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Locating Phillis Wheatley through Transatlantic, Intertextual Teaching

I teach at a predominantly white institution in the very 'Red' state of Texas, in complicated times. On the one hand, curricular movements committed to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) at my home university are underscoring literary pedagogy's potential for addressing race and related topics as lived social justice issues among students and the broader constituencies that liberal arts education serves. On the other hand, political voices from the right, locally and beyond, are calling for the dismantling of just such educational programs, all the way from university settings like mine—Texas Christian University (TCU)—into kindergarten-through-secondary settings. I foreground this vexed context not only to alert readers to its impact on my pedagogical decision-making, but also to acknowledge that the initial word of my essay's title, "Locating," references both a generative heritage of transatlantic scholarship shaping my teaching about Phillis Wheatley Peters and a complex social context influencing that work. (An important additional element of 'locating' her authorship involves heeding advice to incorporate 'Peters' in our naming choices;[1] in most places within the essay, I do use 'Wheatley', given that designation's reflecting her authorial name in publications under discussion here and much prior scholarship.)

TCU is a private US-based institution, and thus technically exempt from pressures like state legislators' recent calls to ban books containing any hint of a current major target of the US political right, Critical Race Theory. Yet, I suspect few on our Board of Trustees would self-describe as 'liberal', as suggested by the group's recently renewing

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trustee membership for a Congressman who voted against certification of Joe Biden's election as US President. Upper-level administrators have enacted various constraints on curriculum, such as refusing to allow 'sexuality' to be added to the academic program name for 'Women and Gender Studies'. Additionally, despite the university's governance system being formally secular, having been separated years ago from an original affiliation with the Disciples of Christ, the 'Christian' part of TCU's name does align with personal affiliations of many students, some of whom I've heard articulate a vision of faith (ironically) less progressive than that of the original 1870s' minister-teacher-founders.[2] Overall, with just under half its undergraduate student body now hailing from Texas, a number of my undergraduate students have described themselves as at an opposite end of a political spectrum than classmates from California, which produces a notable portion of TCU's out-of-state enrollment. Indeed, the make-up of undergraduate classrooms seems to represent a microcosm of political divisions across the US today. (I've found graduate students in our department's MA and PhD programs often reflect more diverse personal identities than undergraduates. Given the university's stronger commitment to its undergraduate program, I concentrate in this essay on my undergraduate teaching.)

Whatever the backgrounds for a course's student group, my home department (English) and the Add Ran College, like my related affiliation with the School of Interdisciplinary Studies, support curriculum aligned with DEI and aspects of the liberal arts that promote critical thinking about history, individual identity, and the role of literature in culture-making. Hence, a figure like Phillis Wheatley Peters brings opportunities for learning with significance beyond any one semester's classroom experience. Here, I revisit two particular course contexts: first, in most detail, an undergraduate course in Global Diasporas for English majors and, second, though only briefly, a new offering on transnational American literature that I am developing based upon my learning from co-editing an anthology of nineteenth-century transatlantic literatures.

By analyzing scholarship-informed teaching, this essay proposes two productive pathways for engagement with Wheatley. Both tap into intertextual strategies for introducing students to her writing in transatlantic context. One, from the course on Global Diasporas, takes

a transtemporal route, extending now-familiar transatlantic concepts such as the Black Atlantic via *The 1619 Project*. The second, which I am preparing for a different upcoming course, envisions building upon the first while inviting students from a range of disciplines to revisit ways they have encountered Wheatley and transatlanticism in other curricula, and asking what those varying frameworks reveal about how studying literature guides broader social understandings. In both cases, my teaching is shaped by scholarship on Wheatley as a transatlantic figure but also by the sociopolitical situation in my setting today—one that, if unique in some ways, also echoes pressures felt across US instructional settings in multiple eras. Thus, one way I examine my Wheatley pedagogy here is to 'locate' its cultural work in both place and (across) time, as locally grounded yet globally oriented, and temporally expansive.[3]

Tracking Wheatley as a Transatlantic Figure

When teacher-scholars locate Wheatley transatlantically today, they of course can draw on Paul Gilroy's monumental 1993 *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. But transatlantic visions of Wheatley's oeuvre actually predate Gilroy's influential text. As far back as 1977, Mukhtar Ali Isani published a report in *American Literature* outlining the complex interplay between initial, unsuccessful efforts to publish her *Poems* in Boston and the launch of the 1773 London edition (which he connected to pieces appearing earlier in the Boston *Censor* in 1772). Isani followed up with additional essays underscoring Wheatley's Black Atlantic dimensions, including '"Gambia on My Soul"' (1979), which underlined her positive portrayals of Africa; 'Early Versions of Some Works of Phillis Wheatley' (1979), which spotlighted the *New-York Journal*'s publication of her 1772 letter to Lord Dartmouth and its related poem, as she was leaving for England; and 'A Contemporaneous British Poem on Phillis Wheatley' (1990), which explicated a 1774 salute to her work by a British poet-reader in Leeds.

More recently, Vincent Carretta's 2011 biography detailed her connections to British colonial culture. In his 'A Farewell to America' chapter, Carretta explored not only the familiar book-history angle for the *Poems*'s London publication but also a number of her personal in-

teractions there (one being with Benjamin Franklin). Carretta set those experiences in dialogue with others of Black African descent then in England. He also speculated on the appeal that claiming self-liberation may have had for Wheatley, given the Mansfield legal decision asserting free status for enslaved colonial subjects once they arrived on British soil. This legal issue guided Carretta's transatlantic reading of Wheatley's 'To the Right Honourable WILLIAM, Earl of DARTMOUTH' (*Poems*, 1773: 73–75), especially its tying slavery to tyranny. He thereby aligned that text, and her oeuvre overall, with anti-slavery perspectives.

