

Contents of the *EAL* Special Issue on PWP

Special Issue Introduction: "Dear Sister: Phillis Wheatley's Futures" Tara A. Bynum, Brigitte Fielder, and Cassander L. Smith

Citation: Bynum, Tara A.; Fielder, Brigitte; Smith, Cassander L. *Early American Literature*. 2022, Vol. 57 Issue 3, p. 1-18.

Abstract

The recognition that Phillis Wheatley (Peters) is a significant figure in early American literature has fueled much scholarship in the last three decades centered on her life and literary contributions. Despite this increased focus on Wheatley, she remains an understudied figure in American culture. This introductory essay addresses the depth and vastness of Wheatley studies. It also notes the stakes inherent in the study and teaching of Wheatley in our current moment, marked by efforts to ban or severely restrict the teaching of race and slavery in American classrooms. These efforts are part of a general politics of white supremacy that has for centuries made the study of Wheatley a vexed proposition. This essay points out the rich possibilities for new avenues of exploration as the future of Wheatley Studies depends on a collective curiosity about who she is and a willingness to engage that curiosity.

Inventions Section: Poems Inspired by PWP

Inventions: Upon Reading "A Hymn to the Evening" by Phillis Wheatley

Michael Beard

Citation: Beard, Michael. "Inventions: Upon Reading "A Hymn to the Evening" by Phillis Wheatley." *Early American Literature*, vol. 57 no. 3, 2022, p. 681-681.

Inventions: Lost Poem #1: Phillis Wheatley, Boston, to Obour Tanner, Boston

Annastasia Bimler

Citation: Bimler, Annastasia. "Inventions: Lost Poem #1: Phillis Wheatley, Boston, to Obour Tanner, Boston." *Early American Literature*, vol. 57 no. 3, 2022, p. 682-682.

Inventions: The Grapevine Jakiyla Gamble

Citation: Gamble, Jakiyla. "Inventions: The Grapevine." *Early American Literature*, vol. 57 no. 3, 2022, p. 683-684.

Inventions: Phillis, heavy and I, naive Alaina Johansson

Citation: Johansson, Alaina. "Inventions: Phillis, heavy and I, naive." *Early American Literature*, vol. 57 no. 3, 2022, p. 685-686.

Essays in the Special Issue

Provocation: Diplomatic Negotiations in Phillis Wheatley's Ambassadorial "On Being Brought from Africa to America" Don Holmes

Citation: Holmes, Don. "Provocation: Diplomatic Negotiations in Phillis Wheatley's Ambassadorial "On Being Brought from Africa to America"." *Early American Literature*, vol. 57 no. 3, 2022, p. 687-699.

Abstract

Scholars of the Black lived experience have always had a contentious relationship with the writings and poetry of Phillis Wheatley Peters. Discussions about the contemporaneous reach of her advocacy for other enslaved Africans is often muted due to her closeness to the white Wheatley family. This essay recasts Wheatley's "On Being Brought from Africa to America" as a diplomatic treatise that illustrates African Christians exclusion within the faith in colonial America. Drawing on Christianity as a point of identification, Wheatley derives her own philosophical reading from biblical myths, using her enlightened status as an ambassador arguing for the wider acceptance of African Christians within evangelical ranks. This example centers Wheatley's lived experience, her survival of the transatlantic slave trade, and her ability to capture collective grievances in her signature poem. Using both rhetorical and literary studies, this essay considers Wheatley's rhetorical experiments as necessary to the continued evolution of Black rhetoric as offering public discourse during the early national period.

Phillis Wheatley, White Victimhood, and Black Belonging in the Age of *The 1776 Report* Emily Donaldson Field

Citation: Field, Emily Donaldson. "Phillis Wheatley, White Victimhood, and Black Belonging in the Age of *The 1776 Report*." *Early American Literature*, vol. 57 no. 3, 2022, p. 701-726.

Abstract

When insurrectionists stormed the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, they were continuing a tradition of white Americans figuring themselves as victims, a narrative whose connection to the American Revolution would be crystalized in *The 1776 Report*, released just days later. This article argues that responsible teaching of Phillis Wheatley's poetry can reframe for contemporary students their understanding of the Revolutionary period, of African Americans' role in the nation, and of crucial issues still at the center of public debate. Wheatley's very existence as an enslaved Black woman poet at the nation's founding—one who was in literal conversation with the vaunted

Founding Fathers, no less—gives the lie to the myth of a white national origin story. Made from within a space of *belonging* as a moral voice in a religious community, her critique of the new nation's most privileged casting themselves as victims reminds us to assess such claims skeptically and to bring the weight of history to bear on them. Reading Wheatley as a Revolutionary poet, I point out how Wheatley's identification with the Patriots was conditional, predicated on her wariness about white colonists' claims of "slavery" at the hands of the British and her full-throated critique of literal slavery. Drawing from Koritha Mitchell's notion of "homemade citizenship," the article emphasizes Wheatley's literary accomplishments not as efforts to counter racist notions of her intellectual limitations as expressed by Thomas Jefferson—as Henry Louis Gates has argued—but, rather, outlets to pursue her own genius and inventiveness, which she used to imagine an artistic space beyond Black victimhood. Study of Wheatley's oeuvre reveals clearly that critique of the nation has been part of the nation since its founding, and we need not fear it or label it un-American.

