Phillis Wheatley's Literacy Records as Resources for Creative Writers Today

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1773. Sociologist-poet Eve L. Ewing titled her intense lyric for *The New York Times*'s *The 1619 Project* with that date. The first time I taught the poem to undergrads at TCU several years ago, none of them caught much meaning from that year's allusion initially, though they appreciated its resonance after discussion of the poem's italicized headnote from Ewing: "*In 1773, a publishing house in London released 'Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral,' by Phillis Wheatley, a 20-year-old enslaved woman in Boston, making her the first African-American to publish a book of poetry."* This fall [2022], when encountering Ewing's 1773-titled text in a course on transatlantic literature of the long 19th century, students saw the connection right away, because they'd already spent some time with Phillis Wheatley Peters as a transnational figure linked to Black Atlantic culture.

Ewing begins her poem speaking TO Wheatley Peters: "Pretend I wrote this at your grave./Pretend the grave is marked. Pretend we know where it is": Ewing's salute to the author implicitly calls to readers to reflect on the fragility of cultural memory, especially when it's tied to marginalized peoples. Later in the "1773" lyric narrative, speaking now as Phillis herself, Ewing's shifting persona asks: "How many iambs to be a real human girl?/Which turn of phrase evidences a righteous heart?/If I know of Ovid may I keep my children?"

A record of layered literacies as well as a series of rhetorically powerful questions, these lines are at the heart of my paper today. I propose bringing together key concepts from diaspora studies and literacy studies to consider how Phillis Wheatley Peters' literacy legacies—material-textual ones and also imaginative gaps in her personal and literacy history—are serving as cultural resources for noteworthy Black women poets today. In broader terms, I'll offer this specific example to suggest that the question of how literacy transforms lives [our MLA session theme] cuts across generations and could refine our understanding of communal, culture-making literacies.

Returning to 1773, first. In that year, Phillis Wheatley, then still the "property" of her enslavers, the Wheatleys of Boston, published her groundbreaking book of *POEMS on Various Subjects*, *Religious and Moral.* Our new year of 2023 accordingly provides an important anniversary opportunity to mark her vital legacies. That effort—honoring her writings and her life, including foregrounding her time as a freewoman wed to John Peters and a mother—is one I've been grateful to join along with a number of faculty and students at my home institution of TCU, and longtime colleagues at the University of Georgia, as well as multiple sponsors and organizational partners.

Although our year-long program won't officially launch until later this month, my involvement with this particular public humanities initiative has already shown me that Wheatley Peters' cultural legacies are both significant and multi-faceted. I invite you to begin participating in what we're envisioning as both shared humanities study and a community-literacy-building endeavor, anchored in Wheatley's authorship. For example, we've opened our student-led website-building process to advice and contributions, even in our current early stages. (URL here: https://wheatleypetersproject.weebly.com/).

My focus today isn't as much on what we now sometimes short-hand as the PWP project itself, however. Rather, I want to share one strand of my still-developing analysis of Wheatley's literacies and their afterlives that has emerged from the combination of that project's collaborations and my teaching of Wheatley Peters in the fall 2022 undergrad course on 19th-century transatlantic culture I referenced earlier, and pedagogy I'm preparing for an upcoming graduate seminar on diasporas. This teaching has simultaneously been informed by several years of collaboration to prepare the anthology that Linda Hughes, Andrew Taylor and I entitled *Transatlantic Anglophone Literatures, 1776-1920.* Moving Wheatley's writing into the widened framework of transatlantic and diasporic studies has helped me see how more narrow disciplinary contexts for appreciating her authorship—whether British Studies or American (so often still conflated with "US") literature; African American studies or gender-focused readings—each foreground different important aspects of her work, but sometimes miss possibilities that a more communal and interdisciplinary stance can enable. The two particular interdisciplinary threads for engaging with Wheatley Peters that I'm bringing together here are literacy studies and diaspora studies.