Subsequent scholarship on Wheatley has situated her life and writing in transatlantic context through connections with a transnational Romanticism. Joel Pace, for instance, positions Wheatley in a network of 'Atlantic-rim' textual interactions that resist tendencies toward 'separating literature by nation, ethnicity, and period' and instead transform 'Romanticism' into a transnational movement with shared themes and goals (2012: 238). Exploring metaphorical ships in both Wheatley and Coleridge, Pace coins the term 'Imag-I-Nation(s)' to foster connected readings of the two poets. In a related essay, Pace asks how 'creating Black Atlantic romanticisms' might benefit from strategies such as linking Phillis Wheatley with canonical British Romantic poets like William Wordsworth (2017: 115). Suggesting that too-rigid periodization models have sometimes siloed Wheatley's poetry into a style-oriented, imitative Neoclassical bond with Pope (115–16), Pace identifies ways of reading Wheatley to confirm her place 'as one of the unacknowledged originators of a Romantic poetics of abolitionism' (116). For Pace, this re-mapping of Wheatley involves, in part, focusing on ideas circulating the Atlantic during her lifetime and on 'Wheatleyan and Wordsworthian' linkages of 'feelings to specific locations in the physical and emotional landscapes and seascapes of memory' (117).

While the oceanic dimension of Gilroy's formulation continues to promote dynamic interpretations of Wheatley, so too does his call to foreground Black history and consciousness. In that vein, my teaching of Wheatley, like classroom foci doubtless in many university settings, derives direction from African-American-oriented interpretations encouraged by Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s scholarship, including his

prestigious Jefferson lecture for the US National Endowment for the Humanities. There, he painted a compelling oral picture of an October 1772 examination of 'a small, delicate African woman, about eighteen years of age' by '"the most respectable characters in Boston"' (2002: 2). In two 2003 publications extending his talk (one an essay for *The New Yorker* titled 'Phillis Wheatley on Trial', the other a free-standing expansion published as *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley*), Gates would further authorize this theme. He dubbed his imagined occasion 'the primal scene of African-American letters', a test questioning, in broader terms, if 'a Negro [was] capable of producing literature?' ('Phillis' 2003: 82; *Trials* 2003: 5). Gates also used his continuing reflections to revisit negative responses to Wheatley over the decades from 1773 onward, from condemnations like Thomas Jefferson's (in)famous indictment of her poetry's (supposed) weaknesses on aesthetic and intellectual grounds to twentieth-century Black cultural arbiters finding her 'too white' (*Trials* 2003: 82), despite 'her sacrifices, her courage, her humiliations, her trials' (*Trials* 2003: 83).

By enshrining this framework for Wheatley studies, Gates may well have discouraged other potential emphases, including avenues building on inquiry like Carretta's consideration of the potential impact of her time in England. For instance, even when arguing for the contributions that a network of women readers (some Black, some white) made to Wheatley's transatlantic publishing career, Joanna Brooks spent the first pages of a 2010 essay's intersectional account critiquing the Gates-promoted recurring tale of the trial/test. Yet, Brooks returned to (and at least partly reaffirmed) the 'legend of the "trial of Phillis Wheatley"' at the close of her alternative history, which revisited the poet's writing as insufficiently enabled by white women who failed to secure publication of her proposed second poetry volume. Brooks accordingly positioned her 'renarrativiztion of Wheatley's career' as distinct from but also aligned with the persistent anchor of the '"Wheatley Court"' as demonstrating 'how race, sex, and gender shape relations of power in the public sphere and in the academy' (2010: 18).

Ultimately, in spite of their varying emphases, both traditions of Wheatley scholarship (transatlantic- and African-American-oriented) often share a focus on how white sponsors constrained the poet, even when providing publication access, and on how that context, in

turn, affected the author's self-representations. For one example blending both traditions, we can turn to Kirsten Wilcox's recounting of the steps involved in Wheatley's *Poems* securing publication in England. Though she cast Wheatley's Boston readership as possibly more progressive and already distinctly 'American' (1999: 17), Wilcox charged both white audiences with constraining a Black voice. As a complex counterweight to that recurring theme in Wheatley scholarship, other scholars proffer that the poet's own choices of form (Pope-reminiscent couplets) and content (affirmations of Christian faith) must be reckoned with. Paula Loscocco's *Phillis Wheatley's Miltonic Poetics*, for instance, urges 'readers to see how Wheatley uses Milton's works to develop a sublime, consolatory, and visionary poetics' (2014: 13). For Loscocco, Wheatley's affiliations with Miltonic verse signal an 'Anglo-American culture function[ing] as a "diasporic" community cut off from the political nation of Great Britain but increasingly committed to the common ground of English literary culture' (16), maintaining *translatio studii* even as the ties of *translatio imperii* unraveled (17). Loscocco actually faults Wilcox for 'postcolonial hostility to British literary tradition' and sees this problem as 'permeat[ing] early American literary scholarship' (25). Yet, scholarship by Victoria Ramirez Gentry and Will Harris counters that complaint. Harris highlights Wheatley's 'diaspora subjectivity' through comparative analysis with other Black Atlantic figures, including John Marrant, Ignatius Sancho, Briton Hammon, Quobna Ottobah Cugoano and Olaudah Equiano (2008: 27–28, 32, 40). Gentry examines how Wheatley and Quobna Ottobah Cugoano (1757–91) found ways to blend their Evangelical-affiliated writing with 'resistance to the oppression of their enslavers in their own, new forms of anti-racist Christianity' (2021: 6). Casting both authors as celebrating a Blackness 'no longer be equated with sin', Gentry also sees their writing as a counternarrative against the kind of 'present-day evangelicals' who excoriate the #BlackLivesMatter (BLM) movement (7).

