

EDITORIAL

The Portland Observer

perspectives THIS WAY FOR BLACK EMPOWERMENT The Independent Challenge

As Good As My Word: Black History Is More Than One Month Of Indulgence

WISH TO ADD THE FOLLOWING PORTRAIT OF GENIUS TO MY MONTH-LONG RECITATION OF IMPORTANT AFRICAN AND AFRICAN-AMERICAN CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE WORLD'S CULTURE. These facts are drawn from that international "Information Superhighway" I now use to expand my research capabilities. We draw here from the work of Englishman, Peter Fryer, for this larger view of Phillis Wheatley, a gifted black American poet (My elementary school was named after her: St. Louis, MO).

The first book by a black woman ever published appeared in London in 1773 and was reprinted many times. It was called Poems on various subjects, religious and moral, and it contained 39 poems by a 19-year-old slave living in Boston, Massachusetts. The first black poet of any significance to write in English, Phillis Wheatley had just spent a month in England, partly as a kind of cultural ambassador or involuntary propagandist for the refinement of Boston. In this role, however, she turned out to be something of a boomerang for her pro-slavery sponsors. Though her situation neither equipped nor permitted her to become an abolitionist, she nevertheless became 'a supreme witness to the anti-slavery movement in Britain'.

Wheatley was not of course her own name but that of her Boston mistress, a tailor's wife who in 1761 bought her "for a trifle" in the local slave-market. Dressed only in a scrap of dirty carpet, the 7-year-old girl - her age was estimated from the shedding of her front teeth - seemed to be suffering from the change of climate but impressed her purchaser by her 'humble and modest demeanor' and 'interesting features'. Before long she was impressing her still more by trying to make letters on the wall with chalk and charcoal. Phillis was segregated from the other household servants and taught to read and write. Within 16 months she was reading

the Bible fluently. She learnt Latin and 'was proud of the fact that Terence was at least of African birth'. This child prodigy, whose attainments must have marked her as 'one of the most highly educated young women in Boston' and no doubt gave much satisfaction to the cultivated tailor's wife, was often visited by clergymen and other individuals of high standing in society'. But, in spite of the attention paid her, she retained her 'modest, unassuming demeanor'.

She seems to have begun writing poetry at about the age of 13. One of her earliest, and shortest, surviving poems, showing the influence both of missionary propaganda and of Alexander Pope - whose neo-classicism permeates all her later work - was called 'On being brought from Africa to America'.

When Phillis came to England in 1773, in the company of her mistress's son, she was lionized. The Countess of Huntingdon, to whom she had dedicated her first published poem three years before, introduced her to the Earl of Dartmouth and other prominent members of London society. Her visitors included Benjamin Franklin, then agent in Europe of the north American colonies. The lord mayor of London presented her with a valuable edition of Milton's Paradise Lost.

When her book was published, soon after her return to Boston, the London Magazine's reviewer found that 'these poems display no astonishing power of genius; but when we consider them as the production of a young untutored African...we cannot suppress our admiration of talents so vigorous and lively'. The Monthly Review came closer to making a political point. Its reviewer was much concerned to find that this ingenious young woman is yet a slave. The people of Boston boast themselves chiefly on their principles of liberty. One such act as the purchase of her freedom would, in our opinion, have done them more honor than hanging a thousand trees with ribbons and em-

blems. There were also favorable notices in the Critical Review, Gentleman's Magazine, London Chronicle (reprinted in the Universal Magazine), Scots Magazine, Town and Country Magazine, and Westminster Magazine.

Phillis Wheatley is 'easily among the most renowned - and therefore the most variously interpreted - Afro-American poets', and both advocates and adversaries have found in her writing only what they wanted to find. Her work has been overpraised because of her youth, sex, race, and servitude. And it has been undervalued because of this excessive praise. She was not a great poet. All the same, 'some of her poems reveal an exceptional being producing exceptional poetry'. And she displayed 'much more Black consciousness, much more concern for her fellow Blacks, than many readers will admit'. She was well aware of the part black people played in American and European society, and in the popular mind. Though she adopts the conventional missionary stance or calling Africa 'The land of errors, and Egyptian gloom, she often identifies herself as an African and entitles one poem: To S.M. a young African Painter, on seeing his Works'. Naturally enough, her concern for her fellow-blacks is expressed most strongly in her letters, which, unlike her poems, were not intended for the white reading public.

After her mistress's death in 1774, Phillis Wheatley seems to have made a precarious living hawking her book from door to door and reading selections from her poems to potential lady customers. In 1778 she married John Peters, a free black man whom she had known for five years or more. Though she bore him at least one child, and mothered two others whose origins are not precisely known, it was not a happy marriage. Peters was in and out of jail for debt. Two of Phillis's children died and the third was very sick. America's first black woman poet died in 1784, in a poor boarding-house, 'surrounded by all the emblems of a squalid poverty'. She was hardly more than 30. Her third child survived her by just a few hours.