Our panel theme declares in its title that literacy transforms lives. And I'm certainly not the first to note that her literacy acquisition—sponsored, however problematically within the context of being enslaved—transformed the young Phillis Wheatley. Henry Lewis Gates's influential NEH Jefferson lecture (followed by his 2003 *New Yorker* essay, "Phillis Wheatley on Trial" and his short-but-incisive trade press book of the same year, *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley*) underscore the complexity that twentieth-century Black artists and scholars had long faced in confronting Wheatley. Summing up a context which he cast as too-long marginalizing Wheatley, Gates posited she had been "Too black to be taken seriously by white critics in the eighteenth century" but became "too white to interest black critics in the twentieth" ("PW on Trial," *New Yorker*, 87). Such monumentally troubling lines as the opening of what Gates dubbed "the most reviled poem in African-American literature" (*Trials of PW*, 71), the 8-line "Twas MERCY brought me from my Pagan land," were clearly written language shaped by her enslavement. They were additionally marked—as so many of the 1773 *Poems* and earlier individually published elegies were too—by features of neoclassical poetics inconsistent with aesthetic preferences of our time. Further, for anti-racist enterprises thankfully guiding an increasing number of university classrooms today, such a text is enervating in its embrace of cultural hegemony—a telling example of what Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o has called "colonizing the mind." If this particular brand of literacy gave an African girl renamed for the slave ship that brought her to America voice, it simultaneously may have constrained her within a cultural cage.

It also, of course, made her a celebrity. It got her into print. It carried her—what irony!—back across the Atlantic to London, where patronage by the Countess of Huntingdon lifted her already-well-known authorship to another level of cultural authority.

So, the 1773 *POEMS* book embodies the aspect of her literacy that Wheatley is best known for today. But research by scholars like Joanna Brooks and Tara Bynum has reminded us to look more carefully beyond that book—including its famous frontispiece, which literally "frames" her as "Wheatley" by virtue of her then-owners' naming—to additional personal literacy practices such as her multiple letters to her friend, Obour Tanner. The 2022 special issue of *Early American Literature*, skillfully edited by Brigitte Fielder, Cassander Smith, and Bynum, presents a wide array of materials demonstrating the author's sustained—indeed, her

growing—cultural power, including as seen in continued recovery work and in public humanities projects like a community reading-and-writing collaboration in Boston, her original American residence.

Scholarship and teaching on Wheatley Peters is becoming more interdisciplinary. And, in that vein, by incorporating key concepts from diaspora studies, we can clarify features of Wheatley Peters's writing that have long puzzled some readers wishing for a more overtly resistant stance. Diasporic reading shows how her work anticipates expressive productions by recent creative culture makers. (I'm thinking, for instance, of novels like Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* or Rebecca Hall's *Wake: The Hidden History of Women-Led Slave Revolts*). Diaspora studies—including the more social-science-oriented research we humanists sometimes fail to engage—emphasize how cultural practices ranging from language choices to where one lives to whom one selects as allies all bear complex signs of trauma and the effort to navigate it which make straightforward interpretations of an individual's agency too simplistic. (Cohen and Fisher, for instance, in their introduction to a Routledge overview of the field, stress how diasporic individuals experience "internal complexities—including multi-ethnic, multi-faith, multi-lingual, multi-cohort, multi-mobile and hybrid diasporas" (5). For a victim of enforced diaspora—which Phillis Wheatley Peters certainly was—negotiation with the dominant culture in one's space and social context of relocation is ongoing. Strategies such as embracing that same culture's dominant religion, or engaging enthusiastically with its politics, can actually provide some agency. That agency is continually recalibrated through specific literacy pathways, some not expressed directly in published writings, so impossible for later generations to fully recover.

Creative writers like Black Caribbean writer Maryse Condé—attuned through both lived experience and scholarship to concepts like the Black Atlantic--have long narrated these themes and associated social practices in diasporic writings. And, in a noteworthy flowering over the past five years, multiple Black women poets have drawn inspiration from the specific legacies of Wheatley Peters' writings, complemented by imagined reengagements with gaps in her literal material literacy records, to generate new texts of their own. These books of poems explicitly identified as indebted to her as a source—a diasporic foremother, if you will. What do these cultural legacies reveal about how literacy transforms lives?

