Comment on the Papers by James Ward and Christopher Geary

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Before turning to a detailed account of each paper, I would like to suggest that as disparate as their subject matter may seem--the work of an eighteenth-century poet and recent theatrical and auditory evocations of the lives of eighteenth-century black people, they share a number of key concerns. Most obviously, they both work to make visible race as the vector of the strange continuities of the afterlives of slavery and abolition. Perhaps most crucially here, both essays call our attention to the ongoing challenge our culture and aesthetics of whiteness presents to our ability to apprehend black art about black experience on its own terms.

The core of James Ward's expertise is on precisely the topic of our workshop--eighteenth-century afterlives--as shown by his book, *Memory and Enlightenment: Cultural Afterlives of the Long Eighteenth-Century,* and his having edited a recent special issue on Enlightenment legacies for *Estudios Irlandeses*. He has also published a number of pieces on Swift, so I hope to hear his comments on the concept of the Bathos in Chris Geary's paired paper. Wards' workshop paper is from a larger project on how eighteenth-century black lives are represented in works from recent decades on stage, and across print, visual (and, in this case) auditory media. His project goes well beyond scholarly writing, as we see from his public discussion with Irish-Jamaican writer Racquel McKee of Winsome Pinnock's *Rocket's and Blue Lights*, from a series in which participants are introduced to relevant texts and invited to discuss them with a facilitator (54). The project also includes work beyond James' research, such as a creative writer who is writing a novel based on the life of Sarah Baartman.

As Ward rightly points out, the visual reduction of the enslaved to the status of objects to be spoken for defines the most iconic eighteenth-century abolitionist images, both Wedgewood's "Am I Not a Man and Brother" medallion, and the Brookes slave ship print of bodies stacked like cordwood. While all such spectacle tends toward an objectifying effect, Ward carefully attends to differences between such representations, for instance, aptly calling out the "psychosis of whiteness" revealed in the movie *Belle.*

Representations of the Zong incident are key to Ward's paper. Turner's 1840 painting "The Slave Ship" and several post 2014 films render the Zong incident as spectacle, some more successfully than other. But all such visual renditions run headlong into the problem of spectacle, addressed famously by Saidiya Hartman as "spectacles of suffering," a problem further analyzed in the eighteen-century context by Ramesh Mallipedi in his 2016 book *Spectacular Suffering.*

Ward moves us beyond this question of spectacle through consideration of the effect of rendering the Zong massacre not as image but as sound. NourbeSe Phillip's brilliant book-length poem *Zong!* conceives the afterlife of the massacred as sonic, and indeed, Phillip's poem, which can seem inscrutable on the page, becomes intensely disturbing and transporting in performance--I hope some of you experienced this at ASECS Toronto. The poet orchestrates the audience in the repetition of fragments of words, which become powerfully, magically discordant and musical over time.

This move sets up James' investigation of the effect of two plays taking on Zong And its legacies, both of which became radio dramas only through necessity during the Covid pandemic. I will focus on Pinnock's play and the contrast Ward draws between its visual and audio versions.

Ward's account of the great difficulty of staging a scene in Pinnock's play--despite separating the characters on stage and using mime, "even with this careful staging, this looked like a scene of violence against a black woman by white men." This scene, intended to be critical of the exploitation of black suffering in visual media, becomes unwatchable as the audience reaction causes the video to be stopped. But switching to audio format, eliminating the possibility of mime, leads to a crucial decision to tell rather than to show--and this seems to allow audience to grasp the point that the main character Lou is rejecting exploitative spectacular suffering--and in this case the obsession with portraying black experience as purely "afterlife"--Lou complains of the cliche of the "ghost of slavery" and her unwillingness to once again be cast in such a role.

Ward protests against an intention to create a hierarchy of representations here, but I nonetheless takes him to be drawing on NourbeSe Phillip to make a case for the power and subtly of sonic performance and its potential for circumventing harmful tropes of spectacular suffering and for opening us really to hear, to willingly apprehend, voices that speak to us out of the black past. I would like to hear his response to this claim of mine!

Chris Geary deeply situates the paper he shares with us in the context of the chapter and the dissertation from which it originates, so I won't repeat that information. He is finishing a PhD at Berkeley, and has a very impressive list of awards and fellowships. He also has three forthcoming publications, one on the concept "category," one on seditious libel in eighteenth-century Ireland, and one in *ECF* with the intriguing title, "Dialectic of Whimsy."

