was an understanding of why race and class matters when discussing feminism. She wrote,

> The reason racism is a feminist issue is easily explained by the inherent definition of feminism. Feminism is the political theory and practice that struggles to free all women: women of color, working-class women, poor women, disabled women, Jewish women, lesbians, old women--as well as white, economically privileged, heterosexual women. Anything less than this vision of total freedom is not feminism, but merely female selfatitrrandizement. (101)

This relates to the story of Freeman because Smith's work is the academic continuation of Freeman's suit. Perhaps the two are not related, but they are. The only difference is intention. Freeman did not intend to make history, so it is not the same as Smith's intentional writing about racial and gender issues, but the same values apply. Both women were fighting for their existence to be respected. Smith is fighting for the intersectionality of her existence to be recognized and Freeman fought for her enslavement to be acknowledged as illegal. The work of Black feminists is built off the Black women who advocated for abolition and those who quietly lived their lives. In feminist literature, women who were publicly pushing for equal rights were the most vocal about the issues, but the work of Smith and others prove that women who lived their lives outside of the confines of the patriarchy were just as brave.

Another piece of scholarship from Smith that relates to Freeman is the book *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*. Although Smith did not write the book herself, her contribution as an editor/creator is reflected through the women that she chose to work on this compilation. Smith wrote the introduction to the anthology and in it she describes why Black feminism is key to the liberation of Black women. On page xxxvi Smith writes, "A Black feminist analysis has enabled us

to understand that we are not here and abused because there is something wrong with us, but because our status and treatment is absolutely prescribed by the racist, misogynistic system under which we live." This strain of thinking is present throughout the entire text and emphasized through different narratives.

In the same book, activist and composer Bernice Johnson Reagon writes in her chapter "Coalition Politics: Turning the Century" about the issue of Black women and other people of color being left out of movements or as she paraphrases as "rooms" and pushes for coalition work. Reagon, is a cultural historian and composer known for her contribution to the Civil Rights Movement's Freedom Singers choir and her various publications about the history and impact of African American music. In her chapter she discusses how people become comfortable in "rooms" where everyone looks and acts the same. These rooms symbolize the segregation that happens when you have white-only spaces or women-only spaces. These spaces exclude those who do not fit the mold and do not offer challenges for those who exist in them. When you have a group of people and every single person has the same idea, how can there be growth and change? Black feminists and other Black women pushed against those areas of exclusion and made their own places which Reagon called coalitions. These coalitions were about creating places where people went to have uncomfortable conversations about race, gender, nationality, and other topics. Reagon advocates for coalition work so that everyone can be in conversation and learn from one another and build a bridge over any differences. In the chapter she mentions the women's movement and how their definition of women excludes Black and Brown women while simultaneously saying that they are pro-women. On page 359 Reagon writes,

> Coalition work is not done in your home. Coalition work has to be done in the streets. And it is some of the most dangerous work you can do. And you shouldn't look for comfort…...In a coalition you have to give, and it is different from your home. You can't

stay there all the time. You go to the coalition for a few hours and then you go back and take your bottle wherever it is, and then you go back and coalesce some more.

Black feminists have been doing coalition work. They have hold spaces where they had conversations about race, sexuality, and the faults with the feminist movement. This work can take various forms such as changes in the law or the creation of a new curriculum but as long as it's happening, change can occur. Coalition work is not always done with a clear objective. Sometimes it occurs when one person's actions can influence the work/actions of another, specifically in the situation between Freeman and Quock Walker.

Freeman's case was cited in the Walker cases as precedent, which were decided in the same year as Freeman's. Walker's road to freedom began in 1781 when he ran away from Nathaniel Jennison after Jennison refused to free Walker after he turned 21. Walker was originally purchased by James Caldwell as a child, then was passed on to Caldwell's widow who married Jennison. James Caldwell originally agreed to free Walker after he turned 21 and his widow shortened that time to age 21. Caldwell's widow died before Walker turned 21 which left him as the property of Jennison. After Walker ran away to a nearby farm run by Seth and John Caldwell. Jennison found Walker and beat him severely for running away, then sued the Caldwells for "enticing" Walker away which created the case *Jennison v. Caldwell* (1781). The courts also heard the case *Walker v. Jennison* that same year, where Walker sued Jennison for a breach of contract by not honoring his late wife's agreement. The jury sided with Jennison and awarded him 25 pounds, but the case stirred up questions surrounding the legality of whether an individual should uphold a previous agreement for freedom. Walker sued for breach of contract and assault against Jennison for not upholding his deceased wife's promise to free Walker at age 21. This case was titled *Quok Walker v. Jennison* (1781). He was represented by attorneys Levi Lincoln and Caleb Strong who argued that Walker was a free man and the jury sided with them. According to Mass.gov, On December 6,

1781, the jury stated "that the said Quok is a Freeman and not the proper Negro slave of [Jennison]. They awarded Walker 50 pounds in damages. During that case, the attorneys cited Freeman's suit against her former master and other similar cases. The final case was titled *Commonwealth v. Jennison* and the Massachusetts Attorney General filed assault and battery charges against Jennison in September 1781. In April 1783, the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court heard the state's case against Jennison and the Supreme Judicial Court Chief Justice William Cushing eventually ruled against Jennison. In his closing statement Justice Cushing stated,

