



# Situating the African American Elegiac Tradition

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**Abstract:** This research paper delves into the dynamic nature of African-American elegy, exploring its evolution across time and space. Rooted in Jahan Ramazani's concept of an "ever-mutating affective universe," the study emphasizes the interweaving of diverse traditions while maintaining the distinctive features of the African-American elegiac form. Focusing on identity, grief, and resistance, the paper traces the historical trajectory of these elegies, revealing their role in cultural mourning and political resistance during the abolitionist movement. Examining poets such as Phillis Wheatley and Paul Laurence Dunbar, the research highlights their nuanced negotiations of agency and identity within the African-American experience. The concept of memory emerges as pivotal, shaping elegies through access to familial or affiliative circles. The study concludes by positioning African-American elegies as a praxis of refusal, resistance, and a vital link between contemporary identity and historical roots. The paper underscores the intricate interplay of grief, identity, and agency within the African-American elegiac tradition, portraying it as a dynamic and meaningful form of expression in the face of historical challenges.

In his work *A Transnational Poetics*, Jahan Ramazani describes the nature of elegy as an "ever-mutating affective universe across boundaries of place and culture: grief, love, and anger; the search for, and thwarting of, consolation; commemorative and anticommemorative impulses" (91). Here, he is emphasizing that in the fabric of elegiac traditions, different traditions are weaved into each other and thus keep changing their forms across time and space. In this paper, I will attempt to focus on the African-American elegiac tradition and to locate it in an elegiac space which reflects the constantly evolving nature of an elegy. On interpreting elegies, Ramazani proposes, "When you interpret a work as an elegy, I would suggest, you understand it differentially in relation to other elegies of other times and places. All elegies have time- and place-specific bearings (71)." I would be focusing on how the African-American elegiac tradition creates its distinct characteristics while adopting some frameworks of European-American and Anglo-American elegies at the same time.

The tradition of African American Elegy carries within it the dual nature of experience of black poets and their subjects. It combines a tradition that can be traced to an African past, but it lends itself to the form of Elegy that is different from their literary tradition. The African American Elegy is distinct from other forms of elegy as the role of identity has an inseparable part. Blount mentions that for "the black poets of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the challenge has been to establish the grounds of their literate and poetic authority without sacrificing the distinctiveness of their experiences in the New World" ("The Preacherly Text" 584). Thus, the new poetic voice has to incorporate the differences as well as similarities of experience. The genre of elegy is rooted in continuity of relations and a heritage which can be claimed by the author. Apart from the form of the elegy, its employment assumes factors such as the humanity of the mourner and the mourned. There is a bond which the elegiac tradition strengthens through expression of grief.

Elegy became a prosthesis of method for black Americans to perform cultural mourning which preserved their distinctiveness. Blount says, "To a much greater extent than Native Americans, however, African Americans wrote and published elegies of their own in English, helping to determine the cultural role that mourning would play in the oppositional consciousness of both blacks and white" (Cavitch 180). From this we can infer that because elegy is

itself a form of expression of loss and mourning, therefore it was a suitable tool for black Americans to use it to affirm their identity by mourning black leaders. Pain, loss, and mourning has already been a part of lived experience of slavery, and thus the author, its subject, as well as the form of elegy all work together in the case of African American elegies. More than the English tradition of elegy, African American Elegy is rooted in public mourning at funerals where hymns were sung for the dead (181). Thus, the affective purpose of public mourning is that of a sense of belonging, solidarity, and community which were passed down to the form of elegy also. Thus, African American elegies invoke a strong sense of community and belonging which goes beyond individual mourning. The subject position in this case and the question of agency- the right to mourn or to be mourned are political dimensions which collide with the form of elegy. Since the late eighteenth centuries elegies have been used as a praxis of refusal and resistance. "Elegies by and for slaves commonly generated sympathy and support for the combative, sometimes violent cause of abolitionism. But they helped to articulate an ethos of renunciation, repeatedly discovering in death an end to otherwise insoluble problems of existence" (181). Elegies provided a way to move beyond the trauma of death and a way to work through instead of retraumatization. The question of agency becomes important because the suffering can also be appropriated or hijacked in the dichotomy between blacks and whites. What are the implications of a political relation between the mourner and the mourned? "In turn, white literary abolitionists appropriated the voices of black mourning in their elegies, eventually assuming the role of post- slavery guardians of the endangered practice of the sorrow songs" (183). These sorrow songs refer to the songs sung at funerals of slaves which were attended by whites as well and later attempted to preserve those songs which originally belong to an oral tradition. These songs which were an integral part of the struggle and everyday lives of slaves were seen as 'interesting' and 'aesthetic' by whites and they came back to their homes having an unsettling urge to compile and preserve them.