Indeed, since the rise of #BLM, foregrounding race when teaching Wheatley has taken on enhanced exigence. Connections between the resistant themes in her texts and campaigns for social justice today are emerging in pedagogy-focused publications, such as Joel Pace's 2020 essay for *Romantic Circles*, '#BlackLivesMatter: The Black At-

lantic Matters'. There, Pace posits that students can 'draw parallels between America's struggle for freedom from British rule and her own fight for liberty from slavery' (para 8). He advocates 'teaching techniques to counter the legacies of segregation and erasure' like those the #BLM movement 'calls on educational institutions to address' (para 1). Pace suggests specific approaches such as pairing Wheatley's writing with musical artistry like Bob Marley's to spotlight the relevance of her voice today.

My reflections here on teaching Wheatley join efforts like Pace's while honoring complementary work in colleagues' classrooms at TCU, as I will note below. I am advocating for a scholarship-informed and locality-nuanced teaching, promoting diasporic themes to foster students' critical examination of institutional curricular structures that shape their social understandings. I will lay out strategies for illuminating individual Wheatley poems and a transnational, transtemporal legacy still retrievable from her writings for students hoping to address global social issues with local implications for their own lives. At a methodological level, I also open up my teaching practices as a resource. If, too often, we have kept the pedagogical decision making that is actually informed by our research invisible to others, I hope my analysis will foster a view of transatlantic-based teaching itself as contributing to, as well as drawing upon, scholarly knowledge-making.

Teaching Wheatley Across Time

One course where I've productively taught Wheatley is an undergraduate seminar on Global Diasporas—one of several rotating offerings that fulfill a Research Seminar requirement for TCU's English major. In a fall 2019 offering, *The New York Times*'s *1619 Project* helped me spotlight Wheatley as a pivotal figure for understanding how past transatlantic diasporas still have sustained historical and cultural impact. Mining this intertextual linkage, my students confronted a view of American and global history tracing transatlantic slavery's legacy from the colonial period through our current moment. Our layered analysis prompted questions about settler/immigrant migration myths such as The American Dream, as well as claims about the US having achieved a post-race status and culture.

The 1619 Project has become a flashpoint among conservative

politicians, who are often citing the ambitious endeavour as exemplifying a broader boogeyman: Critical Race Theory. By fall 2021, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, partly in response to pressure from a major donor to the journalism program and members of the Board of Trustees denied tenure to Nikole Hannah-Jones, after faculty had selected her for a prestigious endowed chair based at least in part on her leadership of the project.[4] Public school board speakers and political pundits now regularly rail against *The 1619 Project*'s content—often, one suspects, without reading it. When I presented Wheatley as an entry point into the project in my fall 2019 seminar, the journalism-cum-literature publication had not yet encountered the degree of hostility now evident in the US. At TCU, I plan to continue the teaching described below. I will do so not, as critics of *The 1619 Project* sometimes charge, because I want to indoctrinate a particular viewpoint. Rather, I will continue to incorporate this material because I trust my students' capacity for addressing texts and contexts critically; along those lines, the literary pieces in the collection are effective resources for inviting questions about racial oppression in multiple transatlantic locales across time, as well as how literary expression can mount social protest.

In my first teaching from the Project, a transatlantic view of Wheatley enabled a generative intertextual approach I will continue to cultivate. The Global/American literature course was organized around a theme of transnational diasporas. Earlier readings, prior to addressing *The 1619 Project* near the end of the term, included Robert Conley's *Mountain Windsong: A Novel of the Trail of Tears* (1992); Francisco Jiménez's *The Circuit* (1997), the first text in his series of narratives based in his own experiences in a family of migrant workers from Mexico; and Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), a post-9/11 novel. Students also read a choice text on diasporic-related experiences of Asian Americans, such as the incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II or Chinese Americans laboring to build transcontinental railroad lines. Each small reading group later presented analyses to their classmates from texts like John Okada's *No-No Boy* (1957), Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston's *Farewell to Manzanar* (1973), Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men* (1980), or Milton Murayama's *All I Asking for Is My Body* (1975). Films like Jan Troell's 1972 *The New Land* and Rebecca Cammisa's 2009 *Which Way Home* also had

vital places in the syllabus.

By the time we got to texts from several creative writers who contributed to *The 1619 Project*, students had a rich array of prior readings with which to forge transtemporal intertextual connections. And the Project's own approach to intertextuality also supported my positioning of Wheatley as a central figure for study of Diaspora in a Black Atlantic context's multiple mappings (including geographic, affective, and literary-historical). We began our work on Wheatley, perhaps predictably, with her 'On being brought from AFRICA to AMERICA' (*Poems*, 1773: 18) which does not appear in the Project collection directly. At TCU, I was surprised to hear many students say they were unfamiliar with the poem, given how often Wheatley—and this specific lyric—is taught in my colleagues' classes. (More on that point later in this essay). But I have been teaching long enough to know that authors' and texts' positions in classroom study, however optimistically we may envision our approaches, do not always stick with individual learners; I also realize our English majors could have missed prior engagement with Wheatley simply by virtue of their previous course selections.

Despite class members' claims of unfamiliarity, when opening the discussion to students' unmediated responses, I found they quickly offered up reactions in line with the longstanding critique of the poem's depiction of the speaker's capture and enslavement as 'mercy'. In line with Gates, several pointed to the text's negative associations of 'black' with 'diabolic die' as downright offensive:

> Remember, *Christians*, *Negros*, black as *Cain*,
> May be refin'd, and join th'angelic train
> ('On being brought', ll. 7–8)

They wondered why a Black writer would take such a position—until they began, through their own conversation, to arrive at an assessment also evident in Wheatley scholarship: that she was constrained by her anticipated white readership. A few students raised questions about possible irony in expressions of gratitude for becoming Christianized. Gradually, speculation emerged that both sincerity about religious commitment and submerged protest against slavery could be present in the same poem.