> And upon this Ground, our Constitution of Govmt, by wch. ye people of this Commonwealth have solemnly bound themselves, Sets out with declaring that all men are born free & equal & yt. Every subject is intitled to Liberty, & to have it guarded by ye. Laws, as well as Life & property & in short is totally repugnant to ye. Idea of being born Slaves. This being ye. Case I think ye. Idea of Slavery is inconsistent with our own conduct & Constitution solemnly bound themselves, Sets out with declaring that all men are born free & equal & yt. Every subject is intitled to Liberty, & to have it guarded by ye. Laws, as well as Life & property -- & in short is totally repugnant to ye. Idea of being born Slaves. This being ye. Case I think ye. Idea of Slavery is inconsistent with our own conduct & Constitution. (96-97)

The judgment from Cushing set the tone for the legislature going forward and by 1790 there were no recorded slaves in the state. While Freeman did not single handedly end slavery with her lawsuit, she had a hand in setting an example and the Walker case is proof of that.

To analyze Freeman's impact on American history and Black feminism, we must look at the circumstances of her life and what it meant for her to sue for her freedom in eighteenth century New England society. In the eighteenth century, European scientists began to "study the physical differences between Europeans and non-Europeans", which can be seen as the start of eugenics.

Eugenics, defined by Merriam-Webster dictionary, is “the practice or advocacy of controlled selective breeding of human populations (as by sterilization) to improve the population's genetic composition.” In this case, Europeans were trying to determine what made Africans different from Europeans. In her article “The Anatomy of Difference: Race and Sex in Eighteenth-Century Science,” author Londa Schiebinger details how scientists believed all Africans were European in physical features and intellectual capacity before birth, but environmental factors changed them to become African. Throughout the text, Schienbinger discusses how European men tried to determine what made “women and Blacks inferior to them.” This distinction is important to note. For these white men, there were only two subcategories: women and Blacks, implying that the term women equaled white women. They did not acknowledge Black women as anything but Black. They were not considered women, nor were they considered men. Black women were the other “Other.” This mentality was what Freeman was living in eighteenth century New England. Freeman had to contend with her existence being negated by society and science. Her suing for her freedom meant she was taking a stand against eugenics and state sanctioned sub-human class put upon her.

Freeman’s lawsuit can be looked at through the lens of the coalition work that Reagon spoke of. When Freeman filed her suit, she helped to continue a conversation that the Massachusetts courts were having about freedom. She engaged the court to consider her viewpoint as a human being, an idea that the court system still struggles with to this day. Although this coalition looks different than the one that Reagon proposed, it still did its purpose. The lawsuit actively questioned the conversation surrounding personhood and its outcome changed Massachusetts society. When the courts ruled that Freeman should be free under the law it challenged the institution of slavery and the social hierarchy. It pushed for people to reconsider how they interacted with the people they called slaves. Those conversations were probably difficult

and there were financial implications to emancipating people, but they were necessary to ensure that more coalition could be done. Freeman's actions and Reagon's words seem far apart but they really are not. Both sought to understand why Black women and people were excluded from certain aspects of life. This is where intentionality comes in. Intentionality separates yet connects the two.

Going back to the theme of intentionality, and making space are a structural part of this chapter. What Freeman represented at the time of her trial was a new way of interpreting the law and how we Black women see ourselves. The fact that slavery was gradually eradicated after the verdict of the Freeman and Quock trials demonstrates the power of asserting your identity in white only spaces. Freeman's case set a precedent that challenged New England society which previously did not think of widespread emancipation.

What makes Freeman's case even more interesting is that she and Phillis Wheatley lived around the same time as one another. These two women lived in the same state during the same period and yet their stories have never been connected. Together these two women changed the narrative surrounding Black women in the Northeast. Even though they lived on opposite ends of the state, their stories are still linked. The actions of Freeman and Wheatley in Massachusetts established how various spheres of colonial American society oppressed Black women and the multiple ways they broke through. Each woman took the path of non-violence and used the existing systems to gain freedom, both metaphorically and physically. And yet intention can also separate them as well. Wheatley intended to publish poetry and make her voice heard but she never wanted to challenge the status quo. Freeman did the opposite; she wanted the idea that all men are created equal and free to include her and other people. Black women have been recorded as fighting for the advancement of our people in America for a long time. Freeman and Wheatley worked and lived at the same time and state, and both are overdue for their contributions to Black history and Black feminist history.