Geary's paper on Phillis Wheatley's relation to "the bathos" as a category of aesthetic judgment brilliantly illuminates that this category has endlessly contradictory effects, beginning with Jefferson's paradoxical attempt to place Wheatley both beneath criticism and beneath Pope's Dunces. The contradictions and paradoxes generated are not limited to the problem Jefferson creates for himself by using a term of class discrimination for the purposes of racial denigration, but let's begin with that problem. Jefferson first contradicts himself by denying that literary criticism could apply to PW's work, and then performing the fundamental critical act of placing her work in an evaluative hierarchy. This contradiction grows from the contradictory nature of racial thinking itself, IE the notion that one human group is lower than another due to its lack of certain human qualities and abilities. For Jefferson, Geary shows us, invoking the Bathos, in the form of the Dunces, only muddies the waters. If Wheatley's racial status for Jefferson bars her from the possibility of intellectual labor, putting her in relation to Pope's dunces suggests instead that the intellectual labor of her verse is all too visible. Geary brilliantly, and crushingly for the *Scriblerians*, calls the concept of the bathos a form of petit-bourgeois thought.

I take this to refer to the wielding of the "Bathos" as an accusation against fellow writers that their verse reeks of the sweat they put into producing their work. The Bathos is not simply the "intrusion of the mundane into the sublime," but is more concretely the intrusion into, the visibility in, their work of the poet's labor and dependence on the marketplace. The Scriblerians delighted in performing disgust at the evidence of the Marxian "double freedom" of dunces--that is to say their free choice either to write or to starve. They, to their shame, write to eat, merely to sustain life, not at the behest of the muses. Pope, by contrast, in *petit bourgeois* fashion, heartily embracing the regime that would reject him, strikes the pose of a leisured gentleman immune to the marketplace. In t*he Epistle to Arbuthnot*, for instance, he claims to write never for money but only because the muses leave him no choice:

Why did I write? what sin to me unknown

> Dipt me in ink, my parents', or my own?
> As yet a child, nor yet a fool to fame,
> I lisp'd in numbers, for the numbers came.
> I left no calling for this idle trade,
> No duty broke, no father disobey'd

Pope's success in the literary marketplace is premised on denying his participation in it, in parallel his verse is thoroughly worked-over to deny the reader any sign of the labor behind it. By contrast, the truly gentlemanly Jefferson's failed attempt at dismissing Wheatley from criticism through criticism could itself be understood as "Bathos" in the most general sense of an inadvertent and unintended literary failing, but perhaps the gentlemanliness of his *lack* of effort in this failure to a degree insulates him.

Ultimately, Geary shows us that, for Wheatley herself the Bathos is paradoxically necessary. To defy Jefferson's racialized claim that she is incapable of intellectual labor, she must visibly perform intellectual labor in her poetry. The marketplace value of her writing depends on the anomalous place of slave labor as at once entirely defined by the marketplace and also outside of it. Hence neither her work nor her marketing of it came be excluded from her verse, thereby necessarily marking her in Popean terms as bathetic. As Geary puts it: "She ultimately embraces bathos in her occasional verse as a means of securing her freedom." I should admit that I struggled with the notion that an author could embrace "bathos," as it is often defined in shorthand as the unintentional intrusion of the absurd, in the form of aesthetic failure, into what should be sublime. However, accepting Geary's definition of bathos as visible labor, and recognizing as he states that Wheatley's verse "must make her devalued intellectual labor visible," this problem evaporates.

Emerging from this understanding of bathos as labor made visible comes Geary's fascinating suggestion that Wheatley isn't the first to be subjected to "the genre of the authenticating preface" by whites vouching for a black writers' authenticity, in the sense that this practice "appears to have been significantly innovated by Wheatley as a promotional strategy" to dispel rumors of ghostwriting. I am not sure if this claim of agency on her behalf counters the problematic racial ideology implied by such authentication or not.

Geary gives a brilliant overview of the ways that critics have always struggle to recognize Wheatley. Generally she has been judged for not being something other than what she was as a writer--a romantic, a male, a black nationalist, a post-romantic lyric writer--and argues that acknowledging her embrace of bathos as a style is necessary to finally reading her on the terms she gives us, rather on those we'd ourselves prefer. We cannot object that the bathos must be unintentional, as Geary has shown us that Wheatley is aware of its necessity to her success. His brilliant reading of the clever deployment of specifically Wheatleyean bathos in June Jordan's tribute and imitation seals the case he makes.

To return to my claim of the commonalities at the outset, I would like to ask the authors for their comments on how they think about the terms on which racial afterlives can be apprehended in a culture of whiteness.