"I, Young in Life": Phillis Wheatley and the Invention of American Childhood

Camille S. Owens

Citation: Owens, Camille S. "'I, Young in Life': Phillis Wheatley and the Invention of American Childhood." *Early American Literature*, vol. 57 no. 3, 2022, p. 727-749.

Abstract

Although there is a rich, original archive of Phillis Wheatley's poetry about children, Wheatley's role in writing the culture of American childhood has not been widely noted. Conversely, while little can be archivally reconstructed about Wheatley's young life, popular biographies of the poet have, since the nineteenth century, placed emphasis on her childhood precocity. This essay intervenes in the first problem and deconstructs the latter, arguing that Wheatley was a major architect of American childhood who carved political interventions in childhood's pliant terms, and who pressed audaciously on its hardening racial boundaries. Placing Wheatley at the center of the early American epistemic, pedagogical, and political struggle over childhood's meaning, this essay traces the dominant racial politics of childhood that came to diminish Wheatley—as either a childlike poet or an exceptional child—in dialogue with Wheatley's own invocations of childhood, family, knowledge, and freedom in her personal writings and published work. Reading Wheatley's elegies to deceased white children beside the poem in which she casts herself—"young in life"—this essay argues that Wheatley drafted early lines in modern American childhood's recognizable form, while expanding beyond the American imagination of childhood's cognitive, social, and racial limits.

"On Imagination" and Material Culture

Christy L. Pottroff

Citation: Pottroff, Christy L. "'On Imagination' and Material Culture." *Early American Literature*, vol. 57 no. 3, 2022, p. 751-778.

Abstract

This article constructs a rich contextual analysis of several objects that appear in surviving records related to the lives of Phillis Wheatley Peters and her husband, and considers the multiplicity of meanings these everyday items may have conveyed. These objects—a nose ring, eight old coats, four silver spoons, and a neighborhood park in Boston—connect the Peterses to networks of global exchange as well as their local communities, and they do so in ineffable and wide-ranging ways. By considering each of these objects, their likely origins and associations, as well as their environmental contexts, scholars can enhance our understanding of the lives of Phillis Wheatley Peters and her husband, and better perceive practices of self-expression and social life that exceed textual self-expression for Black authors in the eighteenth century. These claims find methodological grounding in Wheatley-Peters's poem "On Imagination."

"The World Is a Severe Schoolmaster": Phillis Wheatley's Poetry of Domination and Submission

Britt Rusert

Citation: Rusert, Britt. "'The World Is a Severe Schoolmaster': Phillis Wheatley's Poetry of Domination and Submission." *Early American Literature*, vol. 57 no. 3, 2022, p. 779-796.

Abstract

This essay chronicles how Phillis Wheatley's poetry exposes the colonial system of slavery as one of perverse depravity and immoral excess. Building on recent scholarship that has shown how the rise of the Atlantic slave system cannot only be explained through recourse to economic rationales, I argue that Wheatley's poetry turns on and amplifies the libidinal economy of enslavement in the colonial period, in which enslaved people were wielded as visible signs of wealth and power and were used to propel the capricious desires and whims of white elites. In Wheatley's hands, the Puritanical elegy is charged with a libidinal excess that indicts the slave system, the culture it produced, and the people who participated in and abetted it.

Preface to "Wheatley Pedagogies: A Forum on Teaching"

Tara A. Bynum, Brigitte Fielder, Cassander L. Smith

Citation: Bynum, Tara A., et al. "Preface to 'Wheatley Pedagogies: A Forum on Teaching.'" *Early American Literature*, vol. 57 no. 3, 2022, p. 797-797.

Overview statement on the essays in the sub-section below: The essays that constitute this pedagogy forum address strategies for teaching Wheatley by attending to both the context of her historical moment and our own. Importantly,

the essays highlight strategies for teaching Wheatley in a variety of settings—classrooms, scholarly conferences, and public events. They also provide interdisciplinary approaches to studying her life and work. This forum makes clear that teaching Wheatley offers students transformative opportunities for profound learning and even unlearning.