Even though Freeman deserves credit for her contribution to history, how is her story interpreted today? Slowly Freeman is getting the recognition she deserves. There have been a few books written about her such as *A Free Woman On God's Earth: The True Story of Elizabeth "Mumbet" Freeman, The Slave Who Won Her Freedom* (2009) by Jana Laiz, illustrated by Ann-Elizabeth Barnes, a children's book about Freeman which details her life and suit for freedom. Another children's book written about Freedom was *Mumbet's Declaration of Freedom* (2014) which sought to tell Freeman's story through illustration. It's great that Freeman's story is being taught to the next generation and that there is a variety in the slave stories being taught. Her story is one of the many stories from slavery that need to be told. However, there is not much academic writing about Freeman. Hopefully this chapter will serve as part of the academic introduction to Freeman's legacy. There have been strides to have more of Freeman's story in the public eye through varied ways. The town of Sheffield, Massachusetts has recently decided to create and unveil a statue dedicated to Freeman which is scheduled to be unveiled in August 2022. The statue is slated to be 8 feet tall and depict Freeman in traditional colonial wear and holding a paper with the verdict of *Brom v. Bett*. (Figure 2) There are also rumors of a film about Freeman in development but there is no confirmation of that happening. Freeman's public persona is beginning to develop, which is long overdue for her. Additionally, in Berkshire, MA is the Elizabeth Freeman Center, an organization that helps victims of domestic violence and sexual assault by providing shelter and counseling services. Untold Black history is finally being recognized as part of American history and stories like Freeman's and others are front and center. Some legal cases in recent United States history have pushed for equal recognition for African Americans. Cases such as the exoneration of those for who were wrongly convicted of crimes and the justice for George Floyd have shown that the legal system can work. However, there is still a long way to go for Black people to gain respect in the law and society. Freeman started that tradition and people

continue to fight for equality today.

Black feminist literature has mostly treated female slave stories with respect and attention. With this chapter and other works, the Black feminist archive has a better foundation of Freeman's story and can add to the history of Black women in colonial America. After the events of 2020, there is more of a push to analyze and preserve the information about Black history and eradicate the whitewashing of history. Even though Thomas Sedgwick did the paperwork and argued on Freeman's behalf during the lawsuit, Freeman successfully pushed the moral compass in Massachusetts and declared that she belonged in the same spaces as any white person.


*Figure 2: Source: Rep. Pignatelli, Twitter*

## Chapter 4:

## Cathay Williams and Contending with Masculinity

A salute to Cathay Williams
The hero of this rhyme
A special woman of the west
A legend in her time.
(Quoted in Kirkpatrick 40)

One of the whitest, male dominated spheres of society is the military. In the United States, most of the soldiers, generals, and higher upper positions are held by white men. According to a CNN.com article, "Black service members are still disproportionately under-represented among the officer ranks despite enlisting at a higher rate than other minorities and whites relative to their share of the US population". The military culture in America have not been inclusive to anyone who was not a white man. Black women have slowly made their way into positions of leadership within the branches of the military but there is still a long way to go. Reports show that 31% of female active-duty members are Black, with more Black women serving in the Army than the other 3 branches of the military. However, most women are not put into combat roles during their time in the military due to longstanding gender prejudices. While being in the military may seem like a way of upholding of 'traditional' American values such as patriotism and strength, it can also be a way for Black women to exhibit their abilities and counteract stereotypes that are put unto them. Cathay Williams (1844-1893) was a Black woman who disguised herself as a man to join the Army after the Civil War. Williams, a former slave, decided that the military was her only option to be self-reliant and live life on her own terms. Camouflaging herself as a man granted Williams the opportunity to not be tied down to the gender expectations given to Black women. Williams defied

gendered and racist definitions of Black women in post-Bellum United States society and put herself in the Army. Black feminist scholar Patricia Hills Collins (1948-)'s ideology that Black women have created their own spaces and solutions to the discrimination they faced is echoed through Williams's choices and understanding of her position in society.

The life and legacy of Williams and how it connects to the work of several Black feminist scholars. Williams's understanding of gender and race during her time helps us understand her decisions and why it matters all these years later. Scholars like Collins and others interpret the unique position that Williams was in and have conceptualized how Black women content with the circumstances they are given. With this chapter, we will recognize how the actions of Williams can be viewed through the lens of Black feminists and create a bridge between the generations to demonstrate how the struggle for Black female freedom has evolved.

The reason why this chapter focuses on Williams is because she is part of untold American history that has overlooked the contributions of African Americans. In researching for this chapter, I found more information about the male contributions to the Civil War and post war activities. The women that were written about were those who directly contributed to the freeing of slaves or did a significant act that was widely publicized. People like Williams are usually left out from the conversation about individuals who made a difference in more "normal" ways. History tends to paint the actions of Black women as only being significant in the 20th century and onward, but we have been challenging the current situation. Examples of this are Mary Eliza Mahoney, the first African American nurse and Daisy Bates, an organizer with the Civil Rights Movement. With this chapter, people will know more about Cathay Williams and why the actions of lesser-known people are just as necessary.

Black feminist writers such as Collins have created an academic foundation for how Black women made their own spaces in society without the help of the mainstream feminist movement or

Black Power movement. Collins is an accomplished writer with multiple publications about Black feminism. Some of her most notable publications include *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory* (2019), *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (2005), and *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (1990). Collins's work focuses on the way Black women have been oppressed from multiple aspects of society, aka intersectionality. Intersectionality, first coined by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in 1989, is defined as "a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects" (Columbia Law School). In other words, intersectionality is way of looking at how different factors of a person's life (race, class, gender, sexuality, etc.) affects their experiences and treatment by society and the law. Other Black feminist writers before Crenshaw and Collins such as hooks, Lorde, Smith, Davis, Morrison, Walker, and others wrote about the same ideas that they wrote about, but Crenshaw created a single term to condense their ideas.

