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# Phillis Wheatley and Carolina Maria de Jesus: Unexpected Voices of Revolutionary Times

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Phillis Wheatley and Carolina Maria de Jesus:  
Unexpected Voices of Revolutionary Times

by

Tami L. Toms

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Liberal Arts  
College of Arts and Sciences  
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## Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my family, who have encouraged and supported me. Without the support, I could not have completed the following work. My husband, Peter Brown, has given me unlimited support and encouraged me along the way. Peter has given up time, hot meals, and let me work in front of a laptop for hours. Peter has kept a smile on his face and coffee ready for me.

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## Abstract

The works of Phillis Wheatley and Carolina Maria de Jesus are compared using the concept of *jeitinho*, a Portuguese word for a little way. The creative and crafty method of *jeitinho* is identified in both writers' work and gives a lens to see a different level of engagement in criticism. Both writers have been criticized for their lack of social commentary, but the introduction of *jeitinho* shows their subtle, yet clear assessment of their society. By re-evaluating the contributions made by each author, it is possible to reclaim their relevance as authors.

## Introduction

The American poet, Phillis Wheatley, and the Brazilian writer, Carolina Maria de Jesus, are not usually compared or placed together, but there are similarities. I first read Phillis Wheatley's book of poetry, *Poems Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* and wondered if there might be a corresponding Brazilian writer whose work parallels Wheatley's. When I read *Child of the Dark* by Carolina Maria de Jesus, I recognized identical tactics used by each writer. Although the writers wrote at different times and places, I noticed that both wrote during times of political change or revolution. Both writers became internationally known during their lives, then slipped out of the public view, and both died in poverty. Initially, this seemed tragic, but then I read Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*, and found hope. The tactics Certeau described were similar to the Brazilian concept of *jeitinho*, or "little way" to navigate through life. *Jeitinho* is a popular word for the playful, crafty, creative, and even devious ways to describe the daily acts of resistance needed for survival. Certeau proposed that even when a change is initially small, the future that results from that change, can be unimaginable and unintended. The two writers, when viewed through the lens of *jeitinho*, maneuver through social systems by writing and through their writing change how the structure of their social systems are seen.

While living in Brazil in the late 1980s and early 1990s, I first encountered the word *jeitinho*. I shopped at a market place to buy food for my family and a butcher would wrap the meat I selected around a large piece of bone before weighing. No matter how



carefully I watched him, when I unwrapped my purchase, a large bone would be there. I asked a friend and she said that this was his jeitinho, or way. He justified this sleight of hand because I was able to afford to pay more. Later, my Brazilian mother-in-law used the same word to describe the way that she managed to raise her family of twelve children. There was pride in her voice as she described making the impossible become possible by educating her children in an atmosphere where failure seemed almost a certainty.

The concept of jeitinho can be applied to both Phillis Wheatley and Carolina Maria de Jesus allowing the reader to see a side of each writer which deepens the readers' understanding of the impact that each writer had on their societies and acknowledges the value each added. Revolutionary or politically unstable times are important as during times of change, decisions are made about which path or trajectory will be followed. Many ideas are introduced during a revolution and even if rejected, their introduction is still impactful. The climate of revolution, or political change, offered brief opportunities for the marginalized voices to be heard. Though neither Phillis Wheatley nor Carolina Maria de Jesus were considered revolutionary writers, by writing during times of political change, they employed the tactics at their disposal often in subtle ways.

Phillis Wheatley published her small book, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, in 1773. Carolina Maria de Jesus published *Child of the Dark* in 1960, a diary of her life in a favela, from 1955-1960. The two books were published in pivotal historical times, before the 1776 American Revolution and before the Brazilian military

dictatorship which lasted from 1964 to 1985, respectively. The revolutionary times in which each woman lived and wrote are elevated to near mythic proportions. As determinations for the future course of society were selected, major ideas were culled and replaced.

“Liberty” is the word linked to the American Revolution, yet Phillis Wheatley writes while enslaved, deftly using the literary style of the time and incorporating the religious images with political links. The theme of liberty is juxtaposed against the reality of her personal enslavement. The use of the religious theme in poems of death gave Phillis Wheatley the opportunity to illustrate suffering. Suffering was used in religion as something to be survived in exchange for a future in heaven. In Wheatley’s elegy poems, religion is used as if a weapon, to illustrate that the suffering one feels is real. If the suffering felt following the death of a loved one is real grief, then subtly the idea is introduced that the worldly suffering by enslaved people is also real. By using the same idea that suffering on Earth leads to heavenly rewards, a concept is regularly enforced to the enslaved people through religion, the principle is not insolent, but rather is supported by conventional religion and therefore allowed. Readers are faced with the dilemma between either rejecting the main concept of religion which suggests that a better life in heaven awaits and accepting the loss of a loved one, or accepting the transitory nature of life and ceasing to grieve for their loved ones. This concept allows Wheatley to admonish in a poem the grief felt and forces readers to see the grief that all suffering causes.

“Progress” is the word linked to Brazil. The Brazilian flag is emblazoned with “Ordem e Progresso” (Order and Progress) and Carolina Maria de Jesus writes just as Brazil created Brasilia, the modern capital inaugurated in 1960 as a beacon of progress, yet Carolina Maria de Jesus lives in desperate poverty in a favela, or slum. The tumbling shacks of the favela are the antithesis of the gleaming futuristic city, Brasilia, and the progress which it embodies. Carolina Maria de Jesus used every available method to survive. She writes to first define the value of her life, then in that writing attempts to change how the world sees the plight of the poorest in society. Jesus is able to demonstrate that poverty is not tied to work ethic as she writes of long days, little food and a hard life. Her diary allows readers who have never visited a favela or a slum to feel the desperation that poverty creates and to have a deeper understanding of hunger and how hunger influences society.

Both Wheatley and Jesus capture the attention of the world as they write during these crucial times. Each writer reflects and interprets the political environment of the revolutionary times during which they lived. The colonial era of Phillis Wheatley is steeped in religion and is reflected in her writing. Religion is a theme that Phillis Wheatley used to cloak criticism in an acceptable form. Carolina Maria de Jesus writes of religion in a manner which echoes the leftist government of the early 1960s Brazil. For Carolina Maria de Jesus, religion occasionally offered needed food, but the messages ring hollow. Both women use the *jeitinho* tactic and succeed in the systems within which they live.

Phillis Wheatley is important to American history and how history is remembered. Wheatley represents as a foundational writer in African American literature as she identifies as both African by birth and American by nationality. At the time of the American Revolution, crucial decisions about the future of the nation were made. Phillis Wheatley wrote in a veiled voice advocating freedom even when she had no personal freedom. Although freedom became a hallmark of the revolution, contemporary writers question if maintaining slavery might have been a more realistic reason for the American Revolution. This casts a quite different view of a history than the one often taken for granted.

Carolina Maria de Jesus, like Phillis Wheatley, is dark skinned, on the margins of society, and succeeds against all odds to write. Both women wrote while under difficult situations as a way to personally understand their situation, their stories became universal. Carolina Maria de Jesus wrote as Brazil elected a socialist president who was overthrown by a brutal military dictatorship that lasted from 1964 to 1985. Progress was a theme foremost in Brazil, yet thousands of Brazilians living in favelas without electricity, running water, and inadequate food can hardly be considered progressive. Poverty and progress in the early 1960s are interwoven into the worldwide culture as governments waged war on poverty in an attempt to stabilize the upheaval that hunger threatens around the world. Interest in Carolina Maria de Jesus' works amplified by an interest in the revolutions around the globe which are tied to poverty and hunger.

Phillis Wheatley and Carolina Maria de Jesus were women who could easily have become invisible, yet they wrote and in doing so, became at least briefly visible.

By writing during a time of political transition, and through the use of political and religious tropes, each writer ties her work to the historical period and helps to shape the image of that era. To gain visibility and a voice, each writer must use every method creatively.

The personas of Phillis Wheatley and Carolina Maria de Jesus each contain many layers which can be dissected and studied. In the pages that follow, the focus will be on the political and religious influences in their works looking through the lens of *jeitinho*. While gender, class, and race are important to the overall story of each writer, they are not the focus here.

This focus also exposes slavery and hunger, conditions suffered by many, but rarely described from a first-hand source. Although there have been many slaves and many slum dwellers, each woman through their writing brought a focus to their individual conditions and the condition of whole classes of people. The revolutionary political atmosphere provided a window through which ideas of these writers were observed. A brief history of each writer follows with selected writings which illustrate how religion and politics were woven into the works of each.

Criticism of both writers has been extensive and reflects the attitudes of society. Due to the unusual place in society each writer occupied, the criticism from the more traditional literary community reflects the societal pressure felt against the marginalized writer. Questions about who decides what is literature arise. Each woman had a mentor with stronger ties to mainstream society. The mentors bridged the gap between the marginalized writers and their more hegemonic societies.

Each of the writers have had significant impacts. They represent examples of how the voice of even the least likely writer can add to the richness of literature and perhaps more importantly, create a space for other unconventional writers. Both Phillis Wheatley and Carolina Maria de Jesus rose to international fame, then quickly were forgotten. This study recognizes the important first steps made and encourages future writers to expand points of view. By using a different lens, the contributions made by the two writers are recovered and the historical importance of each writer is expanded. Although the success of the two writers may have been transitory, each writer was able to effect small change. The size of the change is not as important as the fact that the change was initiated.

Studying these two writers together, patterns emerge. The transformation which Certeau describes is perhaps small, like a hairline crack, but it is the beginning of transformational change. There is hope that a method, like the *jeitinho* described here, can subvert a structure designed to marginalize and silence voices and that initial small transformations allow for future, unknown and perhaps unsuspected, mechanisms to surface which will amplify transformations to come. This thesis recognizes the important part played by these two women. The recognition is important because as marginalized writers, their impact has been limited and questioned.

## Jeitinho as a Concept

As a woman living in Northeastern Brazil in the late 1980s to the early 1990s, I was immersed in Brazilian life and culture. I encountered the concept of jeitinho, first through the local butcher's almost sleight of hand, to wrap the meat I selected around a large bone, as mentioned in the introduction. The butcher's use of jeitinho was the more devious, or tricky side, but soon, I heard the word jeitinho used to describe many ways of making the impossible become possible. The word "jeitinho" translates to "little way" in English and is a diminutive of the word "jeito" or "way." The word describes a type of behavior which can be tricky, creative, playful, deceptive, and inventive. The concept in English is somewhere between "eked out" or "by hook or by crook," but neither capture the depth of the word as it is used in Brazilian culture.

I learned from friends and relatives that I should expect to see a jeitinho in the interactions with others and realized that there was not a good translation of the word. My Brazilian mother-in-law, Dona Maria, used the word proudly to describe how she managed to maneuver through a system designed against her and to raise her children well. Dona Maria was born in 1926 in a small farming village to parents who believed that women should not be educated. A woman who could read and write was less valuable in marriage, because she might pass notes to another man, so her father kept his daughters illiterate. Dona Maria was married at the age of 15 to a local farmer who was also illiterate and over 30 years old. The couple had 12 children together and Dona Maria made sure all of her children were educated. Most received college degrees,

several received doctoral and post-doctoral degrees. Dona Maria proudly saw the education of her children as her jeitinho. Against all odds, this jeitinho allowed for success when success seemed impossible. Dona Maria was aware that the system was stacked against a dark-skinned, illiterate woman, yet she did everything she could to assure a better future for her children. Realizing that the small village offered no opportunity, she risked her marriage and moved to the capital, Natal, of her state, Rio Grande do Norte, for educational benefits for her children. She brilliantly managed to keep her children together, fed, educated, and successful, even while her marriage crumbled. Her life described the positive, creative side of the jeitinho.