In his 2002 Jefferson lecture, Gates posited: 'That Phillis

Wheatley is not a houseword within the black community is owing largely to … "On Being Brought from Africa to America"' (20). Indeed, he averred, this brief lyric 'has been the most reviled poem in African American literature' (21). Yet, in a restorative move, Gates also cited several scholars' defenses of the author grounded in noting how 'Wheatley elsewhere in her poems complained bitterly about the human costs of the slave trade', as in her address to the Earl of Dartmouth (21). And Gates went on in the lecture (as in its subsequent published extensions) to relate many Black readers' rejection of Wheatley to the exigencies of African American political movements in the 1960s and 1970s. Arguing that Thomas Jefferson's mean-spirited assault on Wheatley's writing was 'recuperated and recycled by successive generations of black writers and critics' who rejected her as 'imposter', 'race traitor', and 'Uncle Tom's mother' (24), Gates lamented those responses. In the end, he bemoaned (and claimed Wheatley herself 'would weep' at) echoes of such assessments in twenty-first-century condemnations of 'speaking standard English, getting straight A's, or even visiting the Smithsonian' as '"acting white"' (25). So, Gates asked: 'If Frederick Douglass could recuperate and champion Thomas Jefferson, during the Civil War of all times, is it possible for us to do the same for a modest young poet named Phillis Wheatley?' ("Mr. Jefferson," 2002: 26; *Trials*, 2003: 87).

Buoyed by my students' energetic engagement with the poem's complexity, I posed a more transatlantic version of Gates's query. I asked how our own responses to this text and others might be complicated (and enriched) if we looked beyond Wheatley's composition site—enslaved in Boston, isolated from her homeland and family, trying to adapt as a survivor—to the British social context of her *Poems*' publication. We might then (following Byerman 2019; Hodgson 2014: 670; and Isani, "Gambia" 1979: 65–66) imagine her seeing Christianity as a boon. Without actually rejecting her homeland, perhaps she sought affiliation with a version of British-influenced religion invoked in an earlier writing that launched her international reputation before the journey to London that gained publication for her *Poems*, 'On the Death of the Rev. Mr. George Whitefield' (*Poems*, 22–24).[5] I proposed that additional literature we would be reading from *The 1619 Project* might support such an interpretation.[6] We were ready, then, to engage those texts, with Wheatley having provided a transatlantic entry point.

Clint Smith's 'August 1619', for instance, vividly depicts the '36,000 slave ships' that 'crossed the Atlantic/Ocean' and also describes his own literal finger-tracing of a Black Atlantic map of the Middle Passage: 'I drag/my hand across the bristled hemispheres, but grow weary of chasing/a history that swallowed me'. In Smith's recounting of how 'For every hundred people who were captured & enslaved, forty died' during the transatlantic crossing ('August 1619' 2019), we found a more pointed portrayal of the horrors of the Middle Passage than Wheatley gave when so briefly referencing 'being brought' to America. But we also juxtaposed the different levels of agency available to each of these two authors, in terms of both their time periods of writing and their venues of publication. This contrast encouraged students to recognize the ability of *The 1619 Project*, as an endeavour sponsored by a major US newspaper powerhouse, to challenge (and potentially revise) dominant histories' portraits of America's founding stages. Likewise, juxtaposing Smith's poem with Wheatley's, students reported, encouraged them to take into account, as Nikole Hannah-Jones says in her stirring online essay on the Project's goals, that 'Black Americans have … been, and continue to be, foundational to the idea of American freedom' (2019)

Eve L. Ewing's touching '1773' poem for the Project makes a detailed and more explicit connection to Wheatley than Smith's 'August 1619'. Indeed, Ewing's headnote clarifies her title's date as commemorating the London-based publication of *Poems on Various Subjects* and marking Wheatley's role as 'the first African-American to publish a book of poetry'. Ewing's free-verse text, while repeatedly addressing Wheatley as 'you', calls on readers to 'Pretend' a memorial for a poetic ancestor too long marginalized in history.

> Pretend I wrote this at your grave.
>
> Pretend the grave is marked. Pretend we know where it is. (ll. 1–2)

Evoking, like Clint Smith, the Middle Passage, by envisioning 'the boat that brought you' (l.3), Ewing's vibrant imagining of a transtemporal encounter with Wheatley as literary foremother calls out other signs of white patriarchy at work transatlantically in the past and today. Thus, Ewing contrasts the lack of visible memorial to Wheatley with monuments to 'the Mathers' (l.8), sites of official memory which, the

poem suggests, embody white patriarchal leadership of transatlantic settler society in North America. Ewing further alludes to the testimonial signatures assembled to affirm Wheatley's legitimacy, not just as author but as 'a real human girl' (l. 22), testimony essential to validating her writerly authority in the '1773' year of this new poem's title, a link reminding readers that Black texts then reached publication only by virtue of white social power (Ewing 2019).

In discussion of Ewing's '1773', I invited students to think about what it means to have—or not have—a physical memorial site. We asked what Ewing's imaginative creation of a memorial for Wheatley might have achieved. We considered the process of literary recovery as an intervention, as counter-history-telling doing cultural work, and as implicit announcement of readers' social responsibilities going forward. We wondered if Ewing's text ignored the shortcomings class members had identified in Wheatley's work, or if, reading '1773' in dialogue with Clint Smith, we could now place Wheatley in a more empathetic transatlantic context than the colonial-era poet could articulate directly in her own time. How, we also discussed, might reading these three poems together affirm a core argument of *The 1619 Project*: that the heritage of transatlantic slavery as a foundational moment in American history is still having a transtemporal impact?