The themes that Collins writes about in her work, like the stereotypes that are put on Black women in American society, has influenced Black feminist work and echoes the life of Williams. The courage that Williams showed by joining the military and the actions of other lesser-known women would inspire the future Black feminist movement. Collins writes in the journal article, "The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought"

> Sojourner Truth, Anna Julia Cooper, Ida Wells Barnett, and Fannie Lou Hamer are but a few names from a growing list of distinguished African-American women activists. Although their sustained resistance to Black women's victimization within interlocking systems of race, gender, and class oppression is well known, these women did not act alone. Their actions were nurtured by the support of countless, ordinary African American women who through strategies of everyday resistance, created a powerful foundation for this visible Black feminist activist tradition. Such support has been essential to the shape and goals of

Black feminist thought. (745-746)

Here, Collins is recognizing that the work of resistance against oppressive powers is done by the everyday Black women who did not get the recognition they deserve. One could argue that the everyday actions of Black women have pushed the needle towards equality better than the actions of a few. Williams falls in this category that Collins wrote about. Her decision to live as a man and join the Army was small but impactful. Williams and other women who decided to forgo traditional occupations were part of a tradition of Black women who resisted the racist and patriarchal society that continues to persist today. This tradition of resistance guided the Black feminists of the 70s and 80s whom in turn influence the next generation of feminists in the 90s and beyond.

Williams's story is remarkable and a testament to the determination of Black women. Williams was born in September 1844 in Independence, Missouri to a free man and an enslaved woman. Because of the doctrine partus sequitur ventrem ("That which is brought forth follows the belly") Williams was legally a slave because her mother was a slave. During her youth she was enslaved by William Johnson and worked his plantation, until the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861 which saw her status change. Once her town was taken over, she was forced to become a cook for the Union Army and serve for the duration of the war. After Williams was emancipated, she had to find a different way to survive on her own. In an interview about her life, she stated that she joined the Army because she had a cousin in a certain regiment and "I wanted to make my own living and not be dependent on relations or friends" (*St. Louis Times*). She renamed herself William Cathay and served as a Buffalo Soldier in the 38th Infantry. During her time in the military, she became sick and was discovered by the doctor to be a biological woman and was discharged. William's life after military service was not great. She had to do domestic work, the same work she wanted to avoid, and eventually became too sick to work. When her pension was denied, her

financial and personal hardships became worse, and she soon died sometime in 1893.

When Williams dressed as a man to join the Army, she gained male privilege, but what does that mean for the century she was living in and how does turning in to a man defy and affirm gender stereotypes? In the nineteenth century, the idea of being a woman or a man was almost exclusively white. Author and historian Jean Fagan Yellin, best known for her research on abolitionist and author Harriet Jacobs, wrote about race in the nineteenth century in her article, “"Race" and Nineteenth-Century American Womanhood”. Yellin details how black women activists dealt with racism from abolitionist white women and fought for their voices in the women’s rights movement. She points out that the American Equal Rights Association, which was started by abolitionists and feminists, gathered “thousands of signatures on petitions urging suffrage for “women” and “Negroes”” (55). This separation is important to note. The fact that women and Negro are classified as separate groups of people implies that womanhood was reserved for white women and Negro referred to black men. This leaves out black women because they are neither white nor black men making them invisible to organizations like these. Sojourner Truth’s “Ain’t I A Woman” speech at the 1851 Women’s Convention in Akron, Ohio summed up the feeling of black women in the abolitionist and women’s movement. Truth’s speech detailed her being oppressed by white society by not being seeing as worthy of protection as white women and her issues with black men keeping her in the domestic sphere. Black womanhood is not recognized by white society in this century, and this is what Williams was living in.

After Williams began to live life as Black woman upon leaving the military, she encountered the same obstacles that Black feminists would write about later. Williams went back to a life of difficulty, exasperated by the fact that she was illiterate and knew only a little bit about housework. She was not alone in this endeavor. After the Civil War, millions of black women were forced to figure out new ways to support themselves and their families with their newfound

freedom. Some major changes Williams endured were going back to wearing feminine clothes and working "traditional female jobs" that probably paid less and involved being in a domestic environment. Now living as woman and wearing female clothing, Williams would have to change her mindset and accept that what little privilege she had was gone. One of her biggest obstacles was trying to combat the racial/sexist stereotypes that black women were assigned which would have impacted her job prospects but also her daily interactions. In Collins's *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, the chapter "Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images" discusses how stereotypes such as the Mammy, matriarch, welfare queen, Black lady, and jezebel all reflect the ways that black women have been controlled and abused by white society. The image of the "Mammy" is one that Williams would have had to contend with in her time. Collins describes the Mammy as "created to justify the economic exploitation of house slaves and sustained to explain Black women's long-standing restriction to domestic service, the mammy image represents the normative yardstick used to evaluate all Black women's behavior" (72). With Williams's physical ailments and her skillset, the mammy caricature could have followed her around while trying to find work. She could not tell people that she had served in the Army because they would not believe her and technically there was no record of "Cathay Williams" because she used a different name. Her clothing could have also fueled the mammy stereotype because of the long dresses and possible hair coverings she would have worn while working. Williams's life post military demonstrates how challenging it was to be a Black woman and live in a time where you where hyper visible as "the Mammy" yet ignored by society at the same time.