The concept of the jeitinho stayed with me, so when I first read the poetry of Phillis Wheatley, I connected her to the concept of jeitinho. Phillis Wheatley was an unusual poet. She was enslaved and brought to Boston as a child of about seven years old. On July 11, 1761, she was purchased by John and Susanna Wheatley, a wealthy Boston couple (*Carretta Complete Works* xiii). As I had lived in Brazil, I searched for a Brazilian writer to compare with Phillis Wheatley. I found Carolina Maria de Jesus, a writer from the slums outside of Sao Paulo, who used many of the same tactics and strategies as Wheatley. Carolina Maria de Jesus was not enslaved and was born in a much later era (1913), but something resonated. Using the books, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* by Phillis Wheatley and *Child of the Dark* by Carolina Maria de Jesus, I compared how each woman managed to maneuver within the social systems to achieve goals through the use of the jeitinho.



As I read *The Practice of Everyday Life*, by Michel de Certeau, which described the “ways of using” and “ways of operating” this resonated with the concept of jeitinho. Certeau describes the “ways of using” or “ways of operating” as the art of being in between cultures (Certeau 30). One description Certeau used, is that of a person born in Northern Africa learning to maneuver through life in Paris. This compares to the two writers, Phillis Wheatley and Carolina Maria de Jesus, both operating on the margins of their cultures - Phillis Wheatley moves within the structure of slavery and Carolina Maria de Jesus moves within the structure of abject poverty. Certeau continues to describe legerdemain and wit as tactics which must be used by the weaker in society when the rules and laws are determined by the hegemony, or the powerful in society. Those in power have little need to feign, because the powerful determine what is proper, essentially setting or determining the boundaries and rules. The weaker members are forced to operate within these determined boundaries and must find tactics to help to balance their power. These tactics are what I am calling the jeitinho in this thesis.

The idea of the Brazilian jeitinho was studied by Diego Mansano Fernandes, who described it as a particularly Brazilian characteristic. Fernandes studied the jeitinho and found that income inequality, socio-economic issues, a lack of control by the Brazilian people, and an abuse of power, create the need for the concept of jeitinho. I propose that the concept of jeitinho is not limited to Brazil, but is a characteristic which resonates throughout most societies. Phillis Wheatley and Carolina Maria de Jesus use tactics which, when seen through a lens of the jeitinho, provide a deeper understanding to their work.

Although Diego Mansano Fernandes sees the jeitinho as a distinctly Brazilian trait, Wheatley shows that when a similar lack of control, injustice, and the abuse of power confront her, she employs the same behavior. The best application of the jeitinho is a creative approach, the worst application can become corruption. Phillis Wheatley and Carolina Maria de Jesus used a creative jeitinho method by pivoting the messages from religion and politics to create a space for their ideas. In addition, both writers lived during periods of revolutionary or politically unstable times when there were opportunities to give voice to ideas during a period when society must choose a trajectory forward.

Using the concept of jeitinho, the reader is allowed to see Phillis Wheatley and Carolina Maria de Jesus within a broader framework of black diaspora. Both writers showed an ability to make the impossible become possible with a jeitinho. This jeitinho works well with how Certeau describes the way that ordinary people work within a city or within a structure like a society and change that structure through their use. For Phillis Wheatley, using a jeitinho would be the only option available. She would do whatever was necessary to carve out a life for herself with her poetry and her abilities. As an enslaved child, she lived within rules set to limit her power, yet managed to learn to read and then to write. Writing was a way, or a jeitinho, to assume power in her life.

The value of considering this Portuguese word and the concept that defines it is important to both the story of Phillis Wheatley and of Carolina Maria de Jesus. The women shared an innate desire to write and to influence the marginalized lives which they led. Both women are marked by the color of their skin in societies that had been

immersed in slavery and the resulting racism that springs from a society built upon slavery. Both Brazilian and American societies have claimed that racism is in the past and that current society is no longer racist, but that idea is more myth than reality. By examining the similarities and the differences between the two authors, we can better understand the society in which we live and the successful methods that people employ to navigate systems that are designed to favor one population of society over another.

Robert L. Kendrick describes how Phillis Wheatley “masks and mimes” to develop her writing technique (Kendrick 224). The use of the mask or mime is to signify, as Henry Louis Gates describes it in *The Signifying Monkey* (Kendrick 234). Concealing and trickery is part of the concept of jeitinho; where there is an unequal balance of power, clever deception is used to readjust the power, if only temporarily, in favor of the weaker member of society. The de-stabilization created by the ruse “is a circumvention of strength, a subversion of the dominant constructions of the true and just, the transgression of old boundaries and the production of new ones” (Kendrick 236).

Similarly, Michel de Certeau writes about “a way of using imposed systems” (Certeau 18) that can be compared to the concept of the jeitinho. Certeau writes of “innumerable ways of playing and foiling the other’s game, that is, the space instituted by others” (Certeau 18). When options are limited for people within marginalized roles, they are living within an “imposed system.” The way of playing or foiling the imposed system becomes part of the repertoire of skills needed to survive. The imposed systems, whether slavery or poverty, spark individual creativity and the limits become

the spaces where life is practiced. The jeitinho is not so much a choice, but the only way to maneuver through an imposed structure successfully.

Michel de Certeau describes “la perruque” (or the wig) as an assumed manner which allows a tactic for “making do” by using and manipulating the system (Certeau 29). Once more, la perruque, is quite similar to the concept of jeitinho: a tactic to get by in an artful or creative manner within a system. An identity is assumed, much like wearing a wig, which allows the individual to appear to operate within the system, but under the wig, the individual maintains their identity and uses the structure of the system to their advantage.

Acknowledging the use of a jeitinho is recognition of a deeper intent and more creativity than many critics have seen in the two writers featured in this research. However, exploring similar uses of clever and playful methods to compensate for their lack of power within their societies, a link between the two authors can be made. Both Phillis Wheatley and Carolina Maria de Jesus have been criticized for not supporting their classes or their races, but if the jeitinho is considered, then the meaning of their work is changed to represent a utilization of power that is often overlooked. When this jeitinho is employed during a period of political change, a new window of opportunity is opened and the voices of the writers are heard at a time when the trajectory of a society is being determined and the boundaries or rules are being re-evaluated.

## How Jeithino was Employed by Phillis Wheatley and Carolina Maria de Jesus

As an enslaved writer, Phillis Wheatley was navigating a societal system where expectations of ability were tied to skin color. The concept of racial slavery in the New World was based on a belief of racial inferiority for those enslaved and their dehumanization. Wheatley's audience was primarily comprised of the people who enslaved and held these societal views to be true. Religion offered a way to question the validity of slavery. Wheatley wrote in the precise and methodical way that was popular at the time using couplets and regular lines. Wheatley was proof that skin color did not affect her ability to write.

Wheatley's works combat stereotypes in two ways. The first was the ability to write within the literary constraints of her time. By using the tropes and style popular during her historical timeframe, readers experienced ease and familiarity with her work which elevated her on a plane nearly equal to the educated faction of her society. In her use of religion, she selects a topic which is difficult to criticize without questioning the major concepts of Christianity. In effect, she is able to creatively weaponize religion to resist the main tenets of racism.

The idea of the jeithino is a pivotal use of available resources. For Wheatley the jeithino can describe how she was able to use social comments in her writing that might otherwise not have been acceptable.

Wheatley's use of religion in her works could be considered part of the *jeitinho*. Wheatley used religion in an interesting way; rather than console the reader in her many poems of death, Wheatley used religion to show that true freedom is not earthly, but heavenly. This was not an unusual thought for her time; religion has been used against the oppressed employing this message for centuries. The oppressed, perhaps enslaved, are given a message that suffering is tied to the world of humans, but the final and better world is in heaven. This discourages rebellion, because this world is transitory. In an elegy, there is an expectation of sympathy and an understanding of grief. When Wheatley writes an elegy, there is a coolness and an expectation that the grieving family needs to forget their suffering and remember that their loved one is in a better place. At the same time that she is offering sympathy, she reminds the reader of the joy of the afterlife. Had Wheatley not used religion, this sentiment may have appeared insolent. Wheatley is able to use religion to subtly question how society imposes limits on marginalized people. Any criticism of Wheatley's use of religion becomes a criticism of religion and its associated messages.

Another example of *jeitinho* is evidenced in the way that Phillis Wheatley acted when visiting the homes of others. Social norms would not permit an enslaved woman to eat at the same table with those that were free, so Phillis Wheatley would ask that a separate table be set for her (Richmond 21). Requesting a separate table, rather than eating after her white hosts, eating in the kitchen with other enslaved people, or choosing not to eat, may at first appear to be a humble act. In reality, because Wheatley is eating at the same time and in the same room with her white hosts, she quietly demonstrates equality. The request to prepare a separate table requires not less, but

more work. She used this *jeitinho* to gain the advantage and demonstrate that although society expected subservient behavior, she did not accept those limits and defined her place using the same limits meant to confine her to her advantage. Wheatley is operating within the structure of slavery but finding a way to use that structure to her advantage.

One *jeitinho* that Wheatley uses is her youth. In the well-known poem, "To the Right Honourable William Earl of Dartmouth," Wheatley writes "I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate/ Was snatched from Afric's fancy'd happy seat." Wheatley uses the description of her youth to discuss the effect that slavery had on her. If Wheatley had not pointed out her youth, the same discussion might have seemed more threatening, but by using her youth to her advantage, she can proceed. Youth is often seen as a weaker position, but Wheatley twists this weakness as a way to voice stronger comments than would be normally allowed by an enslaved woman.

Phillis Wheatley is criticized for writing without a direct rebuttal of the slavery under which she suffers. She uses a *jeitinho* to pivot and introduce ideas with a subtleness. Many poems describe Africans from myth or history and introduce the idea that classic literature recognizes the importance that African writers and African people have exerted upon history. Although not openly criticizing slavery, Wheatley is able to plant seeds into the mind of the reader that refute the main defense of slavery based on the inferiority of the African people. She shows the educated reader that Terrence (an African) is important. If classic literature prominently mentions African figures and if classic literature is a crucial marker of culture, then the people of Africa have ties to that

culture. There is a subtle idea that educated people would be familiar with these African figures, so reciprocally those who do not understand the value of African people must not be educated or must not be familiar with the classics. The use of classic literary characters with African roots is a quiet demonstration of the ignorance of those who believe in racial superiority. Wheatley introduces African figures with a *jeitinho* and with the intent to subvert classic literature to demonstrate her point that culture supports the equality of African culture. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. detailed the importance played by reason as a trait “privileged, or valorized, above all other human characteristics” (Gates, *Writing “Race”* 8). Wheatley’s use of reason and examples of literary figures clearly subverts the concept of inferiority.

In a time when the word “black” is often tied to evil, uncleanliness, or treachery, Wheatley gave a richness to the darkness of night or the color black through her use of the word “sable.” The elegance that she elicits by the use of “sable” battles the common view of black as dark. She pivoted the meaning to impact how her readers saw the world. “Sable” introduces a richness and beauty to darkness or blackness, providing yet another example of the use of a *jeitinho* of turning a seeming disadvantage into advantage, in this case through subversion.

Even the distance that Phillis Wheatley has in her poetry could be intentional. She is seen as an oddity, brought out at dinner parties at the Wheatley home to perform her writing and reading, recognized more like a trained animal rather than as fully human. By keeping an emotional distance in her poetry, she keeps the readers at arm’s length. Separating herself from the reader becomes intentional. If the concept of the



jeitinho is correct, then, the emotional distance was chosen by her and in her choosing she shows that she has control. Her control of an uncontrollable situation while acting within that system that confines her, and refusing to accept the limitations, is a clear use of the tactic described by Certeau.

Carolina Maria de Jesus used religion to feed her children when she could, yet she openly questioned the validity of how religion views the poor. She suggested that the rich who could afford children should be those that have children, not the poor. She writes, “who should have children are the rich, who could give brick houses to their children. And they could eat what they wanted” (Jesus 130). Jesus writes, “If the Brother saw his children eating rotten food already attacked by vultures and rats, he would stop talking about resignation and rebel” (Jesus 77). She demonstrates the flaws that she sees in the religious teachings presented to the poor. Just as religion is used against the poor, Carolina Maria de Jesus, pivots religion to demonstrate how it could work if those who controlled it (the priests) had to live with the consequences of its teachings.