From Ewing's poignant valuing of Phillis Wheatley—as writer, but also as child, wife and mother—we moved our intertextual re-reading of 'On being brought' to two linked poems in *The 1619 Project*: brief, intense lyrics honoring four other historically pivotal little Black girls, those killed on 'Sept. 15, 1963' in the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. Neither Rita Dove nor Camille T. Dungy specifically names Wheatley. To read Wheatley and Ewing intertextually with the poems by Dove and Dungy expands the power of the latter two authors' imaginings of different pasts and presents for the Birmingham girl-victims. In that context, we addressed Lucia Hodgson's recommendation of increased attention to Wheatley as a youthful girl writer and for incorporating historical studies of Black girlhood like Nazera Sadiq Wright's. We traced transtemporal critiques by Wheatley, Ewing, Dove, and Dungy of how, in one of transatlantic slavery's most corrupt recurring legacies, Black girls are repeatedly denied a childhood free from harm.[7] Lines in Ewing's '1773' gain added resonance

via this lens:

> Pretend I was there with you, Phillis, when you asked in a letter to no one:
>
> How many iambs to be a real human girl? (ll. 21–22).

This recursive theme reaffirms a central claim of *The 1619 Project*, its counter-history of ongoing Black revictimization. And confirming that claim, in turn, opens up readings for Project creative texts by Yaa Gyasi ('1932', on the infamous Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis) and Jacqueline Woodson ('Feb. 12, 1946', on the brutal beating of an US army sergeant, blinded in the attack). Reading Dove's and Dungy's texts with this heritage in mind weaves together an aesthetic tapestry creating an alternative memorial for all such Black victims of transatlantic slavery's legacy, one linked through intertextual study of Wheatley to an artistic legacy of Black elegy writing already seen in her late eighteenth-century texts. This brand of reading thereby relocates the 1963 Bombingham girl victims, whose innocence made them targets reminiscent of a captured African girl brought to North American way back in 1761, into a literary-historical framework belying assertions that transatlantic slavery is 'over' and reinscribing Wheatley's place as a transtemporal Black writer.

Like Ewing, Dove and Dungy must *pretend* if they want to reconfigure the experiences of Black girlhood represented by Wheatley's enslavement and the brutal murders in Bombingham. Like Wheatley, who insists on her right to embrace Christian faith even while also acknowledging enslavers' perversion of its spiritual power, Dove and Dungy both celebrate the place of religion in the pre-bombing lives of the church-going girls. By extension, then, reading these spiritual texts together also invites a deeper acceptance of Wheatley's ability to claim Christianity for herself in 'On being brought'. If Dove and Dungy's poems can still assert the place of religion in a local world-space that makes Birmingham into Bombingham, then it becomes more possible to allow Wheatley a parallel choice.

Dove, for instance, marshals images to remind readers that the shared practices of Black Christian churchgoing enable trust in a heavenly future. Thus, her poem pictures the little girls, soon to be innocent bomb victims, preparing to help lead the upcoming service—'All in white *like angels*' (Dove: 2019, l. 4)—though the angelic status they

are about to have thrust upon them is surely far different than they would wish. Adjusting their sashes, practicing their lines, they are almost ready:

> My, don't we look—
> what's that word the Reverend use in
> last Sunday's sermon? Oh, I got it: *ethereal* (ll. 11–13)

Students in the Global Diaspora seminar caught the irony here. I appreciated how their analysis gathered force from our reading this poem in a sequence of texts, each with a date, marking moments of continued suppression, pain, abuse, destruction, and (so sad, they said) the generations-crossing impact of the Black transatlantic diaspora. Through this poem's description, we could revisit 'th' angelic train' in Wheatley's lyric, considering if her characterization of Christianity as source of comfort was prescient in terms of the positive role it has historically played in so many Black communities. We also noted how seeing the girlhood-oriented images in Dove's poem underscores Wheatley's being denied the kind of girlhood she could have had in her homeland, as indeed all enslaved girls were violently denied true childhoods.

Camille T. Dungy's poem honoring the four little Bombingham girls presents an equally poignant commentary, this time in the voice of a mother. I asked students: How is this point of view different from Dove's poem? What does this maternal voice, speaking of, and to, her own little baby as a 'darkening girl' (Dungy: 2019, l. 4), add to our revisiting of the horrific Bombingham event, historically and in Dove's poem? Dungy's poem re-envisions these lost little girls as they could have become — elderly grandmothers, years after their deaths when just 'babies' (l. 9), a term echoing Wheatley's self-characterization as a baby when seized in Africa and enslaved in America. The word 'brevity' repeats throughout (Dungy 2019). How does 'brevity', I asked, also connect with Wheatley's life and poetry when we read Dungy's piece not only in conversation with 'On being brought', but also with knowledge that Wheatley, herself a mother as Ewing's poem reminds us,[8] died at only thirty-one? Conversely, wishing to ensure Black girls their full innocence, as Dove's lyric asks us to do, does not preclude a commitment to honoring Phillis Wheatley *Peters*' mature Black womanhood as well.

In my classroom, by situating the poems of Ewing, Dove, and Dungy in dialogue with Wheatley Peters' life and life-writing, I've seen *The 1619 Project*'s themes gain discernable significance for students, as the transtemporal reach of transatlantic enslavement acquires voice and form in the recurring portrayals of Black girlhood and womanhood speaking to cultural heirs. Placing Wheatley's *Poems* in conversation with their twenty-first-century counterparts concretizes the Project's themes in a figure whose personal losses and modes of writerly resistance students can recognize as bound up with other young girls and women of the Black Atlantic, across time.