I want to turn now, by way of illustration, to three book-length collections of poems that share Eve Ewing's single-lyric approach of both depicting and extending Wheatley Peters' literacy legacies. The best known of these books is Honoré Fannone Jeffers' *The Age of Phillis*, which achieved high-level academic recognition (with Jeffers repeatedly being invited to address scholarly groups like ASECS and having her book adopted for university-level curricula) while also garnering praise from readers well beyond the academy.

I greatly admire the poetry Jeffers crafted for *The Age of Phillis*. In terms of literacy studies, though, what interests me even more is her process essay toward the close of that volume, where she retraces her process of study of Wheatly Peters—much of it situated in the archives of the American Antiquarian Society. Jeffers casts this process as, itself, a set of interconnected literacy events forming a sustained literacy practice of scholarship-generating-aesthetic-making, or, in more distilled terms, reading and conversations enabling writing. In terms of a genre familiar to literacy studies—she presents her readers with her own literacy narrative. Thus, her "Looking for Miss Phillis" essay begins, like many literacy narratives, by revisiting childhood reading and writing: "As a little girl in the 1970s," she tells us, "for Black

History Month I memorized the names of prominent African Americans, whose images my teachers would trace on construction paper, then tack to the bulletin boards in my school. How I loved those dark silhouettes" (167). The next few scenes recall her home as "filled" with accounts of "Phillis Wheatley" as "a child stolen from across the Atlantic and enslaved," and as "A young genius whose playthings were the poems of Homer and Terrence," and as "the first African women on this side of the Atlantic to publish a book of poetry" (167). Jeffers also points to gaps in her early learning about Phillis Wheatley—that neither her teachers nor her "parents ever mention(ed] Wheatley's husband" (167). She carries her own audience through a series of encounters with Wheatley's biography and poetry, as, ultimately, calling on Jeffers herself to write in order to set the record straight—to correct errors and omissions from an 1830s' white biographer (Margaretta Matilda Odell) and to address lingering questions from Gates's work. Some of what Jeffers describes in subsequent sections of the essay is historical detective work—looking for census data, for instance. Some of it is framed as a personal *kunstlerroman*-esque enterprise Jeffers felt compelled to take on "As a black, female poet whose career was made possible by the accomplishments of Phillis Wheatley" (173). With a nod to how the ever-growing project was blending academic scholarship with a personal quest for knowledge of her own artistic heritage, Jeffers's essay confesses: "I had fallen in love with Phillis Wheatley Peters and I wanted to do right by her legacy" (179).

Ultimately, if we view this essay as an aesthetics literacy narrative, we can better appreciate, I'd propose, how Jeffers brilliantly builds her story to end in a blend of scholarly reflection with new artistry. She embraces the need for creative imagination in her composition process by offering an imagined and image-rich picture of a marriage between John and Phillis and a pre-diaspora African family home grounded in but going beyond what she can document in historical records: "Maybe he was a tender lover and they laughed and cried and clutched. The words they spoke after their passion were to be believed, even though they came from the mouths of black folk. . . . I waited many years. . . [f]or somebody to see her African parents as more than a few brief moments that would be forgotten by their little girl. . . . I waited for somebody to love Phillis as I loved her. And then, I stopped waiting. I decided it was past time. I wrote this book" (187).

In this telling, *Jeffers'* book—enabled not just by *Phillis's* book, which Jeffers makes clear in her literacy narrative was far from adequate on its own—becomes an heir of Wheatley Peters' literacies. It thereby offers a framework for thinking about how creative intergenerational resources grounded in efforts to understand diaspora's impact can emerge from the records and the gaps associated with a forerunner's transformational literacies. That is, aesthetic reengagements with literacy records emerging from past diasporic experiences produce, in their turn, new transformational literacies. To support and extend such cultural stewardship, then, represents one fruitful path for creative makers like Jeffers, and also for participatory humanities projects that study and celebrate such work.