Although Carolina Maria de Jesus wrote daily in her diary and showed a desire to publish her work, when the opportunity to be published is offered by journalist Audalio Dantas, she was reluctant. Her reluctance could be feigned reluctance representing a jeitinho to assure his interest in her writing and a way to exercise control over this opportunity. Her interactions with Audalio Dantas use a subtle Scheherazade allure. This reluctance seems calculated in order to lure and cement Dantas’ interest, showing a calculated jeitinho.

Carolina Maria de Jesus used her ability to write and document her life in the favela at the same time she threatens to write about her neighbors. This represents the jeitinho that she uses to survive as a single mother in the favela. The power to write when no one is reading her writing is no real power, but she still uses the empty threat allowing her some control over her own life. This is an example of claiming a power over a powerless condition. The threat to write about someone in her diary is a calculated bluff and allows Jesus to claim power.

Carolina Maria de Jesus also used a jeitinho in her interactions with men. She had children with different fathers and was reluctant to settle into a relationship where she might lose any freedom. She actively rejected the societal norm of marriage. She chose to acknowledge her position in society as the daughter of an unwed mother, and as an unwed mother herself, to her advantage. Carolina Maria de Jesus refused to simply accept the need to have a husband or man to protect her, which society compelled for women. Rather than accept the shame of being the daughter of an unwed mother and an unwed mother herself, she chose to pivot that shame into the joy of freedom. She describes women fighting in the favela over men or being forced to support abusive men, in order to pivot and question the conventional notion of marriage.

One common criticism of Carolina Maria de Jesus is a lack of gratitude. There was an expectation that she should be grateful for even the half-hearted acceptance by society. Instead, she refused to bow her head, stood on her own, and continued to look critically at the world around her. If the idea of the jeitinho is used, even the concept of gratitude becomes a structure which needs to be maneuvered through. Gratitude can

be a kind response to an unexpected good action, but it can also be an expected response from a weaker person to a more powerful person in an effort to maintain the power relationship. The way that Carolina Maria de Jesus showed her resistance and the *jeitinho*, was to ignore societal expectations. This *jeitinho* is complex, as was Carolina Maria de Jesus. If she had accepted the common view, to hold her head down, to accept the traditional role, and had she not believed in herself enough to write, the story she had to tell would not have been told.

As many Brazilians did, Carolina Maria de Jesus practiced more than one religion. In the Portuguese version of her diary, the character Zuza, a local personality, is introduced as a “Pai de Santo” which translates to “Father of a Saint” (Jesus Portuguese 66). Pai de Santo is a term used in Candomble, a religion with ties to Africa, and used for spiritual leaders. In the English version, Zuza is introduced (Jesus 67), but he is not tied to Candomble and there is no reference that he is a spiritual leader. In both stories, Zuza invites the people of the favela to a party where they will each be given gifts. The people spend money to go to his house by bus then are given only some bread or a sandwich. As a result, Carolina Maria de Jesus notes that when Zuza tries to win support from the favela, he instead loses their support. Carolina Maria de Jesus is critical of both the Catholic and Candomble religions which she practiced. Zuza used hyperbole to promote his generosity, raising the expectations of the people of the favela, but then fails in his own attempt at the *jeitinho*. In the case of Zuza, he loses the support from many and shows how he has overextended his reach. This is an example of the *jeitinho* which was not practiced well and has detrimental consequences.

Carolina Maria de Jesus was unpredictable and used every system to her advantage. When a Brazilian senator asked her to sign her book for him, she wrote “I hope that you give the poor people what they need and stop putting all the tax money into your own pocket. Sincerely, Carolina Maria de Jesus” (Jesus xiii). After achieving writing success and while dining at a restaurant, Carolina Maria de Jesus asks a photographer to make a notation under the photograph when published to say that she used to have to eat from trash cans and “that she has come back into the human race and out of the Garbage Dump” (Jesus xv). These comments show that Carolina Maria de Jesus is able to use the space she occupies to make her point. This is the *jeitinho* where she is playful, yet at the same time is stating criticism which many would not expect.

## A Brief History of Phillis Wheatley

The history of Phillis Wheatley's journey from Africa to America is shared by the ancestors of many Americans and is both universal as well as a unique personal journey of a specific brilliant woman. Phillis Wheatley lived during the American Revolution, a pivotal historical moment and she begins her life enslaved in America. Enslavement during a revolution where liberty is a keyword is a contradictory concept to the reality of Wheatley's life. The story of Phillis Wheatley and how we view American history is equally contradictory, yet her story is fundamental to understanding the truths of unaltered history.

The facts of Phillis Wheatley's life before arriving in Boston are meager. Phillis Wheatley was brought to Boston on the slave ship, *The Phillis*, and she was named after both the ship and the family that purchased her. It is worth pausing here to consider how even her name was a constant reminder of her status as a slave and her relationship to the Wheatley family. As a young girl of only seven or eight years old, she is put on display to be purchased wearing only a "quantity of dirty carpet" wrapped around her like a fillibeg (or a kilt-like garment) (Carretta *Complete Works* 12). Phillis Wheatley's age is only approximated and based upon her missing front teeth. Susanna and John Wheatley purchase the small, young girl to be raised so that they will have a caretaker as they age. The Wheatley family had lost a daughter at roughly the same age as Phillis Wheatley, so they may have been attracted to her on an emotional level as well.

In the Wheatley home, young Phillis wrote on walls, which may indicate that she had been taught to write before being enslaved. If she had been taught to read and write in Africa, she may have attended Qu'ranic schools which were open to both boys and girls. The Qu'ran has many of the same stories from the Bible, so religion might have appealed to Phillis Wheatley as a welcome remembrance of her homeland. We don't know what memories Phillis Wheatley had of her birth family, only a brief recollection of her mother pouring water at sunrise appears in her writing. The writer, Will Harris, discussed the possibility that Phillis Wheatley was raised in the Muslim faith. The belief that Phillis Wheatley was Muslim is bolstered by accounts from Margaretta Odell, a great-grandniece of Susanna Wheatley (Harris). Harris proposed that Phillis Wheatley could have been from the Fulani people and that Arabic would have been widely taught to both boys and girls (Harris). If Phillis Wheatley had learned the fundamental writing skills in Arabic, she would have been taught religion as well, because education was through Qur'anic schools. The Qur'an shows the ties between Christianity and Islam because prophets, like Noah, Abraham, Jacob, and others are mentioned in the Qur'an (The Qur'an xvii). If Phillis Wheatley had been educated using the Qur'an, when she learned English and heard the stories from the Bible, she might have remembered the childhood stories. This familiarity would be a comfort and a reminder of her home in Africa. Rather than seeing Christianity as a new or different religion, Christianity would be a religion built on the beliefs that she already had been taught. Christianity is one more framework which Phillis Wheatley worked within. Religious teaching framed thoughts and concepts. Phillis Wheatley recognized that framework and was able to use it to her advantage.

The Wheatley family owned other slaves, but Phillis was treated differently. In a story about the Wheatley family, another slave, Prince, is reprimanded for sitting next to Phillis in a carriage which places Phillis in a status apart from others, even within the Wheatley home (Carretta *Biography of a Genius* 23). Although Prince is reprimanded, if he was driving the carriage, he would not have selected the seating, but Phillis as the passenger could have either sat beside him or behind him in the carriage. It is clear that Phillis Wheatley made the choice, not Prince, yet Prince is punished. This shows the position of power that Phillis Wheatley wields in the household even though she is enslaved.

As a child in Boston, even had she not been a slave, she would have had little freedom (Carretta *Biography of a Genius* 22). Children were not viewed as independent, regardless of race or social standing. Jennifer Thorn writes that the relationship between Phillis and Susanna Wheatley may have been that of slave and owner, but that does not necessarily preclude love. It is easy looking at history to believe that what we view as right or wrong now could be as easily discerned by those living in that historical period. However, history and societal beliefs are more complex, and the justification of ideas, like slavery, women's rights, or civil rights, often were accepted without deep thought. Based on the young age at which Phillis Wheatley joined the Wheatley household, it is likely that Phillis Wheatley looked for a parental figure in her life. Susanna Wheatley and her daughter, Mary, would have been the most likely maternal influences. Considering that Phillis Wheatley was a young child and was raised with the Wheatley family, it is probable that there was a closer tie between Phillis and Susanna in the quasi-familial roles of mother and child.

As a child, Phillis Wheatley would also be less threatening than an adult slave. Jennifer Thorn writes about the different attitudes in northern slave society and southern or Caribbean slave society toward slave women and reproduction. By purchasing a child, the issue of fertility was not an immediate concern, which allowed Phillis Wheatley to be considered less problematic than an adult woman might have been. It is interesting to consider how Phillis Wheatley's marriage to John Peters changed her life. Later in life, when Phillis gained freedom and was married, societal attitudes toward her would have been quite different than when she was a child. As a child there was an automatic difference in status, simply based upon her youth, but as she aged and became a woman, her status changed. Children were allowed freedom to ask questions that would have been considered improper if asked by an adult. Phillis Wheatley seems to understand the freedom to question permitted by youth and thereby references her youth when she wishes to question slavery.

Mary Wheatley, daughter of Susanna and John Wheatley, taught Phillis to read and write (Carretta *Complete Works* xiii). The family was religious and taught Phillis Wheatley from the Bible and from classic literature. Her education in classic literature was uncommon for free women and was more in line with the education that a wealthy young man in the colonies might receive. For an enslaved woman, the education in the classic literature of the time was very uncommon. The use of her natural talent and intellect is evidence of a calculated method. The place that Phillis Wheatley occupied in the Wheatley family was unusual and she used it to her advantage.



The published poems of Phillis Wheatley come with a preface that included a sworn statement from esteemed men that assure the readers that they are familiar with Phillis Wheatley and confirmation that she did indeed write her own poetry. This acknowledgement was necessary because the idea of a slave girl writing poetry was startling. The acceptance of slavery relied upon the idea that those enslaved were not on par intellectually. The veracity of the idea that the men listed in the preface had met and interrogated Phillis Wheatley is disputed today, but the need for such a disclaimer shows a society unable to imagine the intellect Phillis Wheatley displayed. Guile was needed to use a disclaimer to assure that the book was published.

Through the years, the criticism showed both praise and contempt for Wheatley's poetry. The views reflected the beliefs of the critics about racial slavery during their times more than a criticism of Phillis Wheatley's work.

Thomas Jefferson wrote of Phillis Wheatley in "On the unacceptability of blacks in white America," that "Misery is often the parent of the most affecting touches in poetry. Among the blacks is misery enough, God knows, but no poetry... Religion, indeed, has produced a Phyllis Whately, but it could not produce a poet" (Robinson *Critical Essays* 42). Thomas Jefferson owned slaves and perhaps had an interest in keeping slaves viewed as less than human in order to justify this ownership. Jefferson viewed Africans as "inferior to the whites...in mind and body" (Nash 111). The views expressed by Jefferson toward African Americans are clearly defined in his writing, yet Jefferson as an historical figure is tied to the concept of liberty in a mythical way. The

myths of history expose the need to consider history clearly and look beyond the myths that influence what we think that we understand about history.

Although abolitionists supported Phillis Wheatley, the support was one dimensional- acknowledging her talent as a writer, but missing the depth of the concept of jeitinho. Thomas Clarkson, a British abolitionist writes, “if the author (Phillis Wheatley) was designed for slavery, (as the argument must confess) the greater part of the inhabitants of Britain must lose their claim to freedom” (Robinson *Critical Essays* 44). As enlightenment in the 1830s brought calls for slavery’s end, Phillis Wheatley’s poetry was often used as an example of the elegance of the slave and the barbarity used to enslave. Using the idea of the jeitinho, the poetry can be seen as more nuanced and deeper than just the ability to write.