Looking Ahead: Teaching Wheatley's Elegies

In revisiting my course on transnational, transtemporal diasporas for this essay, I have seen more clearly how creative writing texts assembled for *The 1619 Project*, read together, accrue an elegiac dimension. This deepening realization has helped me recognize benefits of bringing Wheatley's elegies into my teaching in future course offerings. As Andrea Haslanger notes, though a number of Wheatley's elegies honor adult friends of her enslaving family or important public figures like the Reverend George Whitefield, several commemorate children. Haslanger argues that, through Wheatley's poetic rhetoric, 'these child speakers possess an assured command of language and of what their deaths should mean, but they also remain children, with all the vulnerability and nonmajority that entails'. For Haslanger, Wheatley's child elegies both give a special voice of wisdom to youth and illuminate 'the deceased's fragility, making elegy a meditation on vulnerable status' (2019: 128). In future teaching, I plan to juxtapose a text like 'A Funeral POEM on the Death of C.E. an Infant of Twelve Months' (Poems, 69–71) or 'On the Death of a young Lady of Five Years of Age' (*Poems*, 25–26) with *The 1619 Project*'s elegiac contributions from Dungy and Dove. As with the intertextual reading of 'On being brought' in dialogue with Ewing's '1773' poem, pairing the Dove/Dungy poems on the deaths of little girls in Birmingham with Wheatley's elegies for children will underscore the credit Wheatley deserves for strengthening literary traditions still doing cultural work today.

This process, in turn, can include guidance from Antonio Bly's essay on Wheatley's elegies, where he highlights strategies such as her

typographical variations for thematic emphasis—a technique echoed in Ewing's *1619 Project* elegy for Wheatley herself, as well as in Dove's. Close reading of typography in these twenty-first century texts can help students appreciate the importance of italics in Wheatley too, as in her emphases for words like '*Death*', '*Faith*', and '*Wisdom*' in 'On the Death of J.C. an Infant' (*Poems*, 92–94). Dove, for example, pictures the little Birmingham girls as already dressed 'All in white *like angels*', as they prepare for the Church service, hardly expecting that they will soon be rendered literally '*ethereal*' ('Sept. 15, 1963', l. 4, l. 13). Similarly, tracking Wheatley's attentive use of italics in her elegies will attune student readers to how Dungy places italics early in her poem to prepare readers for the powerful closing of her meditation on Black loss's never-ending dimensions. Specifically, italics first emphasize how the Birmingham girls' deaths haunt the speaker, looking at her own daughter:

> Four girls; Sunday dresses: bone, ash, bone, ash, bone.
> The end. 1963, but still burning. My darkening girl
>
> Lies beside me, her tiny chest barely registering breath
> (ll. 3–5)

Those italics, like ones Wheatley strategically deploys, underscore a theme Dungy insistently returns to in her elegy's closing lines, where she tells her readers 'there's been no end' (l. 14).

Bly's analysis of Wheatley's elegies also shows how adeptly they create 'a poetic amalgam of African, American, and European traditions' (2018: 327), including resistance to being enslaved. If Dove's and Dungy's poems are more direct in their linkage of mourning with biting critique of loss tied to slavery's heritage,[9] they, like their literary foremother Wheatley, use attentive traditional craft decisions—such as Dungy's modifying the sonnet form to serve her elegy goals—to narrate a wisdom tied to Black childhood death. Their Wheatley-reminiscent texts of mourning thereby override past incomplete versions of transatlantic history and over-write prior (mis)representation of young Black deaths going back to the 1619 transatlantic passage/passing of America's first enslaved, and forward in later generations.

Building—and Questioning—Transatlantic Frameworks for Literary Study

As noted in my initial overview of this essay's argument, one goal here is to demonstrate, through reflective narration on teaching, how an evolving field like transatlanticism can benefit from linking our scholarship with the pedagogical decision-making that is too often invisible in academic publications. Especially in a silo-breaking enterprise like transatlanticism, the syllabus, as John Guillory argued long ago, is a space of cultural production—and, potentially, revision. Relatedly, a figure like Wheatley brings special opportunities for students to discern connections between her published artistry and its intervention in larger cultural understandings among her audience members—some of them likely reluctant to accept (or even recognize) aspects of her proposed world view. Thus, this essay advocates making students aware of parallels between an individual writer's management of her oeuvre and ongoing interventions (as well as re-inscriptions) of cultural capital imbedded in the structures through which they study literature.

This learning goal has long been a part of my pedagogy, but has been enhanced in recent years from editorial anthology work. Specifically, my fall 2019 incorporation of a dialogue between Wheatley's poetry and *The 1619 Project* emerged from co-editing I was then doing for *Transatlantic Anglophone Literatures, 1776–1920*. Though that expansive collection of primary texts includes only three of her best-known poems, decisions our team was making about where and how to present Wheatley and many other Black authors within all ten of our themes helped me surface ideas for the instructional steps I designed to serve English majors studying Global Diaspora. Now, with that anthology finally in print, and supplemented by an ever-expanding website of additional materials, I am envisioning ways to introduce a far more comprehensive version of transatlantic studies, and Wheatley, to broader undergraduate audiences at my home institution. Because that pedagogical planning process is inviting me to attend to questions about the very structures of institutionally sponsored literary reading that shape students' engagement with larger social issues, I want to close this essay with commentary on this interplay. Again, I am using Wheatley as a test case for analyzing, along with students, the curric-

ular location of authorial figures both in the local context of study (in this instance, TCU literature classes) and in larger networks of material, and conceptual, production. Said another way, one lesson my work as part of a transatlantic anthology-building team has underscored is the importance of addressing both what student readers (think they) know and what they do not (yet) know about a field of study as an epistemological and cultural structure, including by examining how individual figures are situated within that field.