Stripping black women of their sexuality and autonomy is an essential part of U.S capitalism that has existed for centuries and has been explored by Black feminists. Collins wrote that black women's bodies have been commodified and exploited "via mechanisms such as

employment discrimination, maintaining images of Black women that construct them as mules of pleasure, and encouraging or discouraging Black women's reproduction via state intervention, Black women's labor, sexuality, and fertility" (132). Slavery established black women as laborers, maids, and breeders for their masters to gain more slaves. After slavery, with limited options for employment, black women were pushed into the domestic sphere for jobs, and this helped to further the mammy stereotype that justified the overworking of black women as well as taking away their sexuality. Capitalism forces black women to work long hours with very little pay compared to their white counterparts which widens the pay gap and furthers income inequality in America. Black women are often put into jobs were concern for their physical or mental well-being is not considered. Black feminists today are conceptualizing the impact of this and arguing for more recognition of the ways Black women have had to survive, regardless of if the method was traditional or not.

When Cathay Williams started to live as a black man, she was using society's restrictive gender and racial ideals to create her own reality and put herself in places where black women did not go. Living as a black woman, Williams was restricted to doing certain jobs that revolved around the domestic sphere because of her race and gender and previous life as a slave which saw her doing chores in the plantation house. When she started going as a man in public, this opened not only new job opportunities but also access to a certain level of male privilege. By choosing to live as a man, Williams was doing what Deniz Kandiyoti calls "bargaining with patriarchy" or the "patriarchal bargain" (Kandiyoti, 275). Kandiyoti defined the term as women who carve out their own path that gives them some form of autonomy while still adhering to gender expectations. Williams continued to play within gender roles by adopting the strictest male persona: soldier. By becoming a solider, and later a Buffalo Solider, Williams was able to become self-reliant and financially independent, something that would be impossible if she still presented as a woman. She

also opened new freedoms in society for herself as a man. Living as a Buffalo Soldier, she did not have to worry about unwanted sexual attention from men, people questioning why she was wearing certain clothes, or being turned down for certain jobs because of her gender. She could also live a soldier's life of traveling to different places or being stationed in new environments for periods of time. These are all things she could not do as a single woman post-war. While Williams did not completely push against gender stereotypes, by presenting as a man she was able to reach a new level of freedom.

By putting herself in the military, Williams continued the tradition of challenging the exclusion of Black women from certain spheres that Wheatley and Freeman started. Freeman and Wheatley both acted and ordinary heroes whose decisions influenced the way that white society views Black people. Freeman paved the way for African Americans in Massachusetts to gain freedom and enter the same sphere that white people had created. Wheatley used writing to create a platform that future Black writers would use to push back against the idea that great writing only comes from white men. Williams flipped the idea that Black women were more suited to domestic duties and showed that given the opportunity, we can do anything thrown to us. Her courage should be added to the long history of Black women's participation in the military. There is a long history of women dressing as men to join various groups and gain information to promote a cause or for survival purposes. Most of the cases that have been documented, extensively focus on white women and very few cases of Black and brown women have been examined. Black women's contribution to the Collins writes about the perseverance that black women have. She wrote

> Whether individual struggles to develop a changed consciousness or the group persistence needed to transform social institutions, actions that bring about changes empower African-American women. By persisting in the journey toward self-definition, as individuals, we are changed. When linked to group action, our individual struggles gain new meaning. Because

> our actions as individuals change the world from one in which we merely exist to one over which we have some control, they enable us to see everyday life as being in process and therefore amenable to change. Perhaps that is why so many African American women have managed to persist and "make a way out of no way." Perhaps they knew the power of self-definition. (121)

Collins's writing paints the picture of not only Williams but for most Black women who must preserve in environments that were meant to shut them out. Williams must have dealt with harsh conditions in the post-war West and heard things that might have upset her but being a soldier in the army allowed for more freedom.

This quote sums up the entire reason why women like Williams are important to remember in the fight for equality. Collins asks us to view individual actions as part of a larger narrative. It is easy to view movements, such as the feminist movement, as the action of a few well-known individuals that influenced everyone else. Another example is the Civil Rights Movement that history credits Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as its main organizer, especially when it came to events such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott. But it was the actions of everyday people that helped make that boycott successful. Any noteworthy movement, either social or literary, involves the work of ordinary people to make change. Because Williams, and possibly other women at the time, who decided to join the military to take care of themselves, women in the armed forces today and other areas have them to thank. History tends to write the narrative that Black women only began to collectively fight against the racist and sexist patriarchy around the beginning of the 20th century; this is not true. Women like Williams did not wait for someone to tell them that a coalition was coming.