In the 1970s, a renewed interest in the poetry of Phillis Wheatley coincided with an interest in African American Studies. In 1974, Angelene Jamison writes that Phillis Wheatley wrote poetry for Whites, she “did not address herself in any significant degree to the plight of her people” (Robinson *Critical Essays* 128). John C. Shields, in 1980, discussed the link between the writings of Phillis Wheatley and the understanding of the sublime to show that Phillis Wheatley was a serious poet (Robinson *Critical Essays* 203). Mukhtar Ali Isani writes that Phillis Wheatley “was widening the range of eighteenth-century sensibility while working within the basic tradition of the age” (Robinson *Critical Essays* 214). Henry Louis Gates, Jr. wrote how Phillis Wheatley fit into the history of her time and how she wrote to become free. Gates suggested that readers must “learn to read Wheatley anew, un-blinkered by the anxieties of her time

and ours” (Gates *The Trials* 89). Gates highlights the need to ignore images presented by history or generally accepted myths and instead seek a deeper understanding and a more realistic view of history.

Robert G. Parkinson described the importance held by “racial scaremongering and exclusion” in the American Revolution in *The Common Cause: Creating Race and Nation in the American Revolution*. Following his examination of historical news articles, Parkinson proposed that racial exclusion was a common cause adopted during the American Revolution. This is in stark contrast to the commonly held myths of liberty and freedom. If Parkinson’s theory is correct, then the American Revolution was a pivotal time for racial identity and showcases the importance of African American writers, like Phillis Wheatley. The prominence held by Phillis Wheatley at the time of the Revolution was in direct opposition to the racial exclusion that came to represent the new nation of America.

As America transitioned from English colonies to a new imagining of itself, Phillis Wheatley’s poetry takes root. David Waldstreicher notes that the neoclassical revival which bridged ancient and modern society mirrored the ancient versus modern debate about the formation of America. The Revolution was a time to decide which ancient ideas would form the new society and which would be discarded. Slavery could be seen as a link to the ancient world. Simply through her eloquent writing, Wheatley confronted and rebuked the belief that slavery was justified due to racial inferiority. Clearly, Phillis Wheatley was a capable writer. Her poetry proved that the justification of slavery based on racial inferiority was not valid and “raised the distinct possibility that history was

going backwards, not forwards, in America” (Waldstreicher 727). Waldstreicher continues to link Thomas Jefferson’s dismissal of the poetry of Phillis Wheatley to the “very public entry of an African woman into the conversation about ancients, moderns, Africans, and Americans” which undermined a justification for slavery and the treatment of women as inferior (Waldstreicher 732). As Phillis Wheatley used neoclassical ties to literature, particularly linking herself to African heroes, like Terence, she tied literature to Africa and claimed her place. Thomas Jefferson’s dismissal of Wheatley’s neoclassical poetry and his linking religion to Wheatley’s success was a method used to devalue the influence Wheatley had on American society at the pivotal time of the American Revolution.

Defining freedom is an important part of understanding the dilemma that Phillis Wheatley faced as a slave and as a person. The limited choices that Wheatley made were defined by the world in which she lived, the beliefs that she held, and the limits that existed for her as a woman, as a slave, and as a child. The freedoms that we associate with the American Revolution were those experienced by wealthy, white males, but not by American society on the margins: women, minorities, children, the poor, or slaves. For the marginalized, freedom was not expected. The American Revolution did not include women, something that Abigail Adams reminded us when she said to “remember the ladies and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors.” In the first draft of the Declaration of Independence, written by Thomas Jefferson, there was a paragraph (which was omitted in the final Declaration of Independence) that stated:

He [King of England] has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating & carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither. This piratical warfare, the opprobrium of INFIDEL Powers, is the warfare of the CHRISTIAN king of Great Britain. Determined to keep open a market where MEN should be bought & sold, he has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain this execrable commerce. And that this assemblage of horrors might want no fact of distinguished die, he is now exciting those very people to rise in arms among us, and to purchase that liberty of which he has deprived them, by murdering the people on whom he also obtruded them: thus paying off former crimes committed against the LIBERTIES of one people, with crimes which he urges them to commit against the LIVES of another (Robinson, Kirk Ward 20).

This omitted section of the Declaration of Independence is telling. The omission shows the dislike of the concept of slavery but at the same time, there is also a condemnation of Britain and her king for fomenting insurrection among the enslaved people. This offers a great deal about the mindset of the Founding Fathers. Some may have been against slavery, but since slavery was a part of the early American life, they were also against the freeing of the slaves because that could be a risk to their own lives and a financial cost to the owners. As a slave owner, as well as the father of children with his own slave, Sally Hemmings, Jefferson is unusual. Sally Hemmings was also a half-sister to his wife (Nash 114). In Jefferson's *Notes on Virginia*, he is

concerned that “if abolishing slavery became the national policy, then a stable biracial or mixed-race republic would be an impossibility” (Nash 114). In the 1790s, Jefferson attempts to banish white women with mulatto children from Virginia, but continues access to black women by white men (Nash 116). These ideas are based on Thomas Jefferson’s belief in the inferiority of the African people and society’s double standards related to the behaviors of men versus women. It is important to remember that many of these views representing misogyny and racism continue to plague our society today. An understanding of the mindset of the political leaders during the American Revolution is important as it more illustrates clearly the place that Phillis Wheatley occupied in history.

Arthur Lee wrote in 1767 that “freedom is unquestionably the birth-right of all mankind, of Africans as well as Europeans” (Nash 16-17). Phillis Wheatley wrote a poem to Charles Lee, “On the Capture of General Lee.” General Lee had tried to take George Washington’s place in the revolutionary army and was charged with insubordination in the battle of Monmouth (*Carretta Biography of a Genius* 158) so the poem is unusual as Wheatley describes the “Godlike Washington” in a poem about Washington’s rival. Wheatley writes, “Find in your train of boasted heroes, one, To match the praise of Godlike Washington” (*Carretta Complete Works* 92). Phillis Wheatley was either unaware of the rift between Charles Lee and George Washington, or perhaps wrote with a different intent. Could she have written about Charles Lee knowing about the feelings that Arthur Lee had at the time of the Revolution? Perhaps Wheatley was misleading the audience from Charles Lee to Arthur Lee. If she intentionally planned to mislead the reader, this would show another example of guile.

Phillis Wheatley's fame during the American Revolution is important. She writes about George Washington and the events leading to the American Revolution and stakes a claim to her place as both an American and an African. Gerald Horne and Gary Nash are two authors that claim that the American Revolution may have been less about freedom than about assuring that slavery could continue in America.

The importance of the historical events at the time of Phillis Wheatley's life cannot be ignored. The collections of her writings include many significant historical figures, from George Washington to Lady Huntingdon, each playing pivotal roles in history and how we view freedom. Her published book of poems was dedicated to Lady Huntingdon, or Selena Hastings, who created a "Huntingdonian Connection" of Calvinist Methodist churches (*Carretta Biography of a Genius* 28). Lady Huntingdon financially supported the burgeoning Methodist religious movement which included abolitionist ideas. Phillis Wheatley's poetry book that was published in Britain was dedicated to Lady Huntingdon. Letters were sent by Susanna Wheatley to Lady Huntingdon before Phillis Wheatley's voyage to Britain to introduce her.

The ties to Lady Huntingdon were important to the publication and support needed to market Phillis Wheatley's poetry. George Whitefield was important to both the Wheatley family, because he represented the version of religion they practiced, but also for his ties to Lady Huntingdon and to the Boston area where he preached. George Whitefield was the subject of one of Phillis Wheatley's published poems and Whitefield was the Chaplain to Lady Huntingdon (*Wheatley Complete Writings* 16). Wheatley

wrote a glowing elegy upon Whitefield's death in 1770, which helped tie her poetry to the religion of the time.

Wheatley wrote "To the University of Cambridge, in New England," or Harvard University (Carretta *Complete Writings* 11). In 1773, the commencement speech at Harvard University was a debate about the legality of slavery (Robinson *Critical Essays* 164), which implies that the students and faculty of Harvard were interested in the issue of slavery and abolition. If Phillis Wheatley was aware that the commencement speech discussed the legality of slavery, her choice of a poem to the University of Cambridge, or Harvard may have been a calculated and subtle reminder of the discussion about slavery.

Another way that Wheatley entered the discussions about the future of America was to write to and about George Washington. Although George and Martha Washington owned slaves, Washington replied to both the letter and poem. In a letter dated February 28, 1776, Washington invited Wheatley to visit his headquarters in Cambridge (Carretta *Biography of a Genius* 156). Washington's ties to slavery were complicated. He would free the slaves he owned only upon his death in 1799 (Nash 63). The fact that Washington invited Phillis Wheatley to his headquarters speaks to both the fame enjoyed by Phillis Wheatley at the time and her impact on discussions of racial equality during a period of change.

Phillis Wheatley wrote "To His Excellency General Washington" with one stanza showing the "heaven-defended race" of America. At a pivotal time, Wheatley writes about the images of freedom which become the American myth of freedom and a



people blessed by divinity. In this poem, Wheatley used the word “Columbia” for the new nation. Columbia defined America as early as 1761 (Shields 306). By crafting a poem to honor George Washington and the new nation, Wheatley is also crafting an image of the new nation. By writing about and to George Washington, Wheatley is claiming her place in the future country of America and her attempts at influencing how that new country will be seen. The future is being decided and Wheatley is staking a claim to define the future and to make her mark upon that history.

Although Jefferson disparaged Wheatley’s talent, the fact that her poetry was discussed by Jefferson acknowledges the importance that Wheatley’s poetry held at the time (Carretta *Biography of a Genius* 200). Had Phillis Wheatley not been important, there would have been no need for Jefferson to disparage her; the fact that she was important enough to require his interest is telling. Gary Nash asserts that Jefferson “promoted the use of hundreds of acres” in the West to compensate slave owners for the financial loss that freedom would cost in lost property to the slave owners (Nash 74) should the nation decide to abolish slavery. The consideration of a plan to give acres of land to compensate slave owners is an indication of the pivotal nature of revolution and the possibility of abolition. If no thought of abolishing slavery was being considered, then no plan to compensate slave owners would need to be considered.

Phillis Wheatley used her poetry to expand the importance of Americans and African Americans in society and to claim her place as both an American and an African. In the poem “On the Death of the Rev. Mr. George Whitefield,” the emphasis that Wheatley places on the African is shown. She places the African within the “dear

Americans,” but then also promotes the idea that the Africans could be the “sons, and kings, and priests to God,” an important concept including African Americans on an equal plane. The portion of the poem in quotes, as if spoken by Whitefield, notes that the Savior is impartial as the Africans are discussed. This impartiality by the Savior elevates the position of the African. By invoking the Savior, the highest authority is demonstrating the equality of the African, even the ability to “be sons, and kings, and priests to God.” This poem shows the deftness of Phillis Wheatley to invoke religion to make a point and to claim her place as both an American and African.

When Phillis Wheatley visited Britain in 1773 to publish the book of poems she had written, the *Somerset* case had already been decided. In 1772, the *Somerset* decision ruled that slaves from the colonies could not be forced to return to the colonies and could stay in Britain and remain free. Phillis Wheatley could have decided to stay in England as a free woman, but instead opted to return to America risking her freedom. Although this decision could have been influenced by many different factors, the decision is a reminder of how important, how complicated, and perhaps how personal, the decision would have been for Phillis Wheatley. She may have had emotional ties to the Wheatley family. She may have felt that she played a part in the ongoing public discussions for the future of America. She may have felt that America was her home. The decision to return to America may have been influenced by all of those reasons. Whatever the reason, by deciding to trade certain freedom for an uncertain future indicates that she held deep ties to America.