Extending further, as one of the specific initiatives within our forthcoming PWP project aims to do, we should support youth literacy practices that will invite young readers and writers to seek similarly transformational literacy, not just for themselves individually, but for their communities. This is the goal driving plans for creative writing workshops my colleague Carmen Kynard and I are developing for schoolteachers, followed by a youth writing contest calling for

new media and expressive genres informed by study of Phillis Wheatley Peters' literacies—not just her book of POEMS.

It's worth restating that Jeffers is not our only model, for either the community literacy project we're embarking on or for analyzing its foundational principles. Two other poets—Drea Brown and Alison Clarke—though their writings have not (yet?) secured the level of widespread acclaim afforded *The Age of Phillis*—provide additional vital examples. Drea Brown's chapbook, *Dear Girl: A Reckoning*, focuses specifically on what might be the most telling gap not only in Phillis Wheatley's literacy records but in the larger history of the Black Atlantic diaspora: direct depictions of the Middle Passage.

In the opening piece in Brown's intense, painful, powerful collection—"Dear Reader"—she seems to speak simultaneously as herself and as a young not-yet-Phillis: "believe me when I tell you I am haunted/by marvelous horrors of past-not-passed. . . thunderous things/. . . this lineage/of banshees and haints. . . . overboard or below deck thick in blood memory/inherited apparitions some come to stay/while here is the reckoning believe/ me reader the dead will have their due." (11). Another poem later in this vivid collection proffers language for unspeakable trauma, casting its claim of voice and its attempt at words as a necessary step, a painful but essential refusal to accept lost literacies from these horrors. Thus, Brown reflects: "when bodies are unable to mourn/ traumatic situations the memory/is stored in a secret place." Honoring this pain, she continues: "there is always already urgency/to piece in place what has not/been said." (25). Reiterating this theme of a reparative telling—a literacy enactment required by prior silencing—Brown's closing text nods also to concepts often invoked in diaspora studies: "we are a haunted people, defined by crags of history and silence that have only increased the pang and swell in phantom limbs of cultural memory; by excavating tombs of historical trauma . . . we can reckon with the haunt and give voice to what is sunken or buried." (45)

Like Jeffers's *Age of Phillis* and Brown's *Dear Girl*, Alison Clarke's book of poetry includes a literacy narrative of sorts, again positioning a 21st-century poet as tapping into the records of her subject's literacy practices (such as Wheatley's use of multiple languages, her dependence on patrons, her spiritualism). Also like Jeffers and Brown, Clarke locates herself in a tradition of communal literacy learning—in this case, an elective literature course she took after completing requirements for her sociology degree at the University of Alberta. Her professor included the writer Clarke repeatedly refers to as "Phillis" (like the title of Clarke's book) in a "class focused on . . . women who found themselves on the margins, especially women of colour" (137). Inspired, she said, by Wheatley's determination to overcome obstacles to her writing, Clarke returned to study of Wheatley's story as the source for her MFA thesis, which she dubs "an inspiring and illuminating journey [of] writing [her] poetry collection" (137-38).

Three determined, productive Black women poets, all with books they explicitly connect to being inspired by Phillis Wheatley Peters, by immersing in her writings, as well as what she did or could not write, and what's been lost from writings we most likely cannot recover. In reading not only their poems but their literacy narratives of diaspora-shaped composition, we find a worthy reminder. Literacy can indeed be transformational. For communities of readers. For aspirational writers. For any of us who aim to be cultural stewards, seeking and sharing meaning from records of prior literacy-enabled transformations.

Note on the text, above and below:
This copy of the MLA talk includes occasional additions of information needed for readers who did not attend the original session in San Francisco. Below, I also provide a bibliography of texts referenced in the talk, though a Works Cited was not shared with the original audience. Where possible, I include links to help our website visitors have easy access to the texts referenced in the talk. I also adopt a format blending MLA and CMS styles to include all information that might assist website visitors' access.

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