In *American Elegy*, Max Cavitch borrows the timeline of African American Elegy from Jahan Ramazani's work and begins with Phillis Wheatley, who wrote elegies for whites. He tries to reestablish Wheatley as the bridge between "classical traditions of poetic mourning and an emergent tradition of African- American elegy" (192). Apart from Phillis Wheatley, he mentions Lucy Terry and Lemuel Haynes who contributed their elegies in the mid eighteenth century. But he singles out the event when a black author wrote an elegy for a black subject in the year 1810, which is possibly the earliest elegy recorded written by a black author for a black subject (184). What does this difference between the eighteenth century and nineteenth entail with respect to elegy as a form? The event where the mourner and mourned are both black, what does such an event signify? Elegy in this case can be seen as elegy-in-process, which gradually became representational of grief, pain, and loss associated with black subjects.

However, there are certain features which African American Elegy adopts from the European- American elegy such as a move towards the general from particular. Elegies invite everyone to perform a collective mourning and that is only possible where there is a shift towards common human experiences with respect to the departed. Cavitch mentions, "The exhortation not to grieve, the assurance of the departed's happiness in Heaven, the promise of posthumous reunion- these conventions of European-American elegy seem to transcend racial difference" (184). This transcendence seems simple at first, because it is easy to infer that these elegiac traditions merge with each other. But the history of these elegiac traditions tells us that the African-American elegy has been a site of political struggle for freedom. The dehumanisation of the slaves never allowed them even the status of a 'subject' because they were treated as 'objects'. The ties between a child and its parents were governed by law rather than by biology. The law refused any rights of parents over the child, and was treated as mere property. Hortense J. Spillers in her article "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" discusses the ungendered black subject who was treated merely as property within the framework of law (68). The African-American elegiac tradition has a history of a struggle to reclaim humanity and become a subject of mourning first. Thus, even if there is a common element of de particularisation, they "originate in or reflect dramatically different circumstances of mourning" (Cavitch 185). There was no record of ancestry or lineage which the slaves could claim as their own. Their familial and ancestral mooring were cut off and remained suspended because they were not allowed to create new relations that may provide them solidarity. Thus, as opposed to the European American elegiac tradition where there was no disruption in ancestry and no struggle for claiming one's lineage and history, the African American elegiac tradition has been a witness to a system which refused them any form of expression of grief and loss. Phillis Wheatley wrote an elegy with the title "To a Gentleman and Lady on the Death of the Lady's Brother and Sister, and a Child of the Name Avis, Aged One Year." It is palpable from the title itself that Phillis is only a mediator for the Gentleman and Lady in the title to grieve for their siblings and a child. The claim over the child is not a site of struggle for the whites, the relations are all presupposed with meanings of filial bonds and claim over the death of the child. For slaves, this was never the case. She writes in the poem: Thine Avis give without a murm'ring heart, Though half thy soul be fated to depart. To shining guards consign thine infant care To waft triumphant through the seas of air: Her soul enlarg'd to heav'nly pleasure springs, She feeds on truth and uncreated things (lines 23- 28). Here, Wheatley uses the name Avis, the child who died and is comforting the couple that they should not grieve her death as she is in a greater company as opposed to the human world. Through the form of elegy, Wheatley here is also able to hold claim over Avis as she is the author. In



a way she is exercising her rights through white subjects and by trying to become a part of free society. She introduces 'I' in the poem: Methinks I hear her in the realms above, And leaning forward with a filial love, Invite you there to share immortal bliss Unknown, untasted in a state like this (lines 29- 32). In "To the Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth", Wheatley talks about the separation that she went through and the tyranny of living a life severed from parents: I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate Was snatch'd from Afric's fancy'd happy seat: What pangs excruciating must molest, What sorrows labour in my parent's breast? Steel'd was that soul and by no misery mov'd That from a father seiz'd his babe belov'd: Such, such my case. And can I then but pray Others may never feel tyrannic sway? (lines 24- 31). There is a huge role that memory plays in the form of elegy. Because it is written for someone, there is a register of memory whether affiliative or familial that belongs to the author. There has to be an access to memories about the mourned which can be inherited as a result of familial relations or it can be acquired through an affiliative circle. This explains the nature of Phillis Wheatley's elegies for white subjects in which she finds a space for her own elegiac expression. She uses the platform of writing elegies for white elites, because she does not have any familial or affiliative circle of memory which could lend her a black subject to write elegies for. "Not recognized as a mourner, perhaps not even by herself, Wheatley set about acquiring the means of recognizing and managing the mourning of others (Cavitch 187)." The agency that Wheatley is given to mediate the grief of the other through her own words is deeply influenced by Christian principles of consolation and afterlife. Max Cavitch has attempted to listen to the quiet frequencies in Phillis Wheatley's child elegies which express a fugitive refusal and resistance.

Tina M. Campt, in her work *Listening to Images* introduces a methodology of listening to images so that the quiet frequencies which are not obvious are attended to. Similarly, highlighting the characteristics of elegies that Phillis Wheatley wrote, one can only see the strain of resistance by attuning to the non-representations in her elegies. For example, Cavitch sees an expression of anger in her child elegies combined with mourning which did not exclusively belong to her. Thereby her anger is an expression of the lack of right to mourn for someone and not being able to claim her grief as her own.