The last line, "Perhaps they knew the power of self-definition," is part of Williams's legacy and Collins's work. Self-determination is what connects these two women, it's what links

Williams's life to the modern day. The need to define your womanhood, your Blackness, your life on your own terms is the point of this article. In the previous chapters, intention was the focus but, in this chapter, self-determination is the focal point. Choosing to define yourself is what we can apply to Williams's legacy. After the Civil War was over and she had to figure out what she was going to do with her life, Williams made the choice to join the Army and defy all the stereotypes that were put on Black women Collins outlined in her work. It also echoes the choice that Black women made when they call themselves Black feminists. Collins wrote in the article, "What's in a Name? Womanism, Black Feminism, and Beyond" that Black women have struggled with naming themselves Black feminists, womanists, and other titles. She wrote that Black women calling themselves Black feminists disrupted the white feminist movement because it acknowledged the lack of awareness about race in the feminist movement and separated Black women from the Black power movement because that movement did not acknowledge the gender disparities in it. Self-definition allowed Williams to choose how she wanted to be in this world. This freedom is not often given to Black women, more often titles are given to us. But now we have the option to choose how we want to be categorized as or not assign ourselves to a category at all.

Her story being recognized now can be viewed as a shift in the way we view slave narratives. After Williams was discovered to be a woman and was forced to leave the Army, she lived out the rest of her days as a woman. She applied for a pension for the government, but they turned her down. Once she began living as a woman again, her story was spread through her local town, and she talked about her life to a local newspaper. Outside of that, she has been forgotten in history. We can guess that she has been left out because Williams did not have a "traditional slave narrative." She had a different life that we can see exposed the gender and racial hierarchies of the time. Stories of people running away in the middle of the night or being sought after by ruthless slave owners to find freedom on their own, feeds into the ideal that there must be a grand story of

survival. The reality is that the 'slave story' is not monolithic one and slaves across the country lived different lives depending on who owned them, the environment they lived in, and what their role was on the plantation if they lived on one at all. There is also the lack of documentation that Williams left behind. For women like Harriet Tubman there is a wealth of knowledge about her because of public interest and the availability of documents such as financial documents, pictures, interviews, and personal papers. The only documentation on Williams are the discharge papers she received, her pension request and denial papers (Figure 3) and the interview she did after leaving the Army. There is no other documentation such as photos, writings, or anything else of Williams; there is a drawing of her but that is not verified. Her pension documents help to confirm some details of her life and what she did in the military, they also serve as the only solid proof that she served. With the few articles about Williams out now, and this chapter we can discern that the Black female experience is not one size fits all.

On a final note, Williams did what she had to do to survive and navigate the binary world that we continue to live in today. Williams's choice to dress as a man and join the Army may have been unusual but she possibly deemed it her only option. After the Civil War and the ending of slavery, many slaves were left wondering where they would go and what they should do. In Williams's case, she wanted to make her own way and being in the military was her best option. Living as a man must have been difficult but it allowed her to make her own money and not be constricted by clothing, gender norms, and other obligations. Even though she was discovered to be a woman and forced out of the Army, Williams made her mark on United States military history. Collins's writing relates to Williams's life because of the rejection of stereotypes put on Black women. Collins writes about intersectionality and how various aspects of society affect the way Black women move throughout society. If Williams had been a man, she would have had more options and opportunities to use her skills to find different employment. Williams experienced

masculinity and femininity and was able to see how society allowed for freedom and restriction for the two genders identified at the time. Today, Black women have taken a more involved role in all branches of the US military. The highest-ranking Black woman in the military is Admiral Michelle Howard, which is a far cry from when Williams was in the service. Admiral Howard is just one of many Black women who make up leadership in the military. Hopefully Williams will be remembered as part of Black female history and someone who lived on her own terms.

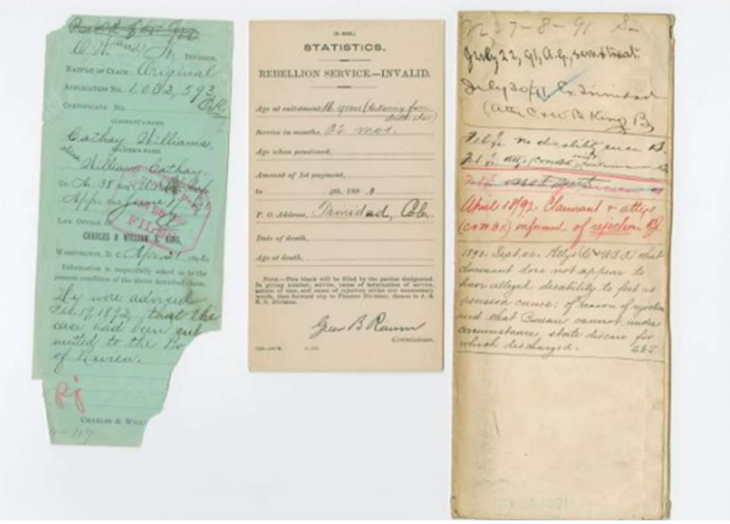


*Figure 3: Source: National Archives Catalog*

## Chapter 5:

## Conclusion

The contributions of Black women in the United States have not been properly explored. The actions of Black women have pushed the country forward toward a more understanding and inclusive place. These actions such as the ones taken by Phillis Wheatley, Elizabeth Freeman, and Cathay Williams demonstrate that it does not take a lot of political power, recognition, or lots of money to make a difference. As quoted in the previous chapter, Patricia Hills Collins wrote that the actions of regular, everyday African American women were the backbone of Black women's activism. No crusade for change can rely on the support of well-known people, it must be done with the work of those unknown to history. The three women that I focus on liberated themselves through unconventional means and helped to make an impression on future generations.