Undergraduates in my upcoming transatlantic course will bring diverse past learning experiences to our work, particularly since the class is open to all majors. If students have taken other literature classes at TCU, they may well have already been introduced to Wheatley, with the range of course contexts where she appears, based on my informal poll of my faculty colleagues, reflecting ongoing scholarship on the writer. For instance, Dan Gil uses Wheatley poetry in a Milton course. Dr. Mona Narain, a British and postcolonial literature specialist, has sometimes taught Wheatley in her undergraduate Multiethnic Literature class, including using 'On being brought' as a companion piece to Mary Prince's narrative. (Narain forecasts adding Wheatley-inspired poems by Honorée Fannone Jeffers to future teaching). Brandon Manning's engaging analysis of Gates's *New Yorker* essay exemplifies a scholarship-informed positioning of Wheatley in a vital tradition of African American writers. Several faculty colleagues, meanwhile, locate Wheatley transatlantically and/or transnationally. Stacie McCormick, for example, teaches an Introduction to African Diaspora Literature, where she generally incorporates three poems: 'On being brought from AFRICA to AMERICA', 'To the Right Honourable WILLIAM, Earl of DARTMOUTH', and 'To S.M., a Young *African* Painter on Seeing his Works'. McCormick supplements discussion of those texts with excerpts from Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, excerpts from Gates's *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley*, and, occasionally, scenes from a play by Lorna Littleway entitled *Phillis Wheatley: The Celestial Muse*. Dr. Layne Craig, herself a scholar of transatlantic culture, teaches Wheatley in two courses, Major American Writers and Major British Writers. In both cases, she reports, she features Wheatley texts from *Transatlantic Feminisms in the Age of Revolutions*, which incorporates both Wheatley's 1774 letter to Mohegan leader and or-

dained minister Samson Occom and the poem to Dartmouth. Wheatley also appears in various courses surveying American literature, women's writing and gendered genres. For instance, Theresa Gaul gives Wheatley attention in both her American Literature to 1865 survey and in an Early American Literature course. Gaul also teaches courses on letter writing and life writing, where she explores how Wheatley represents Africa and the Middle Passage, ways she uses epistolary and life writing genres, and what the writer's achievements contribute to views of Black women's authorship. For Gaul, texts generally addressed include 'On being brought', 'To the UNIVERSITY of CAMBRIDGE, in NEW-ENGLAND', and the Dartmouth poem. Linda Hughes teaches Wheatley in her Women Poets and Poetic Tradition course. Again, 'On being brought' and the poem to Dartmouth are featured, as well as 'To S.M., a Young *African* Painter on Seeing his Works' and 'To His Excellency, General Washington'. The faculty member who may teach Wheatley most often is Anne Frey, who describes multiple emphases in her courses: as 'an example of Enlightenment aesthetics … with further discussion of neoclassical poetic practices', including considering 'why writers want to imitate or cite classical learning as opposed to citing personal experience'; in study of Revolutionary-era debates, with discussion of 'the way "freedom" is defined'; and in study of 'the status of natural law arguments in pro-slavery vs. abolitionist rhetoric'. The Frey-taught classes where Wheatley appears include British Writers, The Romantic Imagination (which takes an explicit transatlantic focus), Introduction to Law and Literature, and British Romanticism.

If this rich array of reports on studies of Phillis Wheatley Peters in our curriculum contradicts my past Global Diaspora students' descriptions of their limited knowledge about her, I see their responses, in retrospect, as pointing to an opportunity. On the one hand, that informal query in class discussion hardly provided adequate time for careful revisiting of prior class experiences. Their hesitancy to recall previous study, when combined with my look at an incoming class roll of even fewer English majors, points to dividends that could arise from focusing, in my upcoming transatlantic course, on how Wheatley (has been and) can be located in cultural memory by way of curricular framings that are themselves objects of critical inquiry.

While the new transatlantic anthology's presentations of 'On being brought' and Wheatley's salute Lord Dartmouth will play a part in this endeavor, I expect that another entry—her poetic missive to General Washington—again paired with an entry from *The 1619 Project*, will be a centerpiece of our inquiry. The anthology's presentation of the poem to Washington (appearing in our 'Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism' section) underscores Wheatley's impressive insights into a complex political context that is transatlantic by virtue of a not-yet-won Revolutionary War, even as she aspires to joining a new national identity. To clarify the historical moment of this lyric, our anthology's paratexts explicate distinctions between this text's composition and publication versus Wheatley's authorial situation when the Dartmouth poem had appeared in her 1773 *Poems*. As our headnote explains, the first printing of her lines to Washington seems to have occurred in an April 1776 issue of *Pennsylvania Magazine*, when Wheatley was already well known on both sides of the Atlantic. The poem thereafter fell from view until Charles Heartman, a German immigrant to England and later to the US, recovered it as part of his 1915 *Phillis Wheatley*, which expanded her available oeuvre beyond the *Poems*. In printing (along with the poem) both the letter Wheatley sent to Washington and Washington's gracious, affirming reply, Heartman provided a fascinating counterpoint to Thomas Jefferson's infamous dismissive response to Wheatley and her poetry.[10] Indeed, as our headnote stresses, Washington's description of Wheatley as 'favoured by the muses' signaled his appreciation of her classical learning, just as his invitation to visit his headquarters affirmed their relationship as allies in the ongoing fight for nation-making. In that vein, Heartman's introduction to his reprinting of the Wheatley-Washington exchange depicted all three figures (poet, general, and Heartman himself) as cosmopolitans who appreciated classical culture. At the same time, Heartman offered a reading of this epistolary occasion as a sign of Wheatley's allegiances shifting away from England's paternal colonialism to the new nation.