During the American Revolution, black men fought alongside white men (Nash 10). Because England offered freedom, following the *Somerset* decision, some feared that black soldiers would not fight against the British. At the same time, Lord Dunmore proclaimed in 1775 that enslaved blacks could join the British against the revolutionary forces (Nash 24). Slave owners saw groups of slaves escape to join British forces (Nash 27). James Forten was a black man who fought during the Revolutionary War and was taken prisoner by the British and offered to be taken to England where he could “pursue a satisfactory career” (Nash 128). Instead, Forten insisted that he was a prisoner of war (Nash 128) and he represents the contribution that black Americans made to the American Revolution. Forten believed that America would be free for Americans of all color. He represents the black Revolutionary American, who, like Phillis Wheatley, believed that America would eventually offer freedom to all. Forten and Wheatley are important historical figures who documented the crucial roles played by African Americans and the impact and influence they held during the establishment of the new nation. Gary Nash writes that freeing slaves would perhaps have led to a better society (Nash 76). The explanation that it was impossible to free the slaves at the time of the American Revolution may be based on a justification of the history rather than sound reasoning. It is worth considering how history is often used to justify current political and social ideals and as we divest ourselves from the racism that has shaped society, ideas about history may change. As the views of history change, the importance of early African Americans, like James Forten and Phillis Wheatley, may also change as history accepts its less savory parts, like slavery, with a clearer

understanding. There may also be a future view of history that gives credit to extraordinary African Americans who participated in shaping American history.

After Phillis Wheatley returned to Boston and was freed, she entered a part of society- the free black society- which was both a small portion of society and always imperiled. One issue Wheatley and her husband John Peters faced, the issue that faced all freed slaves, was transitional freedom which was a daunting issue for previously enslaved people. Freedom, without financial compensation, left many free blacks in difficult financial situations. There was no support system from relatives, no social assistance, and many had limited education and few opportunities. For a free black merchant, there was little recourse if a white citizen did not pay their bills or honor an agreement. This placed black businessmen in a more precarious position than that of the white businessmen, who had the support of the courts when disputes arose. Since American slavery was based upon racial identity, the color of one's skin could easily become a threat to their freedom. A free black person continued to live with the real threat of re-enslavement.

The American Revolution was a pivotal window in time for Phillis Wheatley. Writing as a slave, she provided insight into the history of America. She played a fundamental role as a writer and as an advocate for the future of America. The myth that history presents of extraordinary wealthy white men creating the future nation overlooks the contributions made by women like Phillis Wheatley.

One poem that focuses the attention toward the American Revolution is "On the Death of Mr. Snider Murder'd by Richardson" written by Wheatley in February or March

of 1770. It is not one of the more famous poems by Phillis Wheatley, yet it cements her into the history of the American Revolution. Wheatley writes, "Thou (Christopher Snider) the first martyr for the common good" about the young boy (Snider) of 11 or 12 years old who was killed by Ebenezer Richardson (Shields 233). Richardson had been confronted in 1770 by a mob after he informed the British about the colonists' tax evasion (Shields 233). By identifying Snider as the first martyr, rather than the victims of the Boston Massacre, which took place a few weeks later, Wheatley documented the events leading to the American Revolution and thereby claims a distinct place as an American poet.

#### **On the Death of Mr. Snider Murder'd by Richardson**

In heavens eternal court it was decreed

Thou the first martyr for the common good

Long hid before, a vile infernal here

Prevents Achilles in his mid career

Where'er this fury darts his Poisonous breath

All are endanger'd to the shafts of death

The generous Sires beheld the fatal wound

Saw their young champion gasping on the ground

They rais'd him up but to each present ear

What martial glories did his tongue declare  
The wretch appal'd no longer can despise  
But from the Striking victim turns his eyes-  
When this young martial genius did appear  
The Tory chief no longer could forbear.  
Ripe for destruction, see the wretches doom  
He waits the curses of the age to come  
In vain he flies, by Justice Swiftly chaced  
With unexpected infamy disgraced  
Be Richardson for ever banish'd here  
The Usurpers bravely vaunted Heir.  
We bring the body from the watry bower  
To lodge it where it shall remove no more  
Snider behold with what Majestic Love  
The Illustrious retinue beings to move  
With Secret rage fair freedom's foes beneath

See in thy cor[p]se ev'n Majesty in Death

Another poem, "On the Affray in King Street, on the Evening of the 5<sup>th</sup> of March," which has been lost, was noted in a proposal for a book by Phillis Wheatley. The missing piece, a reference to the that the Boston Massacre, tied Wheatley to important events during the American Revolution.

There are layered meanings in her poem "On Messrs Hussey and Coffin," which is written on one level about two men with a tale of a stormy ship wreck, but who also share an historical importance. The introduction states that "Messrs Hussey and Coffin, as undermentioned, belonging to Nantucket, being bound from thence to Boston, narrowly escaped being cast away on Cape-Cod, in one of the late Storms; upon their Arrival, being at Mr. Wheatley's, and while at Dinner, told of their narrow Escape, this Negro Girl at the same Time 'tending Table, heard the Relation, from which she composed the following Verses" (*Carretta Complete Writings* 73).

The poem seems on one level to be about a ship wreck, a storm tossed journey, poem, appealing to all who had risked their lives on a trek. However, on a second level, the selection of Hussey and Coffin is important historically. Nathaniel Coffin becomes a "staunchly antislavery family" (Waldsteicher 721) and his slaves befriend James Somerset, a slave belonging to Charles Steuart. Later, the *Somerset* ruling (*Somerset v. Steuart*) in London declares that a slave brought to England cannot remain enslaved. The poem seems to highlight a reference by Wheatley to important people in the famous court case ruling on slavery and an awareness of the politics dealing with the issue of abolition. By focusing on the shipwreck and the redemptive nature of the wreck,

attention can be brought to individuals with ties to the *Somerset* ruling in a discreet method. The poem could be an example of the use of jeitinho to bring up a subject in a more acceptable way. The use of religion in saving the two men again makes the story appealing to the readers and becomes almost a “cover” to be able to discuss people important to a pivotal ruling in a more acceptable manner.

The religious theme of the leaving Earth for a better world is even shown in this poem about a near death experience. “To Heaven their Souls with eager Raptures soar, Enjoy the Bliss of him they wou’d adore. Had the soft gliding Streams of Grace been near,” is not what the reader expects. There is a feeling that rather than have survived the sea, they have missed out on heaven.

The poem “Liberty and Peace” was written after the marriage of Phillis Wheatley to John Peters and after the American Revolution. This poem is interesting because it is written using the name Phillis Peters and the theme of freedom or liberty is central. The concept of peace is important because the need for peace after a war is a welcome relief. Writing as Phillis Peters, there is still a clear tie to her identity as a proud American citizen. Phillis Wheatley Peters refers to herself as a Muse in many poems and in this poem, she claims how the Muse foretold the freedom of the nation as she writes “Lo! Freedom comes. Th’ prescient Muse fortold.” This ties her writing to the cause of the freedom of the new nation. This poem shows the jeitinho used to claim a place in history by showing how the new nation is indebted to the muse who foretold the future. This is a way to use self-agency to assume a place in the new nation.



The most criticized of Wheatley's poems is "On being brought from AFRICA to AMERICA." Perhaps even this poem can be viewed differently if the lens of *jeitinho* is used. The poem begins with "Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land." On the surface, Wheatley writes as if grateful for her enslavement, but if Phillis Wheatley is using a *jeitinho*, she first attempts to capture the audience and convince them of the gratitude they expect. The pivot is in the end of the poem when she acknowledges how some view her race, but fires back with a reminder to Christians that "Negros, black as Cain, may be refin'd, and join th' angelic train." This final stab at equality is made acceptable by the hook of gratitude in the first line. If the readers consider the *jeitinho* lens, then the whole short poem is a method to criticize slavery within the structure of inequality using religion as a tool to balance the power. Certeau's structure is evidenced by placating the expectation of gratitude by white society, and operating within this expectation; then, Wheatley is free to address the issue of equality. In subscribing to religion's redemptive ideal, readers might see that the angelic train is open to all, regardless of race, so that those on Earth who discriminate are operating on a lower plane. Even the unusual placement of "from Africa to America" puts the emphasis on Africa first, demonstrating importance and value.

Criticism of Phillis Wheatley revolves around how little she reflects upon African American literature as a voice for her race. Richmond discusses the influences on Phillis Wheatley and notes that she had little contact with the black community; she was raised in the Wheatley household in a quasi-familial role. Her writing reflects the position that she held, which was outside the traditional role for a slave; the expectation that she would represent a role which she did not fully hold seems unjustified. At the same time,

she did claim both African and American heritage (Richmond 60) which shows her understanding of her unique place. Using the lens of the jeitinho to view Phillis Wheatley's writing, she wrote and lived under the confined structure of slavery, yet she amplified her power through the guile she used and created a space for herself. As she created this space she began to define the idea of what it means to be an African American.

The portrait of Phillis Wheatley, below, which was included in the book, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, can be compared with the photograph of Carolina Maria de Jesus. Both show the women writing and concentrating on their writing. Both women were unexpected authors of their time and battled similar issues. Although separated by time and place, the authors are linked by similar strategy.

The two authors, Phillis Wheatley and Carolina Maria de Jesus, are rarely compared, yet when compared, the similarity in the tactics used are evident. To understand Carolina Maria de Jesus, a brief history is needed.



Figure 1 Phillis Wheatley  
National Portrait Gallery



Figure 2 Carolina Maria de Jesus  
Photo from *Folha de Sao Paulo*

## A Brief History of Carolina Maria de Jesus

Carolina Maria de Jesus documented her life at the bottom of Brazil's economic and social ladder. Brazilian slaves were freed in 1888, but life in the favelas or slums of Brazil remained brutal. This was the world of Carolina Maria de Jesus.

Carolina Maria de Jesus was born in 1913 in the state of Minas Gerais to an unmarried farmworker. At this time in history, women who were unmarried mothers were shunned by society in a way that the unmarried fathers were not. This is an outward sign of discrimination toward women that permeates society to this day. When a local woman known for her charity offered to pay for Carolina's schooling, Carolina's mother insisted that she attend in order to have a better life. By the age of 16, Carolina Maria de Jesus was supporting herself working as a maid and other low-wage jobs. Carolina Maria de Jesus soon found herself living in the Brazilian slums or favelas, as the slums are known.

While living in the Caninde slum near Sao Paulo, Carolina Maria de Jesus supported herself and her children by collecting paper from the trash and selling the collected items to be recycled. She wrote every day in a journal made from the paper she collected. Jesus documented life in the favela and wrote poetry, stories, and plays. She was present when Audalio Dantas, a young journalist, visited the slum to write about the opening of a new playground for children. Dantas overheard Carolina Maria de Jesus threaten another dweller of the slum that if their bad behavior continued, she

would write about them in her journal. With his interest was piqued, Dantas was able to convince Jesus to allow him to read and edit for publishing some of her journals.

In Portuguese, the name of the book that Jesus and Dantas published was "*Quarto de Despejo*," which translates to "*Room of Trash*." When translated by David St. Clair into English, the title was changed to *Child of the Dark*. The derivation for the Portuguese title is how Carolina Maria de Jesus sees the slum- as the trash room, or garbage dump, for the city. In addition to the literal trash dump near the slum, people living in the favela have also been dumped out or discarded by society. David St. Clair is known mostly for his occult writing which may have influenced the change in the title to *Child of the Dark*. There is a loss of meaning in the translation of the title and a disconnect from the writing of Carolina Maria de Jesus.

An excerpt from the book below shows the tie to trash or dump that is important to the book.

At 8:30 that night I was in the favela breathing the smell of excrement mixed with the rotten earth. When I am in the city I have the impression that I am in a living room with crystal chandeliers, rugs of velvet, and satin cushions. And when I'm in the favela I have the impression that I'm a useless object, destined to be forever in a garbage dump. (Jesus, 28-29).