The relation between death and elegy in the African- American tradition has to be understood in the context of slavery where death was often seen as liberation and freedom. The killing of a child was considered merciful because that would be the only to liberate the child from a life of humiliation and slavery. Countless slaves committed suicide or contemplated it. "To crop a lineage by killing oneself was not only to free oneself from bondage but also to prevent one's doomed potential progeny from coming to life" (209). Thus, in the slave experiences and its representations in various literary forms, death has an anticipatory meaning and freedom can be only achieved by death. Death itself becomes a method for mourning similar to an elegy. In antislavery elegies, "elegiac depictions of slaves' preferences for death are a common feature of antislavery poetry" (214). The abrupt rupture of mourning renders it unresolved and the work of mourning is sidelined as it is driven by a desire for death. Jahan Ramazani calls it anti-elegiac forms of elegy where grief remains unresolved. In the elegy "A Mother's Heroism", Frances Watkins Harper writes about a mother who is being told that her son died in fight for justice and thus became a martyr. To which she replies: " 'Tis well! 'tis well! " the mother said, " That thus my child should die. " 'Tis well that, to his latest breath, He plead for liberty; Truth nerved him for the hour of death, And taught him how to die. " It taught him how to cast aside Earth's honors and renown; To trample on her fame and pride, And win a martyr's crown" (23- 32). We can see here that mourning is displaced by heroism and grief is transformed into pride and righteousness. Heroism here, stops the traditional workings of the elegy to process grief, and instead becomes a reminder of the cause of death. In a sense, this elegy is meant to be a reminder to grief so that it reiterates in the collective imagination as a proof of historical injustice meted out to blacks.

The negotiation between individual and collective loss which starts from individual mourning and then shifts to a collective towards the end of the elegy extends the circle of mourning from personal to public. In Paul Laurence Dunbar's elegy for Frederick Douglas we can see the positioning of a "we" towards the end: We weep for him, but we have touched his hand, And felt the magic of his presence night, The current that he sent throughout the land, The kindling spirit of his battle-cry. O'er all that holds us we shall triumph yet, And place our banner where his hopes were set! (lines 49-54). "The work of the poem is to convince Dunbar's readers that the black generations from which Douglass's leadership issues will continue even without him. And Dunbar insists those generations will persist because of him: "still thy voice is ringing o'er the gale." Dunbar, in fact, is able to initiate a tradition of African American elegy. His poems of the late nineteenth century inspire a tradition that thrives even among poets writing today" (Blount, "Paul Laurence Dunbar 239). Blount goes on to say, "The form of the elegy itself operates as a strategy of reading. With race as the basic grammar of identity, Dunbar encourages readers to see his poem as being replete with both racial and gendered signifiers. The history of American slavery is displaced onto a template of African origins" (239). This point can be extended to infer that Dunbar has in his mind a higher purpose for elegy than that of consolation and processing of grief. Instead of elegy being a cathartic reading, another layer is added to the elegy of history and autobiography. There are elements in the elegy which prompt the readers to move on from grieving and establish a distance from mourning by indulging in further information about the mourned. In African American elegies there is a strong strain of the historical past of African Americans as a community that is embodied by the

one who is dead. Thus, the mourned acts as a connected thread between the contemporary African American present and its historical past.

Jahan Ramazani defines two different methods through which the poet carries out the work of mourning. The goal of normative mourning is to completely process and resolve grief so as to move on from the pain of death. Elegy is the last stop where the poet expresses his pain and lends himself to lament. There is a transfer of power over the dead to God and angels. Such as Wheatley writes in her poem "To a Clergyman On the Death of His Lady": Let grief no longer damp devotion's fire, But rise sublime, to equal bliss aspire, Thy sighs no more be wafted by the wind, No more complain, but be to heav'n resign'd 'Twas thine t' unfold the oracles divine, To sooth our woes the task was also thine; (lines 34- 39). Here, grief is seen as a hurdle which has to be surpassed because it is seen as unnecessary based on Christian theology which grants heaven to good souls. This treatment of grief is based on a temporal promise of religion which is made in the present by the poet. However, one must note here that here Wheatley is writing for a white subject and subscribes to how the European-American elegiac tradition deals with grief. In Paul Laurence Dunbar's elegy for Frederick Douglas we see a more deeply rooted history which Dunbar weaves in the elegy. There is a to end weeping, but only to give impetus to more action and justice for the oppression faced by blacks. Dunbar mentions the injustices faced by him and the purpose of his fighting. He writes: 'Twas for his race, not for himself he spoke. He knew the import of his Master's call, And felt himself too mighty to be small (lines 34- 36). Even though Phillis Wheatley did not ever directly acknowledge the dehumanisation that the slaves faced or raise a voice against the cruel realities of the time, one should not infer that the elegies did not contain any resistance or refusal. If one sees the African American tradition of elegy as a praxis of refusal, then all of the elegies that have been dealt with in this paper ruminate some degree of resistance even if it borrows the elegiac tradition or if it carries a legacy of oral traditions. In this paper, I have attempted to look at elegies through a lens which brings out its distinctiveness and features which situate them in accordance with the history of black subjects.

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