Wheatley's impact can be measured by all the Black poets and writers that followed her. Had Wheatley's book not been a commercial hit and raised important conversations about the ability for Africans to write, publishers would have been hesitant to produce more works by African writers. Even though many historians have chosen to not include her in the discussion about important Africans and African Americans in U.S history because of the perceived lack of anti-slavery sentiments in her work, but this thesis has shown that to be wrong. Wheatley knew that slavery was wrong, as evidenced in her letter to Reverend Samson Occum about the hypocrisy of colonists advocating for freedom from England yet still owning slaves. Her work gave readers what bell hooks called the "oppositional gaze." Black feminist scholar bell hooks, who recently passed on, gave us that term to describe the way Black women view media. She wrote that when Black women give their perspective through media, they are disrupting the status quo which sees white men's viewpoints as the norm. With the oppositional gaze, women like Wheatley gave the world a different context to think about. Wheatley's work allowed for the perspective of a young African

slave girl to be treated with respect and reject the racist and sexist notions that Africans were not capable of higher thinking. By publishing poetry, Wheatley changed the narrative and assisted in paving the way for future Black poets to have their work be accepted by everyone. Poets such as Amanda Gorman and Honorée Fanonne Jeffers are the part of the legacy that Wheatley created.

Similarly, Elizabeth Freeman's legacy can be determined through the way the legal system has evolved to address the human rights issues that continue to plague the United States legal system. When Freeman successfully petitioned the court to grant her freedom on the basis that the Massachusetts Constitution says, "All men are created equal", she changed the way that people viewed the law and their relationship to it. At the time when Freeman was suing for her freedom, the colonies were experiencing their own freedom from England and questioning what it meant to be free. Before Freeman's case there were other people who had sued for freedom in Massachusetts, but their cases were focused on gaining freedom because of promises of manumission were not upheld. Freeman's case is believed to be the first in the state to be based on the idea that slaves should be free because they are equal to white people in the eyes of the law. In many states, the idea that slaves are equals to white people would be considered blasphemy. In 1787, a few years after Freeman's case, the Three-Fifths Compromise would be passed during the Constitutional Convention. The compromise stated that slaves would be counted as 3/5 of a person, thus giving slave states more representation in Congress. This action was the opposite of what Freeman was doing. She wanted to be considered a full human being in the eyes of the law and not be considered lower than second class. Today, Black, and brown people are still fighting to be considered equal under the law. Recent civil rights cases including the murder of George Floyd, the exonerations of people wrongfully convicted of crimes, and countless cases on those with marijuana convictions being expunged, the law is slowly trying to make up for the decades of systemic injustice. While these cases are just a few where the law is addressing the inequalities that

Black and brown people face, there is a long way to go to reach true equality. But we can determine that Freeman started a trend of people fighting back against the system that tries to keep them in a second-class place.

Cathay Williams was a woman who lived by her own rules by joining the United States military and living as a man. These actions force us to look at the racial and gender stereotypes that we place upon others. When Williams was born into slavery, there was no way that she thought that she would be free. From what is known about slavery, most slaves were born and died in slavery. While a lot did run away and people like Harriet Tubman who helped others escape and find safety in the North, there were others who lived out their lives on the plantations. When the Civil War happened and the ratification of the 13th Amendment on December 6, 1865, slaves were freed and forced to find new ways to provide for themselves and create new lives and identities. During the war, the town that Williams lived in was taken over by Union soldiers and she was forced to cook and clean for the soldiers. After the war, Williams had to decide how support herself and she decided to join the Army by disguising as a man. Living as a man must have had its challenges, but she was able to do the same work and activities as any other soldier. It took a lot of bravery to change her identity so she could live independently. Although she was later discovered to be a woman and discharged, Williams made history when she decided to live as a man and infiltrate the Army. History often leaves out stories like her in favor of more well-known and 'exciting' stories, but Williams shows us that living life on your own terms is the most interesting story. Today Black women are still in the military and are making strides to make the leadership more diverse. Women like four-star Navy Admiral Michelle Howard, former Rear Navy Admiral Annie B. Andrews, Brigadier General Kaffia Jones, Major General Gwendolyn Bingham, Major General Marcia Anderson, Major General Nadja West, and others have made history with their current or former posts in the military branches. They continue the legacy of Black women in the

military that Williams was a part of.