The English translation of the title misses the synonymous symbolism of the slum to the visceral marginalization of the dwellers of the slum as trash or garbage, a disposable part of society. Carolina writes to define herself, to escape brutal poverty, and her writings provide a window into the favela. To some degree, her writing gives meaning to

the force that poverty creates in a society. Carolina Maria de Jesus writes of exhaustion, endless work, suffering, and hunger faced by residents of the favela.

Society often equates opportunity with work ethic. Using that logic, a parallel assumption is often made that the cause of poverty is a lack of ambition. Carolina Maria de Jesus demonstrates the error of this line of thought. She works exhaustively each day trying to feed herself and her children. Jesus wrote in the late 1950s and the early 1960s, a period of social unrest and revolution against the remains of colonial oppression in Brazil. This was during the time of the Cuban revolution; the insight that Carolina Maria de Jesus gave the world was the ability to see the abject poverty that gave birth to revolution. This underscored the importance of historical concepts like the war on poverty worldwide. If poverty were allowed to fester, the ensuing result may be revolution. John F. Kennedy's inaugural address in 1961 included the following: "If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich." (Kennedy, 1961) This quote underscored the importance of helping the poor, not as a duty of the rich to be kind, but as a matter of survival. There is an inherent threat that the rich who forget the poor will soon be at the mercy of revolution. Kennedy's quote underscores the importance that the issue of poverty held in the early 1960s and helps to understand the importance of Jesus' writing during that same time period.

The primitive nature of Jesus' writing and the lack of formal education make the warning regarding revolution more dire. Her writings show that discontent among the poor is not developed by indoctrination by foreign elements or from a leftist agenda, but rather bubbles up from the poor themselves. This is perhaps the reason that Carolina

Maria de Jesus became internationally famous. She wrote about the plight of the poor and gave voice to the revolutionary thought created by wealth inequity. Much of the stability in the world in the early 1960s was threatened by popular revolution, like the Cuban revolution. Jesus showed that even without leadership or political awakening, hunger alone could ignite revolutionary ideas.

Carolina Maria de Jesus' writing was important, but as a person, she was conflicted. She tended to believe in the racism of her society. She denigrated those with darker skin, even as she herself was dark skinned. She exhibited a type of xenophobia toward the Northeastern Brazilians, whom she sees as the "other" in the favela. She proudly notes that the fathers of her children were all white. It is as though racism has seeped into her thoughts and twisted her thinking without her knowledge. This is also interesting because it gives a window into the thought of the marginalized person in society and how society shapes the universal thought process, even those who bear the brunt of that racism.

Carolina Maria de Jesus was able to leave the favela as a result of her writing. Initially, this seems to be a fairytale ending for Jesus and her family. They were able to purchase a small home in a nice neighborhood, but the transformation brings with it new problems. Jesus was able to transition from a woman dressed in rags to the elegant woman portrayed in historic photos. In the new neighborhood, her children were still seen as dangerous by their new neighbors and contaminated by their time spent in the favela. This demonstrates the difficulty of class mobility. Carolina Maria de Jesus

showed intelligence and an ability to conform to the dress standard of her newly won place outside of the favela, yet she still was not accepted.



Figure 3 Carolina Maria de Jesus elegantly dressed

The photos of Carolina Maria de Jesus show her transformation from a woman dressed in rags to an elegant author who has taken the conventional fashion as her own. The ability to make the transition from favela dweller to international author required skill. By writing during the time when she lived in the favela, Carolina Maria de Jesus documented the everyday life inside of a favela and at the same time changed her own life. The transformation showed how Carolina Maria de Jesus worked within the structure of Brazil's system of class, learning and pushing limits to change her own

image. There is a calculated approach to the image change designed to meet the expectations of a social class who expected Carolina Maria de Jesus to match a certain appearance. Even the change in dress is part of operating within the structures set up to confine. The earliest photos of Carolina Maria de Jesus, dressed in rags, marked her place in society; yet, the later photos of an elegantly dressed Carolina Maria de Jesus, show a woman who has carefully taken on the appearance needed to move her within the structure society has placed.

Carolina Maria de Jesus often used imagery as a *jeitinho*, in her writings in order to work within the system. Birds are used to describe the treatment of the poor. The images soften the message, allowing the space to openly criticize.

May 19 I left the bed at 5 a. m. The sparrows had just begun their morning symphony. The birds are happier than we are. Perhaps happiness and equality reigns among them. The world of the birds must be better than that of the favelados, who lie down but don't sleep because they go to bed hungry. (Jesus 26)

The sky is beautiful, worthy of contemplation because the drifting clouds are forming dazzling landscapes. Soft breezes pass by carrying the perfume of flowers. And the sun is always punctual at rising and setting. The birds travel in space, showing off in their happiness. The night brings up the sparkling stars to adorn the blue sky. There are so many beautiful things in the world that are impossible to describe. Only one thing saddens us: the prices when we go shopping. They overshadow all the beauty that exists. (Jesus 36)



Carolina Maria de Jesus shows the darkness caused by poverty through the image of the garbage dump. The garbage dump both describes the favela, as well as, conjures a visceral imagining of people on the margins of society as disposable.

May 28 Life is just like a book. Only after you've read it do you know how it ends. It is when we are the end of life do we know how our life ran. Mine, until now, has been black. As black as my skin. Black as the garbage dump where I live. (Jesus 154)

Carolina Maria de Jesus, who is living among the poorest class, writes insightfully about class. She recognized the delight of the poor for the smallest of gifts and compared their delight to that of the wealthy. This was an opportunity for Jesus to question Brazilian President Kubitschek's decisions and economic choices. She illustrated the small cost of pleasing the poor and the futility of pleasing the wealthy.

The poor wanting something. The rich not wanting to give. He (a factory owner) handed out only pieces of crackers. And they were as happy as Queen Elizabeth of England when she received the 13 millions in jewels that President Kubitschek sent her as a birthday gift (Jesus 55).

Carolina Maria de Jesus was a writer who chose her words to describe the world around her and to actualize a fantasy world better than the reality of her harsh life in the favela. There is a beauty in the world she captured even as there is hunger and suffering. Although there is no attestation, like the one that begins the book of Phillis Wheatley's poetry; there was a similar disbelief that Carolina Maria de Jesus was capable of writing works of this caliber. Audalio Dantas was questioned about his role in

her book, he answered that he edited, but he did not rewrite (Jesus xiii). The first book sold out 10,000 copies in just Sao Paulo (Jesus xiii). The first hurdle was simply acceptance of her ability to write and is similar to the hurdle faced by Wheatley- the need to have accepted members of society vouch for the talents of marginalized writers.

Carolina Maria de Jesus discussed Brazilian politics and the importance that hunger played in society. Warnings to politicians were more acceptable during the revolutionary political time when Jesus wrote. Shortly thereafter, during the military dictatorship, the same message would have been silenced.

What our President Senhor Juscelino has in his favor is his voice. He sings like a bird and his voice is pleasant to the ears. And now the bird is living in a golden cage called Catete Palace. Be careful, little bird, that you don't lose this cage, because cats when they are hungry think of birds in cages. The favelados are the cats, and they are hungry (Jesus 26).

There are frequent criticisms of the government found in Jesus' writings. She writes of a disease caused by snails living in a lagoon which the State Health Department warns the favela dwellers to avoid. The Health Department shows films to the dwellers of the favela warning them to avoid contaminated water, but does nothing to assure clean water. So the production of the films and the education of those in the favela are meaningless if the people in the slum have no choice but to drink contaminated water (Jesus 93). Criticism of how the government deals with the snail disease is a way, or *jeitinho*, to demonstrate the futility of government. If no real solution

is offered to real problems, then the government is devalued. The example of the snail problem is an emblem of the uselessness of government.

A quick review of the history of Brazil in the late 1950s and early 1960s is necessary to understand the names of the politicians used by Carolina Maria de Jesus in her works. The history of Brazilian politics is interesting and intertwined with American history. In the late 1950s to early 1960s the United States had high concerns over the spread of communism in the Western hemisphere as Fidel Castro gained control of Cuba. When the leftist government of Brazil shifted farther left, bringing ideas of land reform, income reform and ties to Cuba, the United States and the ruling class of Brazil began to be concerned. Carolina Maria de Jesus wrote of President Juscelino Kubitschek, who had been elected in 1955 and had built the new capital of Brasilia (Levine *The History of Brazil* 123). Janio Quadros was elected in 1960, but resigned, leaving Joao Goulart to assume the presidency of Brazil. Goulart pushed a platform for wage growth to stabilize the Brazilian economy. By early 1964, President Goulart had plans to redistribute land to help the poorest of society and to remove multinational corporations and to nationalize industry (Levine *The History of Brazil* 125). A military coup was enacted March 31 to April 1 of that year, which the military called a revolution (Levine *The History of Brazil* 126). Almost overnight, the new military government, led by President Marshal Castelo Branco, began to limit elected officials by taking away political rights, marking Goulart and others as “non-persons” (Levine *The History of Brazil* 127). Those aligned with the left were imprisoned and branded as “communist” (Levine *The History of Brazil* 128). In the years that followed, military generals who served as Brazilian Presidents became even more repressive. Torture became a tool to

rule the nation, with support from USAID ( the United States Agency for International Development) and other American operatives (Levine *The History of Brazil* 130). The military dictatorship continued until 1985. American support of the regime was another instance, where, like political support of slavery after the American revolution, a clear look is needed to understand the reality of international relationships supported by American politics, rather than perpetuation of the myth of offering a helping hand to foreign nations.

Although Carolina Maria de Jesus was a poor woman living in a favela, she used a *jeitinho* to write of the politicians casually. Often using their first names as if they are friends of hers, she claimed her place in the political arena, even though she had no power. Simply by claiming the power, she is empowered:

And we spoke of politics. When a woman asked me what I thought of Carlos Lacerda, I replied truthfully:

He is very intelligent, but he doesn't have an education. He is a slum politician. He likes intrigues, to agitate (Jesus 6).

The political views which Carolina Maria de Jesus highlighted, showed an understanding based on the reality of the poverty in which she lived. When she wrote, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Carolina Maria de Jesus captured the leftist government's viewpoint.

Adhemar de Barros, a Sao Paulo politician was also mentioned by Carolina Maria de Jesus as "Adhemar." She opines that Adhemar lacked an education. In

Portuguese, “education” can refer the education as schooling, but is also used as a designation of class, manners, or propriety. Jesus is most likely not questioning Adhemar’s schooling, but his lack of class in her comments. Adhemar de Barros was known for the phrase “He steals, but he gets things done,” which was a phrase he never denied (Levine *The History of Brazil* 161). He was the epitome of the politician who could not be trusted, but still had some deep desire to better the lives of the constituents whom he represented.

Although Carolina Maria de Jesus was published worldwide and became one of Brazil’s most famous authors, she was not politically left enough nor right enough in Brazil (Jesus 185). She criticized politicians as a group and was vocal, using her fame as a platform.

## Shaped by Revolution

Revolution and change were important in the works of both Phillis Wheatley and Carolina Maria de Jesus. Although the time periods were separated by centuries, the writers both used revolution to their advantage.

Phillis Wheatley wrote at the time of the American Revolution, a pivotal time in the history of the United States. The Revolution shaped her writing, as she wrote of historically important people, including George Washington, Lady Huntingdon, and George Whitefield, an important religious figure at the dawn of Methodism.

Carolina Maria de Jesus wrote during a revolutionary period for Brazil. Writing in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Jesus was documenting life inside Brazil's favelas, or sprawling slums, around the larger cities. Brazil elected leftist presidents who were replaced in a 1964 coup supported by the United States which would leave in place a military dictatorship from 1964 until 1985. Carolina Maria de Jesus writes of President Juscelino Kubitschek and his policies in her diaries.