JUAN WILLIAMS, AN AFRICAN AMERICAN POLITICAL REPORTER FOR THE WASHINGTON POST, WROTE A BOMBHELL COLUMN LAST WEEK. His nationally syndicated piece recognized America's independent Black leadership as serious contenders for the loyalty of the Black community.

As such, these leaders (he identifies Minister Louis Farrakhan, Reverend Al Sharpton and myself) are posing a frightening challenge to the Black political establishment, who are ignoring the rage of the Black masses, according to Williams, "at their own peril."

Michael Dawson, a professor of sociology at the University of Chicago and the co-author of a recent study of African American political attitudes, is quoted by Williams: "We were stunned by the magnitude of change in support of black-nationalist views since 1988. Right now half of the black community supports the idea of an independent black party. It's never been that high." Williams goes on to cite a recent survey which revealed that 67% of African Americans consider Minister Farrakhan to be a "good leader," and notes that support for "black nationalist viewpoints" is higher among younger and poorer Blacks.

Mr. Williams is to be applauded for writing a piece which honestly addresses the fact that there is a widening split in the black community and an intensifying competition between Black independents and the entrenched Black (largely Democratic Party) establishment. His posture, however, reveals his own political biases and offers one more glaring example of the reasons African Americans are so disillusioned with the "Educated Blacks" who have failed to lead the way in solving America's most fundamental social problem-racism.

Unlike what is reportedly now the majority of 'black people, Mr. Williams has a very low opinion of the independents. He sneers at Minister Farrakhan's militancy. He scoffs at Reverend Sharpton as a "character." And he dismisses me as "an itinerant activist." Most disturbingly, he scornfully

refers to "a glorification of ignorance...taking hold in the Black community" and to the African American people as "a community in a frenzied rush in the direction of the loudest voice."

One does not have to agree with Minister Farrakhan, Rev. Sharpton or me (in fact, we often disagree with each other) to consider that the reason half the African American people support an independent party is because it just might turn to be an effective political vehicle. An independent party just might get more for the Black community than the assimilationist Democratic party, which has sold out the interests of its most loyal voting bloc in order to win the White House, consolidate its control of the U.S. Senate and maintain its grip on the House of Representatives.

In 1972 at the National Black Political Convention in Gary, Indiana, the independent alternative was debated and defeated in favor of a strategy of electing more Black Democrats. While we have succeeded in electing hundreds of Democratic mayors, city council members and members of Congress, the Black community is substantially worse off than it was two decades ago. Poverty has increased. Educational opportunities have dried up. Violence and crime have skyrocketed. The very social fabric of our community is coming apart.

If Mr. Williams were to take a serious and unbiased look, he would see that the most striking "glorification of ignorance" among Black people is our blind loyalty to the Democratic Party policy-makers who have condemned us as a "special interest," repeatedly insulted even the most cooperative (Jesse Jackson) and educated (Lani Guinier) African American leaders, while taking our votes for granted. Is it any wonder that the Black leaders who remain silent about these political abuses are losing ground while those who are unafraid to speak out are gaining respect among Black people? Mr. Williams suggests that it is the utter paralysis of establishment Black leaders--their failure to put us on any kind of viable road to empowerment-has

caused Minister Farrakhan, Rev. Sharpton and me to forcefully tell the truth about what is happening to our people and to America.

Mr. Williams labels this outspokenness a "reactionary black populism." By what standard does he invoke this proactive label? Minister Farrakhan has involved himself in national electoral politics twice. The first time was to support the Reverend Jesse Jackson's presidential campaign in 1984, Jackson (in case Williams has forgotten) was the most progressive of the major presidential candidates; he ran on a progressive-liberal platform well to the left of the other Democrats. The second time Minister Farrakhan intervened in a national election was to support my independent candidacy for president in 1988. As everyone in the Black community knows, I am a leftist, a progressive. The independent party I lead--the New Alliance Party--is pro-socialist. Reverend Al Sharpton, whose "mainstreaming" has been heralded by major publications from the New York magazine, has significantly reshaped his political allegiances--from supporting the Republican arch-conservative Senator Al D'Amato in 1980 to being an ally of Reverend Jackson. We are not proponents of a reactionary populism in the Black community. Pat Buchanan and David Duke are the reactionary populists. We are progressive populists.