Reading and Teaching Phillis Wheatley Peters in Boston

Nicole N. Aljoe, Toni Bee, Erica B. Lindamood

Citation: Aljoe, Nicole N., et al. "Reading and Teaching Phillis Wheatley Peters in Boston." *Early American Literature*, vol. 57 no. 3, 2022, p. 799-814.

Abstract

The goal of this essay, composed by educators from three different university and community organizations in Boston, is to share an overview of one community reading and engagement experience with the work of Phillis Wheatley Peters. In addition, it aims to provide a possible model for similarly collaborative community and higher education partnerships generally, as well as specific engagements with Phillis Wheatley Peters. And finally, we hope to highlight the powerful value of art to facilitate the inclusion of all diverse voices as part of our efforts to combat racist ignorance and create a more truly democratic society.

The First SEA Common Reading Initiative, or, How to Break Down Old and New Barriers to Teaching Phillis Wheatley Peters

Patrick M. Erben

Citation: Erben, Patrick M. "The First SEA Common Reading Initiative, or, How to Break Down Old and New Barriers to Teaching Phillis Wheatley Peters." *Early American Literature*, vol. 57 no. 3, 2022, p. 815-819.

Abstract

This reflection essay surveys the Society of Early Americanists' first Common Reading Initiative in 2020–21, which used as a common text Honoreé Fanonne Jeffers's *The Age of Phillis* to involve current undergraduates in the study of early America—specifically of Phillis Wheatley (Peters). I further offer the Common Reading Initiative as a creative pedagogical tool for teaching slavery, race, and racism in the face of politicized efforts to insulate students from critically engaging with topics of such vital importance to free academic inquiry and the health of our democratic system of government.

Reflections on "Phillis in Prison"

Elizabeth Ferszt

Citation: Ferszt, Elizabeth. "Reflections on "Phillis in Prison"." *Early American Literature*, vol. 57 no. 3, 2022, p. 821-826.

Abstract

"Phillis in Prison" is a reflection on recent experiences in teaching African American literature in four MDOC facilities, over two semesters, in 2020; then connecting those students to an academic opportunity to present their work (reading and writing) on colonial poet Phillis Wheatley, and the work of contemporary poet Honorée Fanonne Jeffers (*The Age of Phillis*, 2020) at the Society of Early Americanists (SEA) biennial conference, in March 2021. Student-inmate work was read by undergraduates in the Social Justice Program at Spelman College.

Loving Blackness across Arts and Sciences Michelle S. Hite, Deanna P. Koretsky

Citation: Hite, Michelle S. and Deanna P. Koretsky. "Loving Blackness across Arts and Sciences." *Early American Literature*, vol. 57 no. 3, 2022, p. 827-834.

Abstract

This essay reflects on "loving Blackness" as a pedagogical tool in assigning Honorée Fanonne Jeffers's *The Age of Phillis*. As such, it articulates the possibilities for regarding the inner lives of Black people beyond the constraints of anti-Blackness and white supremacy. When released from this antagonism, we challenge our students with exploring Black life on its own terms. This approach informs how we brought STEM students and advanced English literature students together to reconsider and reimagine the potential narrative strands found in pre-nineteenth-century Black history and the promises of Black futures using *The Age of Phillis* as a model.

Teaching Phillis Wheatley Peters through Black Liberation Theology Sam Plasencia

Citation: Plasencia, Sam. "Teaching Phillis Wheatley Peters through Black Liberation Theology." *Early American Literature*, vol. 57 no. 3, 2022, p. 835-841.

Abstract

This essay argues that it is productive to teach Phillis Wheatley Peters through the framework of Black liberation theology, an exegetical tradition that understands the Bible to be a liberatory text and God as siding with the oppressed. While Dr. James Cone—inspired by theological movements in Latin America, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X—named this school of thought in the late 1960s, its existence as an interpretative practice and form of life predates Cone's naming by at least two hundred years. Approaching Wheatley Peters's work from this vantage, I show, enables us to teach students how she's challenging and reordering the reigning taxonomies of her era. This

approach thus scaffolds students away from their most common misreadings of Wheatley as an accommodationist on the one hand, or a savvy manipulator of religious discourse on the other. Black liberation theology also helps us move students beyond their overreliance on irony/sarcasm as an explanatory framework by providing a heuristic that's grounded in late eighteenth-century racial, theological, and sociopolitical tensions.

On Being Brought from Africa to America to London: Teaching Phillis Wheatley in the Former Heart of Empire

Xine Yao

Citation: Yao, Xine. "On Being Brought from Africa to America to London: Teaching Phillis Wheatley in the Former Heart of Empire." *Early American Literature*, vol. 57 no. 3, 2022, p. 843-849.