The decisions made during a revolution shape the post-revolutionary time period. The American Revolution is still questioned by historians today. Rather than relying on the myth of freedom from English rule, some question if the Revolution was shaped by slavery. England was moving toward the abolishment of slavery for its colonies. The *Somerset* ruling gave freedom to any slave from a colony when in England. The *Somerset* ruling could have been the beginning of the end of slavery within the English

colonies. Phillis Wheatley traveled to England and could have taken advantage of this rule to remain a free woman in England. Instead, she opted to return to America as a slave. There are two reasons for her choice. First, she would have felt an obligation to Susanna Wheatley, who was ill and who had raised her from a child in her home. Although enslaved, Wheatley may have had strong emotional ties to the Wheatley family and although slavery seems foreign to us today, at the time it was accepted as a normal part of society. As an unusual slave, Phillis Wheatley may have been spared at least some of the hardships of slavery. The second, and perhaps more compelling reason for Phillis Wheatley's return to America could be that she believed that freedom was an inevitable result of the American Revolution. Phillis Wheatley proudly saw herself as an American with a contribution to be made to guide the new nation.

The changes made as a result of the revolutionary period helped to push Wheatley toward the popularity that she gained. The abolitionist forces could focus upon a poet who demonstrated the skill to read and write at a level at least as proficient as most Americans. The ability that Wheatley showed disrupted the argument that slavery was morally just because Africans were inferior.

For Carolina Maria de Jesus, the Brazilian political atmosphere in the early 1960s was also revolutionary. Her diaries fit well into a leftist government, exposing the desperate poverty from within. Goulart planned to increase literacy in Brazil using Paulo Freire's educational methods, which at the time were seen as radical. Land reform was an important goal, to thwart the latifundia, or large landholding by individuals and businesses. Leftist policies were meant to bring Brazil to economic power through

progress. If Carolina Maria de Jesus had been discovered after the 1964 military coup, the publication of a diary demonstrating the poverty in the favelas might not have gained worldwide attention, but instead might have been buried as an embarrassment to the military regime.

Just as there are images of liberty for the American Revolution and progress for modern Brazil, the images become all encompassing. We might need to look more deeply at our history and accept the reality of what our history encompasses. The writings of Phillis Wheatley allow an investigation into the concept of liberty and the writings of Carolina Maria de Jesus question the progress that is key to Brazil. Each writer is criticized for a lack of support to their respective race and class, but few critics question the myths of freedom and progress that mark each revolutionary period. If focus is given to the history and the place each writer held, it is possible to consider history differently and more clearly, by looking beyond the myths. Phillis Wheatley and Carolina Maria de Jesus had value, not simply as writers. Wheatley was an able writer but not a great poet. Carolina Maria de Jesus wrote descriptively but again, was not a great writer. Instead, what each did was to add their voices at a pivotal time. Their voices influenced and guided society at critical revolutionary periods. This is not to say that every idea they held was adopted. Wheatley's poetry did not abolish slavery and Jesus did not end hunger or bring an end to the favelas. The strength of the works of these writers is evidenced by having their voices and ideas validated.



## Using Mentors to Bridge Gaps

Both Phillis Wheatley and Carolina Maria de Jesus had mentors who assisted and guided them. For Wheatley, her main mentor was Susanna Wheatley, who was her owner, her mother-figure, and her mentor. Carolina Maria de Jesus' mentor was Audalio Dantas, a young journalist who happened to encounter Jesus and recognized the importance of the journals that she had written.

The mentor holds a place for a marginalized writer that is a bridge between what society accepts and the voice of that marginalized writer. The mentors for both Carolina Maria de Jesus and Phillis Wheatley understood the publishing world, understood the society, and were working from inside the hegemony of the time. Without the bridges that mentors create for the marginalized writer, it becomes much more difficult for the writer to be accepted and published. Even the idea of a mentor becomes a strategic part of maneuvering through systems.

Both writers were driven to write. This drive to write is common among marginalized people. The marginalized writer first writes to acknowledge their value in a society that does not value them. By writing, a new viewpoint is realized, and that view from the outside gives a previously unknown look into the society. By seeing society from a marginalized viewpoint, society is given a new perspective. The new viewpoint takes the reader outside of their comfort zone and widens horizons for the reader. So the writing that begins as a way for the author to self-realize, becomes an avant-garde view of the very society that has marginalized them changing and re-organizing the

same society. This change of society by the new viewpoint is an example of the subversion of structures by those living within the structure which Michel de Certeau describes.

The mentors for the two women were quite different. The Wheatley family encouraged Phillis Wheatley to write. As mentors, they gained pride from the writing that their slave did, but they also brought her out at dinner parties to perform her writing in front of guests. This treatment of Phillis Wheatley as an oddity is difficult to understand today.

Carolina Maria de Jesus met her mentor Audalio Dantas, in a playground where he overheard her threatening to write about a neighbor in her diary. Dantas recognized the interest that there would be for a diary written by a woman in the slums. As a journalist, his interest was not completely altruistic. He wrote, "I am not bringing you a newspaper story but a revolution" (Levine *The Cautionary Tale* 59) as he published excerpts from Carolina Maria de Jesus.

Both mentors capitalized upon the discovery of their mentees. Audalio Dantas made a name for himself and the discovery of Carolina Maria de Jesus propelled his career forward. The success Dantas that enjoyed after discovering Carolina Maria de Jesus was more stable than that afforded to Carolina Maria de Jesus. The Wheatley family gained a type of fame and respect from the writings of Phillis Wheatley.

Through the support of the mentors, the writers' works were acknowledged and each became internationally known. It is easy to imagine that without their mentors either writer could easily have slipped into obscurity. The fame that each achieved might

have changed their lives forever, but instead, each died in poverty. The return from international fame to obscurity demonstrates the tenuous grip that the writers are able to gain, even with more talent than their mentors. The mentors gain more lasting success simply from the discovery and promotion of the writers than the writers achieved themselves. This shows the need for the *jeitinho*, or the skill and guile, to work within the system. The inequal power structure is evident in the precarious nature of success for outsiders to the system.

For Phillis Wheatley, we can assume that she achieved a major goal of freedom from slavery. Her poetry was well received and published in America and in Europe. Freedom without financial support or financial freedom can hardly be called freedom. Phillis Wheatley gained her manumission from the Wheatley family and married a free black man, John Peters. An article from 1823 details the life of Phillis Wheatley and her husband:

The reputation he (John Peters) enjoyed, with his industry, procured him a fortune; but Phillis being much indulged, had not acquired sufficient knowledge of domestic concerns; and her friends continuing their particular attention to her, gave him uneasiness, which operation on a disposition that was not willing to have her more respected than himself- which first manifested itself by reproaches; which were followed by harsh treatment. The continuance thereof affecting her susceptible mind, and delicate constitution, she soon went into a decline, and died in 1780, about the 26<sup>th</sup> year of her age, much lamented by those who knew her worth. (Lewis 30).

This article tells a narrative of the life of Phillis Wheatley, but the narrative reflects the time (1823) when it was written. This is the story of an indulged Phillis during her life as a slave, then her mistreatment by her husband, a man of color. This fulfills two societal myths. The article pushes the belief that slavery was not so bad, Phillis was indulged while a slave. The article also reinforces the belief that even a free black man, respected in the community, was not able to recognize the value of Phillis Wheatley and therefore treated her poorly. Both narratives would play well in the white community reading the article. Any guilt from having slaves is assuaged as the narrative proposes that the treatment of Phillis Wheatley Peters while free was harsher than her treatment while enslaved. The narrative of the black man as dangerous and not quite civilized, even when wealthy, is another common idea promoted by the inherent racism of the early history of America.

Carolina Maria de Jesus also died in poverty. The fame acquired through the publication of her books did not equate directly to income. Levine notes that even just from the copies of *Child of the Dark* printed in the United States, Carolina Maria de Jesus should have received more than one hundred and fifty thousand dollars, yet there is no reference to her receiving this money (Levine *The Cautionary Tale* 68). Although de Jesus was poorly educated and Dantas could have taken greater advantage of her, he opened joint bank accounts with her and helped her to buy a small home. As a poor woman, de Jesus did not have the documents required to open bank accounts alone (Levine *The Cautionary Tale* 61). Photos of Carolina Maria de Jesus show a poorly dressed woman while living in the favela in front of tattered shack; later photos of her at book signings show an elegantly dressed woman. Newspaper accounts criticized Jesus

as a woman “playing the part of a fashion model” and spending her days at a chic tea parlor (Levine *The Cautionary Tale* 62). The criticism provides valuable insight into the thought of a class-conscious society. Although, Jesus had won international acclaim and lived with her children in a modest home, her transformation was seen as threatening or wrong. She is not criticized for binge drinking or excessive spending, but for the change from rags to elegant clothing and for the sin of drinking tea at a chic venue. The criticism shows a class based bias that finds class change to be threatening and exposes the need for a tactic like the *jeitinho* to navigate that class system.

The role of the mentor gives legitimacy to marginalized writers. There is a tendency to either doubt that the marginalized writer is capable of writing or a doubt that what has been written is valid as literature. There is an assumption that both Phillis Wheatley and Carolina Maria de Jesus were not capable of writing. The second wave of criticism is to question the validity of their work as literature.

As recently as 2017, an article appeared in the *Folha de Sao Paulo*, (one of Brazil’s leading newspapers) criticizing the writing of Carolina Maria de Jesus and asking if writing a journal can even be considered literature (Amorim). This demonstrates the resistance within the hegemony of literature to acknowledge the validity of a marginal voice. Just as the declaration in the beginning of the book of poetry by Phillis Wheatley was needed to accept Wheatley’s ability to write, Carolina Maria de Jesus’ contribution to literature continues to be questioned. There is an automatic assumption that a person from outside of traditionally trained literary circles cannot contribute anything of value, so the criticism is either that perhaps someone

other than the marginalized writer created the work or that the work itself is not valuable enough to merit the attention which has been given.

Finding a mentor is important to writers like Phillis Wheatley and Carolina Maria de Jesus, who struggled to be accepted. The mentor is not a luxury, but a needed bridge and becomes a strategy for the marginalized writer.

## Religion for Phillis Wheatley and Carolina Maria de Jesus

Religion is important to both Phillis Wheatley and Carolina Maria de Jesus. The Wheatley household were members of the New South Congregational Church in Boston and followed George Whitefield, a Calvinist Methodist (Mason 3). Religion plays a part in many of Wheatley's poems. Interest in religion was an acceptable and expected sentiment to be expressed among women during the colonial era. For Carolina Maria de Jesus, religion is seen differently. Although she visits churches looking for food for her family, she questions the teachings.

For Carolina Maria de Jesus, when a priest came to the favela saying that the poor should have more children, she wrote "who should have children are the rich, who could give brick houses to their children. And they could eat what they wanted" (Jesus 130). When a priest said "that God blesses only those who suffer with resignation," Carolina Maria de Jesus wrote that if Brother Luiz "saw his children eating rotten food already attacked by vultures and rats, he would stop talking about resignation and rebel, because rebellion comes from bitterness" (Jesus 77). Carolina Maria de Jesus displayed a contempt for a religion that had turned its back on the poor.

At first glance the two writers seem to approach religion differently, upon closer examination, both women used religion to question their society. Carolina Maria de Jesus wrote more directly during a time when her directness was accepted. Phillis

Wheatley wrote in a more subtle manner, but still used religion to add strength to her points of view.

The use of religion in her works helped Wheatley's book get published. One of Phillis Wheatley's well-received poems was the "On the Death of the Rev. Mr. George Whitefield," who may have visited the Wheatley home (*Carretta Complete Writings* xiv). Reverend Whitefield was the chaplain of Selina Hastings, the Countess of Huntingdon, who helped publish Phillis Wheatley's book of poetry (*Carretta Complete Writings* xiv).

The production of the poems for the dead was a small industry for Phillis Wheatley. By writing these death poems, Wheatley gained the support of the community for her writing and that support led to interest in her other forms of poetry. The personalized poems for the loss of a neighbor's child would have endeared Wheatley to the community and help to promote her poetry. The inclusion of many poems of bereavement in her collection of poetry encouraged the purchase of her small book by those in the community whose losses she documented. This could be viewed as a calculated way to capitalize on her publication.