My informal email research asking faculty about students' likely prior engagements with Wheatley suggests few would have already studied the poem to Washington. A strong rationale, therefore, for classroom analysis of Heartman's publication of this text involves seeing it as an example of literary recovery in action. Our class discussion

of Wheatley's exchange with Washington, as presented by Heartman, will provide a chance to address several interlocking questions about Wheatley-Peters studies raised in this essay. How, for instance, does our view of Wheatley as a British colonial author (as she was when *Poems* initially emerged) need to shift when we add the written dialogue with Washington to our archive? Why might Heartman have been invested in circulating this material? How does setting this entry from the anthology in dialogue with the earlier Dartmouth poem, also in that collection, amend views of Wheatley some students might have brought to TCU, if, for instance, they studied her in a high school American literature textbook, like one frequently adopted in Texas, which pairs her with Abigail Adams as women supporting the Revolution? And, beyond the admittedly limited featuring of Wheatley in *Transatlantic Anglophone Literatures*' print edition, which texts would students want to add to that project's website? One project in the transatlantic course, in fact, will ask students to work in a team to create a new primary text entry for the digital anthology that is a companion to the print, and I would anticipate Phillis Wheatley Peters's writings being an appealing archive to mine.

As a closing activity for this upcoming transatlantic course's engagement with the author, I envision another connection with a text from *The 1619 Project*, an offering from Reginald Dwayne Betts entitled 'Feb. 12, 1793'. As its headnote explains, this piece acknowledges that, in that titular year, President George Washington 'signed into law the first Fugitive Slave Act', decades ahead of the more famous 1850 version. Betts symbolizes forceful rejection of Washington's approving the law—and by extension, recalibrates cultural memory of Washington himself—by literally blacking out a reprinting of most words in the legislation. What shifts in students' views of Washington and Wheatley could emerge from bringing Betts's text into our curricular archive? How might Betts's text push us to re-read, through yet another lens, Wheatley's poem to Washington and his reply?

Coda

I know that the print anthology I helped assemble and the teaching stories I offer here have barely begun to tap into the multi-faceted pathways for studying Phillis Wheatley Peters in transatlantic context. So,

I close with an invitation. The digital humanities team allied with our print anthology is assembling new resources online at https://teaching-transatlanticism.tcu.edu/. I hope readers will submit their own stories of teaching Wheatley, and/or additional primary texts from her oeuvre framed with pedagogical paratexts. Collaborating as a community, invested in the interactive relations between scholarship and teaching, we can extend the intertextual framework for studying Wheatley in transatlantic, transtemporal context, and for exploring other writers' positionings in diverse transnational learning spaces as well.

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Notes

1. Jeffers makes a forceful case for adding 'Peters' to our naming, 'considering that [Phillis Wheatley Peters] discarded the surname of her former slave master and decided to take her husband's last name' (2020: 179). Hutchins's incisive 'Provocation' on this topic draws on the biographical research undergirding Jeffers's collection of poetry. He suggests multiple factors contribute to persistence of the familiar naming choice—some related to the fact that 'Wheatley' is inscribed on the best-known publications, others more problematic.
2. On the 'Christian' dimensions of TCU's culture, see Flowers and Middleton's essay, which the TCU Admission office presents online.
3. On cultural relationships between the local and the global, see Howard's *Center of the World* (2019), especially the Preface (vii–ix) and Chapter 1 (14–16).
4. See Flaherty 20 May 2021 and Robertson 23 June 2021. For ringing defense of Hannah-Jones by two scholars self-describing as critics of her work, see Whittington and Wilentz 24 May 2021.
5. The US Library of Congress digital copy of a 1770 printing of the poem depicts the author's identity as both surprising and impressive; its front-page description of her reads: 'A Servant Girl, of 17 Years of Age, belonging to Mr. J. WHEATLEY, of Boston; – She has been but 9 Years in this Country from AFRICA' (7). To see themselves as Wheatley scholars, students could take inspiration from an online transcription, with editorial commentary by peers at Marymount University, whose insightful footnotes document the poem's original publication in the US and Britain as 'transforming [Wheatley] from a young enslaved woman with a small readership among friends of the Wheatley family to an author with an international readership' (James West and Amy Ridderhof, editors, note 1).
6. For teaching *1619 Project* texts in this Global Diaspora course, I used an early version, as published online in *The New York Times Magazine*. Later, the expanded book-length version became available. Citations here reference the *Magazine* version, online here: https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/african-american-poets.html. I provide a sample syllabus for the Global Diaspora course at https://SarahRuffingRobbins.com in the 'Teaching' section: https://sarahruffingrobbins.files.wordpress.com/2022/05/finding-home-syllabus-sample.pdf
7. I am grateful for the opportunity that reading work for Micah-Jade Stanback's dissertation has heightened my understanding of this vital topic. Also on this theme, and for other invaluable support of this essay's development, I thank the journal editors and generous input from the peer review process.
8. Ewing also records how, as a mother, Phillis Wheatley Peters faced her own loss: 'If I know of Ovid may I keep my children?' (l. 24).
9. See, for fruitful comparison, Anna Brickhouse's reading of 'On the death of J.C., an Infant', versus a translation-adaptation of that poem in the French 1830s' *Revue des Colonies* periodical, sponsored, Brickhouse reports, 'by a small group of Caribbean intellectuals combatting racial oppression in the Americas (2004: 86–7). Brickhouse spotlights differences between Wheatley's original and Cyrille Charles Auguste Bissette's reconfiguration of the poem via a shift to designating the dead child as 'noir' (Black) and other changes and omissions (107–08). Such rhetorical remixing points to the immense capacity of

Wheatley's poetry for adaptation, not only by a nineteenth-century Black French Caribbean writer seeking to render its anti-slavery into more explicit terms, but also by recent poets responding to her work.

10. On Jefferson's dismissal of Wheatley, see Petrea (2011: 295–6, 299–300), and Bly (2018: 321).

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