Abstract

This essay considers the transatlantic workings of different national formations of anti-Blackness and colonial whiteness across several centuries, by taking the 1773 London publication of Phillis Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* in relation to teaching Wheatley's poetry in London in 2019. The recognition Wheatley received and her careful negotiations with conditional white British benevolence must be understood alongside both the continual British disavowals of ongoing historical anti-Blackness and robust, widespread antiracist resistance, which are often dismissed as foreign problems imported from the United States. In this context, studying and teaching Wheatley dramatizes the threat of a dehistoricized exceptionalism that upholds a model of diasporic Blackness viewed as solely American, rather than convergent with Britishness. A conscientious pedagogy of teaching Wheatley requires attention to the shifting resilience of Blackness encountering adaptive environments of anti-Blackness that can masquerade as tolerant and civil as well as the colonial, eugenicist, bio-essentialist strain of British white feminism. Finally, the challenges of curriculum and classroom are placed into the wider setting of the hostile structures of UK higher education which still attempts to delegitimize Black intellectual traditions, to stifle the field of Black studies, and to undermine the emergence, as well as vitiate the perseverance, of Black scholars.

Love as Method: Teaching Phillis Wheatley Peters and Honorée Fanonne Jeffers

Eugenia Zuroski

Citation: Zuroski, Eugenia. "Love as Method: Teaching Phillis Wheatley Peters and Honorée Fanonne Jeffers." *Early American Literature*, vol. 57 no. 3, 2022, p. 851-856.

Abstract

This essay reflects on my experience teaching the poems of Phillis Wheatley Peters as part of an introductory-level literature course called "Making and Unmaking Literary Traditions" in early 2021. Drawing on Honoré Fanonne Jeffers's description of her experience researching and writing *The Age of Phillis* (2020), I consider how "literary tradition" and historical archives have reproduced writers like Wheatley Peters as academic property, foreclosing the possibility of their being engaged as community. A Black feminist approach that emphasizes lived feeling as knowledge, and honors the attachments and accountabilities that attend bonds of love, generates nonviolent pedagogical conditions for engaging Wheatley Peters's poetry.

Archives: "Sister, Wasn't It Good": Archival Gestures, Mutual Witness, and the 1973 Phillis Wheatley Poetry Festival Kirsten Lee

Citation: Lee, Kirsten. "Archives: "Sister, Wasn't It Good": Archival Gestures, Mutual Witness, and the 1973 Phillis Wheatley Poetry Festival." *Early American Literature*, vol. 57 no. 3, 2022, p. 857-871.

Abstract

This essay examines how the 1973 Phillis Wheatley Poetry Festival presents its namesake as a figure meaningfully shaped by Black women's critical and creative treatments of her work. The festival draws on and enters into the long tradition of Black feminist communities forged around and through Wheatley's poetry, but its print cultural traces are un(der)documented and un(der)preserved. Following the participants' understanding of the same, this essay argues that the festival's archival impacts must be understood as a register of Black women's intimacies and mutual address documented across its participants' prose, verse, visual art, and performance. Rather than treating on the scantness of the festival's extant ephemera as a phenomenon of anti-Black misogyny alone, this essay maintains a focus on how the participants' serious attention to each other's creative lives challenges its audience to consider Wheatley archives alongside other Black women in her own time and since. In so doing the festival and its participants model a Wheatley studies in which Black women participate as writers, readers, and most critically readers of each other's work.

Archives: Anonymous Wheatley and the Archive in Plain Sight: A Tentative Attribution of Nine Published Poems, 1773–1775 David Waldstreicher

Citation: Waldstreicher, David. "Archives: Anonymous Wheatley and the Archive in Plain Sight: A Tentative Attribution of Nine Published Poems, 1773–1775." *Early American Literature*, vol. 57 no. 3, 2022, p. 873-910.

Abstract

When as part of my research into Wheatley I read extensively in contemporary newspapers and magazines that Wheatley and her circles might have read, I stumbled on a surprising, and striking, number of poems that read as if they not merely could be Wheatley's, but seem extremely likely to have been written by her. This essay presents those poems and makes the case for attribution in biographical and historical as well as lexical terms, and explores the implications of Wheatley having had especially strong incentives to publish some work anonymously, especially for a specific period after the publication of her book and her emancipation. In the wake of her fame and the politicization of slavery in the midst of the imperial controversy, anonymous and pseudonymous publication would have allowed her more control over the present and future of her writing than she had actually had before 1774 or possessed later, during the straitened literary and publishing scene of the Revolutionary War years.