Robinson writes of the issue that Puritanism had upon slaves, noting that the values promoted by Puritanism - thrift and abstinence - were not choices for slaves, but rather conditions imposed upon them (Robinson, Kirk Ward 65). If thrift and abstinence were important concepts, then the slave in America was left out. A slave was not in control of his or her own sexuality and had no possessions.

The consolation that Wheatley offered in the poems of death to the grieving family often seems sparse. Instead, many of the death poems almost demand that the



family stop grieving and see the freedom offered in death. In “To His Honour the Lieutenant-Governor on the Death of his Lady,” Phillis Wheatley writes, “And let us hear the mournful sigh no more, Restrain the sorrow streaming from thine eye, Be all thy future moments crown’d with joy!” (Carretta *Complete Works* 62). In the poem for George Whitefield, Wheatley writes, “But, though arrested by the hand of death, Whitefield no more exerts his lab’ring breath, Yet let us view him in th’eternal skies, Let ev’ry heart to this bright vision rise” (Carretta *Complete Works* 16). The death poems acknowledge that there is a sadness in death, but that death is also a freedom from suffering and a cause of joy for the soul which transcends to a better world. The pivot and focus on joy caused by the release from earthly suffering uses religion to remind readers of the lesson to ignore suffering. The suffering of grief at the time of a death could be compared to the lesson brought to the enslaved by religion, which is to ignore the suffering felt in this earthly life. The focus is upon grief where an unspoken equivalence is drawn; if everyone, including slaves, are to ignore hardships in this life, then grief is working against religious teachings. Readers are boxed into a corner; either belief in an afterlife and the admonition that grief should not be felt, or succumb to grief at the expense of belief. By allowing the readers to feel how painful grief can be, then demanding that the bereaved pivot to see the heaven offered by religion, readers are uncomfortably aware of the pain of grief. The very real pain of slavery can also be viewed in this same lens; the reality of the pain of grief cannot be quickly forgotten, nor can the wrongs of slavery be easily accepted and forgotten. In focusing on the pivot from grief to the joy of heaven, the difficulty is exposed in both our understandings of grief and slavery. This theme is woven throughout Phillis Wheatley’s poetry of death

and challenges readers using their own religion. This challenge, when seen through the lens of the *jeitinho*, is not accidental but contrived in order to make a subtle point.

Without the cover of religion, Phillis Wheatley's demand to stop grieving and see the freedom offered by death seems cruel; however, by using the *jeitinho* lens, Wheatley is using the lesson that a better life waits after death. This is the lesson designed to keep people in their place, but when reflected back at the ruling class, it becomes a subtle critique of society. This use of religion becomes a weapon that Phillis Wheatley wields when seen through the lens of the concept of *jeitinho*.

Carolina Maria de Jesus uses the messages in religion to question social systems, as well. Her writing echoes the leftist messages that religion is not relevant in the lives of the poor. By writing while living in the favela, religion is reflected through the eyes of a slum dweller. Her lack of religious or political training drove home the message that the desperation of hunger was not theoretical, but an organic result of poverty. After a mass is held, the priest says, "it was a pleasure for him to be with us," and Carolina Maria de Jesus wrote that "if that Father lived with us, he would soon change his tune" (Jesus 131). By using the words of the religious community, Carolina Maria de Jesus pivots the message to demonstrate how hollow the words are. After reading of the hunger and the struggle to simply feed her children and survive, messages from the priests appear naïve.

The Brazilian political left during Jesus' time, stood for a belief that religion holds the will of the people in check. Karl Marx writes that "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It

is the opium of the people” (Marx 60). Carolina Maria de Jesus sees religion in a similar light as Marx. Just as Phillis Wheatley used the religious teachings of her time, Carolina Maria de Jesus used the belief system popular during her time. She writes with a hunger, not just for food for her children, but a hunger for life. She reminds readers how religion can ring false for those most affected by poverty. Rather than a desire to forget the world, Carolina Maria de Jesus has a desire to change the world, not just for herself and her children, but for others.

## Conclusion

The importance of a period of revolution or political change and the use of a method described by the concept of the *jeitinho* could have been coincidence if used by a single writer. By looking at two different marginalized writers from two different time periods, two different countries and two different times of political change, the same methods and opportunities are presented and indicate more than chance.

Both Phillis Wheatley and Carolina Maria de Jesus used a *jeitinho*, or a crafty, creative, deceptive method that shifted their positions of weakness to advantage. The use of a *jeitinho*, or the method to pivot their weakness to strength, was important for their voices to be heard. Both writers were on the margins of the societies in which they lived. Marginalization usually leads to silence, yet both women wrote, were published, and were widely read. Wheatley was published and read in both Europe and in North America. Carolina Maria de Jesus was read around the world and her diary was translated into a dozen languages.

Both writers lived during times of political change. For Wheatley, the American Revolution was a time period which opened a window for her voice. Phillis Wheatley was not just an oddity - an enslaved writer - but also a writer with the opportunity to use her voice to add to the discussion of how the country would proceed forward and what values would shape the new society. Carolina Maria de Jesus wrote during a brief period of an elected leftist government which would be replaced with a military dictatorship. During this period when Brasilia was built as a new capital, unlike any

capital before, Jesus brought to light the plight of the people living in the sprawling favelas or slums. Brasilia was a planned city, designed to move people farther inland at a time when most of Brazil's population was centered on the coasts. The city of Brasilia was planned and designed to be the futuristic capital. Michel de Certeau could not have imagined a place more constructed than Brasilia, yet Carolina Maria de Jesus, and the others like her living in favelas, created spaces for a class that was largely ignored by architects and city planners. They took the discards of the cities, made their own sprawling cities, and at least one woman decided to write about the hunger and her life within the favela. Jesus forced the world to look at the life of the poor, the most vulnerable in society, from a first-hand viewpoint.

Without both the *jeitinho* method and the revolutionary political period, it is unlikely that either writer would have been published. The fact that each writer defined the opposite of the myth that each revolutionary period created is important. The American Revolution is defined by the concept of liberty, yet Phillis Wheatley became popular and wrote of freedom while enslaved. The leftist government in the late 1950s to early 1960s in Brazil used progress as a defining message, yet Carolina Maria de Jesus wrote of abject poverty and hunger. The myth of progress is refuted by the reality of the intense poverty. The revolutionary period of the leftist government opened an opportunity for the voice of Carolina Maria de Jesus to be brought to the world.

If Phillis Wheatley had written after the American Revolution, there would have been less interest because the major decisions of the path of the new country had been decided. During the revolutionary period, decisions about the future of a new nation

were being made. Phillis Wheatley was able to add her voice to demonstrate that the voice of an enslaved woman was heard.

If Carolina Maria de Jesus had written after the military dictatorship took power, there is little doubt that her voice from the favela would have been silenced. The world would not have seen the diary of a woman who detailed the struggle of hunger and poverty while living through that hunger and poverty.

Each writer needed to use every method available to maneuver through a system in which they held little to no power. The *jeitinho*, or the crafty, devious, tricky method employed was important. For Phillis Wheatley, as an enslaved woman, it is unlikely that she would have learned to read and write, had the ability to write, and had the ability to publish without using every method possible for an advantage. Even something as small as the decision to request that a separate table be set at dinners for her, showed that she was able to wield every bit of power to her advantage. Her use of religion in the poems of death take the message from the powerful in society to the weak and pivot that same message back to the powerful from an enslaved woman. In a society which used religion to control the poor by suggesting that true freedom and true life was not here on Earth but in a future heavenly world, religion was designed to avoid rebellion and to assure that the less powerful in society accepted their suffering. When Wheatley writes of the deaths of people in her community, people who considered themselves superior to those enslaved glimpsed the same image of death as a better place and had religious teachings thrown at them during this vulnerable time when they felt the pain of

the death of a loved one. This would be considered insolent were it not for the use of religious teachings. This is a pivotal use of jeitinho, where again the power is shifted.

Carolina Maria de Jesus used her ability to write to manage the people in the favela around her. As a single mother in the favela, the threat of writing about her neighbors in her diary does not sound frightening, yet she uses the threat to control her surroundings as best she can. When she meets Audalio Dantas, a journalist, she initially feigns disinterest in having her work published, even when she writes frequently of her desire to be published. If she had quickly handed her diaries over to Dantas, perhaps there would have been less interest in her. Carolina Maria de Jesus uses the messages brought to the poor by religion, then reflects the message back. She asserts that if the priest had children and saw their hunger and their need to eat from garbage, he would change from accepting the suffering to call for open rebellion. These are tactics Carolina Maria de Jesus uses to operate within the system of poverty and achieve the best results that she can.

Why is it important to study these two writers and the methods they used? Both of the women have died and writing about them will not change much, but what they each displayed was a humanity which enriches life. Although not much may change, there continue to be people on the margins of society living within social systems designed not to help them, but to keep them confined. Investigating the techniques and the opportunities presented demonstrates the role held by Phillis Wheatley and by Carolina Maria de Jesus in their respective histories. In studying two writers who utilized tactics like the jeitinho concept, a deeper understanding of the two is gained, but

perhaps more importantly is the awareness of the many who do not fit the expected mold in literature and in life and the potential gains which can be made as the cracks in the structures of society widen, becoming more inclusive. Phillis Wheatley and Carolina Maria de Jesus can be viewed as role models for others marginalized.

The value in studying these two writers is the ability to see how each used the systems within which they lived- systems which were designed to silence their voices. Through their writing, these two writers were able to create foundational cracks in those systems. Michel de Certeau notes that “the important thing is neither *what is said* (a content), nor the *saying* itself (an act), but rather the *transformation*, and the invention of still unsuspected mechanisms that will allow us to multiply the transformations” (Certeau 152). This explanation by Certeau shows the importance of writers like Phillis Wheatley and Carolina Maria de Jesus. Each writer used a method, or the *jeitinho*, at a specifically important revolutionary time period to bring forth ideas which were important. These ideas of racial equality and of class equality, came directly from the people suffering racial inequality or class inequality. There is an initial excitement in society when the voice from inside the inequality surfaces, which caused their initial success. There is next a reversal of that fame when the underlying condition, race or class inequality continues seemingly unchanged. By giving voice to the criticism of the structure, small cracks are made in those structures. Phillis Wheatley did not achieve racial equality through her writing, but she expressed ideas and exemplified an ability which created a crack in the structure of racial inequality. Carolina Maria de Jesus did not end the favelas, the hunger, or the class inequality, but through her expression she was able to create a crack in the structure of class inequality. Studying these two writers



together, the pattern of the small cracks made by each is more easily seen. The transformation which Certeau describes is perhaps small, like a hairline crack, but it is the beginning of transformational change. There is hope that a method, like the jeitinho described here, subverts a structure designed to marginalize and silence voices and that the initial small transformation allows for the future, unknown and perhaps unsuspected mechanisms which will multiply the transformations to come. Hope is expressed by the two writers as they show that even the most disadvantaged in a social system can find ways to work within their system to effect change and even the smallest change influences others.

Woven into the stories of the two writers are myths which can influence how history is remembered. As the stories of the two writers are dissected, the myths of history start to crack slightly, just as the writers cracked the social structures within which they lived. For Phillis Wheatley when the concept of the jeitinho is considered, the importance she played in American history and literature is more visible. Her voice becomes more central to how we see American history.

The myth of progress in Brazil is similarly fractured by a single voice speaking out by writing and publishing a raw diary. Just as Carolina Maria de Jesus works within the structure of class and poverty, she creates the cracks for those who come after her. The importance of Carolina Maria de Jesus, when seen through the lens of jeitinho, introduces a way to question the historic myths of a culture.

Looking at historical times, like the United States Revolution and the revolutionary period prior to the military dictatorship in Brazil, the need for the creativity

of the jeitinho used is clearer. A version of history favors part of society and requires the jeitinho strategy to offset the inherent imbalance of power within societal structures.

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