There are a lot of things that tie these three women together and some aspects of their lives are extremely similar. Both Williams and Wheatley had trouble after important chapters in their lives where they both broke barriers in predominantly white spheres of society. Wheatley could not find the same success and security that she had while enslaved, while Williams struggled to find her footing in the world after leaving the military. These two women defied the limitations placed on Black women in the time periods they lived in, but how did they end up in their respective situations? We can conclude that these women were ahead of their time and society was not equipped to support their different way of living. In Williams's case, after she left the military, she stayed in the South. After the Civil War, Reconstruction began which can be described as the period between 1863-1877 where African Americans were granted rights and efforts were made to combat the inequities of slavery. Williams lived through this period and after it. She lived part of her post-military life in Colorado then in Missouri. The South saw great changes post-war and once Reconstruction ended, there were efforts to take away the rights that African Americans had gained. Williams's life post-war included a husband who stole her money and the inability to collect a pension from the Army because her service was not legally recognized. In comparison, after Wheatley's manumission, her life was vastly different from when she was enslaved. Once she was freed, she had to find employment on her own and did not have any skills that she could offer. 18th century Boston was not set up to support a freed African woman with no skills even though Wheatley reached a certain level of local celebrity. She eventually died penniless and without any support from her former benefactors. Williams and Wheatley saw hardship and it is sad that they were not celebrated for their actions while they were alive, but now there is more recognition for them in today's time.

Doing the research for this thesis, I encountered a few limitations with finding information

about my three subjects. One of the biggest issues that I encountered was the lack of academic articles and books about my subjects. I found the most information about Wheatley, partly because, she gained a level of fame with the publication of her poetry and her work has been preserved and reprinted. Academic scholars are looking at Wheatley more and how her poetry works in tandem with other writers. In terms of Williams and Freeman, there was less information and the databases that I used could not offer much. Freeman's life is getting more recognition now with the unveiling of her new statue soon and more books being written about her, more specifically children's books. Another issue that I faced writing this thesis was the overall lack of information about alternative slave narratives. Most researchers focus on 'traditional' slave stories which can be easily taught. If we look at the most popular biographies of slaves, the focus is on slave stories that involve a cruel master, a daring escape, families torn apart, or some other story we have heard before. Finding information about the variety of slave stories was difficult. Besides stories like Wheatley's and a few others, most information about slave life is limited. This limitation did not affect what I could gather on my subjects but rather forced me to investigate alternative sources, such as Black feminist literature, to build an academic and biographic profile.

This thesis was written so that it can serve as a basis on information and theoretical foundation for analyzing the lives of the three women. Most of the information that I found about my three subjects did not place them in conversation with the Black feminist and literary movement. By looking at my three subjects lives with a Black feminist lens, we can see how they have contributed to the activism that is occurring today. It was important to include a Black feminist lens when evaluating these women because the work that Black women are doing today in academia, activism, education, and other fields relates to the experiences that my subjects have faced. The work of bell hooks relates to Phillis Wheatley because they were both writers who took their personal ideas and put it into their work to tell their perspective. Wheatley's writings and

poetry showcases her intelligence and observations of the world, while hooks's work also displays her observations of the world but adds an analytical foundation to back up her work. Elizabeth Freeman's life connects to the work of Smith due to both women fighting for recognition in and out of the United States patriarchal system. Freeman sued so that her life can be considered equal to that of a white person under the law. She wanted the court to know that she should be free, not because of a broken promise of manumission but the idea that "All men are created equal" and are free under the law should include Black people. Smith wrote about the lives of Black women and how their concerns and experiences are valid even if they contradict the message of other mainstream groups. Even though Smith and Freeman lived in different time periods and used opposite methods to get their voices heard, they both wanted their lives to be understood as worthy. And lastly, for Williams, the writings of Patricia Hill Collins demonstrate the constraints that racial and gender stereotypes have on the everyday life and choices of Black women. Williams's decision to live as a man and seeing that as her only option to live independently shows how restrictive life was for free Black women. Collins's work seeks to explain how Black women have created their own communities and definitions within their lives to counteract the negative notions made.

There needs to be more writing about not only these three women, but other Black women that have been lost to history. There are several stories that can be explored and expanded upon. The contributions of Black women are not limited to the time of slavery or certain themes such as domesticity. Black women have made strides in a multitude of areas, and they continue to make history. But it is important to acknowledge that the pact actions of women whose names have been lost to history are just as meaningful. Historians have often picked and chosen who to write about and who is deemed important to the normalized historical timeline. And using Black female writers are the key to understanding Black female history. Although I used hooks, Smith, Collins, and a few other writers, there are other writers such as Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, and

Ida B. Wells that I could have used and should be used to work in tandem with Black women from the past. Wheatley, hooks, Freeman, Smith, Williams, and Collins are all historical sisters that are bonded by their quest for understanding and freedom from racial and gender confines.

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@repsmitty. "There's so much of American history that we Americans don't know. Thank you @DevalPatrick for your support of this critically important initiative. #blackhistory is #americanhistory. It's our obligation to teach the #realhistory #mapoli #MUMBETT." *Twitter*, 2 Nov. 2021, 6:36 am., twitter.com/repsmitty/status/1455484052916559875.