What will all of this translate into in electoral politics? I have no crystal ball. But I agree with Mr. Williams that the Black establishment ignores the rage at the grassroots at its own peril. A greater sensitivity to the new realities of American politics would serve the "Educated" among us well. If the Black community were to go politically independent in the coming years, it would not go alone. There are 20 million outraged white Americans who made a break to vote independent in 1992. If these two angry populations come together--which I believe they must--then these "ignorant" Americans might just be inhabiting the White house in 1996.

Saturday Respite/Recreation Center Set To Open For Adults With Disabilities

The Arc of Multnomah County today announced plans to open a respite care center for adults with developmental disabilities on the second and fourth Saturdays of each month

from 10 am to 3 pm. The center will be located in the Easter Seals Building at 5757 Sw Macadam.

Funded through a grant from Multnomah County, the

center will feature activities including arts and crafts, recreational opportunities such as picnics, neighborhood walks, and other outings in the community. The space has been donated by Easter Seals Society. The center is open to adults 18 years of age and older who currently reside with their family or in a foster care home.

The center will initially accept a maximum of ten adults per Saturday session, growing to include 15 adults at the end of the first six months. There will be one staff person for each 3 adult participants. Fees as on a sliding scale basis.

According to Gretchen Yost, Executive Director of The Arc of Multnomah, the center provides a much-needed resource for both the individual with a disability and for families. "For some of our families, this may be the only place they go outside of the home all month," she stated. "With the lack of vocational options available beyond high school, and the shortage of activity centers, the center will provide recreation and a time to socialize for the consumer and much needed respite for the family."

Interested families may call The Arc at 223-7279 to request an application packet, which includes the center policy and procedures, as well as fee information.



Letter To The Editor

Send your letters to the Editor to:
Editor, PO Box 3137, Portland, OR 97208

Ms. McGrory,

After reading your "if I had a Lillehammer" column in the Sunday, February 27, 1994 article, I was compelled to write this letter.

I was disgusted by your statements concerning Tonya Harding (or Rose Red as you so eloquently refer to her). Ms. Harding had every right to be a part of the Olympics. In fact, it is a miracle that she is able to skate what so ever. Before you and the rest of the news media condemn her, let's get the facts straight:

1. Skating is a very expensive sport! It takes money - lots of money to achieve Olympic and national status as a figure skater. Many people have had to borrow money and/or mortgage their homes just to give their children a chance to follow that (many times) elusive world and/or Olympic gold medal.

2. Ms. Harding has asthma. Just being an athlete is more than many asthmatics are able to achieve. Many children with asthma are discouraged by their doctors and families to become a member of any sporting event. As a child, I was unable to participate in many sports because of my respiratory ailments. As an adult who has "grown out" of this illness, I understand why her face was tight and she looked "tired" on the ice.

3. Tonya Harding is not rich.

True her outfit was not as elaborate as Nancy Kerrigan's outfit. (Imagine what most people can do with \$13,000!) So Tonya had to make her outfit. Many people can't even sew. What if her skates were old and not as clean as the others? I don't see you or your colleagues offering to help her. (Kerrigan received millions from Reebok, Campbells and now a parade in Disney World. Bonnie Blair didn't get nearly as much, and she received gold medals.

4. What is so wrong with Ms. Harding stating she was going to "whip her (Kerrigan's) butt"? She would look very stupid to say she will "lose to her"! Did you write anything about then President Bush stating he was going to whip another's butt? I rest my case.

5. I was taught to believe everyone is entitled to a fair hearing. (In this case, trial by media). How biased are you (the media) when you dislike someone because of his/her upbringing. If we are to be biased, let's talk about all people (shall we):

A. The Jews do not need to live since this is a Christian world.

B. Whites shouldn't be allowed to play basketball or run track.

C. Poor people shouldn't receive scholarships because only the wealthy deserve them. Nor should health care be given to the poor.

D. People shouldn't be given a second chance since they ruined it the first time.

E. American blacks should still be slaves.

F. Handicapped people should be destroyed because they are not "normal".

G. All people who learned of Kerrigan's attack should be condemned. I guess everyone in the world is a conspirator.

H. Women have no right to any protection since they are subservient to men.

I. Liz Taylor was married eight times! The last husband is young enough to be her eldest son.

J. The homosexuals. Well, there was Gomorrah. Need I say more?

K. Nancy Kerrigan's \$13,000 outfit. (See no. 1)

Apparently no one is worthy in the media's eyes. Does this mean someone will write an article about that tacky red outfit you wore? Don't you know you are too old for that!! Maybe Reebok will give you millions to help dress you.

Sincerely, A. Osekre
P.S. to Editor of The Washington Post:

I wasn't sure I was reading the national Enquirer or your paper. I think the Enquirer has better stories!

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