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<ch>On Being Brought from Africa to America to London</ch> <chsub>Teaching Phillis Wheatley in the Former Heart of Empire</chsub>

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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.

KEYWORDS: Phillis Wheatley, transatlantic, slavery, Black history, pedagogy, poetry, white feminism, trans-exclusionary radical feminism, Black American history, Black British history

In 1773, Phillis Wheatley arrived in London, England. In 1773, Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, was published in London, England, because she could not find a publisher in New England willing to print her work.

In 2019 I taught Phillis Wheatley in London, England. In 2019 when I taught Phillis Wheatley, I assigned her poetry on our American literature survey syllabus since she was not on it already. And in 2019, as far as I know, that was the first time Wheatley—Wheatley, specifically, not Wheatley Peters—was taught substantively in my department as a set text.

I can imagine that your reaction to this might be the same as my initial response: embarrassed incredulity. However, I write this not to bury my department, but to consider my reconfigured pedagogy as a non-Black scholar engaging Black study and, specifically, Black American womanhood in the former heart of empire. In 2019, I had lectured about Wheatley with a focus on the subversive craft of “On Being Brought from Africa to America” and “To S.M. a young African Painter, on seeing his Works.” Black texts require appropriate Black studies pedagogy: I drew on P. Gabrielle Foreman's community-sourced document about writing on slavery and Koritha Mitchell's policy on the *n*-word. Student calls for the study of Black writers matches the enthusiasm I have encountered in the United States and Canada; however, as the above comparison suggests, formal British education needs to rise up to the level that students demand. I write this in 2021 as I am preparing to teach Wheatley again, the recurrence

of our American literature survey in our department's two-year curricular cycle that straddles the global resurgence of Black Lives Matter in 2020. Anti-Blackness and misogynoir are global: teaching Wheatley in London has taught me as a non-Black Americanist of color how the unevenness and contradictions between anti-Blackness's British and American iterations in the eighteenth and twenty-first centuries operate not as inconsistencies but, rather, as the flexible heterogeneity of anti-Blackness throughout the Black Atlantic—and to further appreciate Wheatley's own acumen in navigating this emerging bifurcation. As Vincent Carretta writes, "We have increasingly come to appreciate Wheatley as a manipulator of words; perhaps we should have more respect for her as a manipulator of people as well" (137). Phillis Wheatley was able to transmute her experience of the Middle Passage into the poesis of "On Being Brought from Africa to America"—for 2021, how might I draw out the subtle craft of Wheatley manipulating white people on both sides of the pond to bring her from America to London and thereby making the printing of that poem possible, when London was originally the condition of possibility for being brought from Africa to America?

Teaching about race as an Americanist, when it is far rarer for literary studies in the UK to substantively engage racialization at all, runs the risk of reinscribing the prevailing attitude that race is relevant only in relation to United States; my expertise could contribute to active white British ignorance about the imperial past so many paradoxically long for if the transnational and comparative workings of anti-Blackness and whiteness are not stressed. This includes more than teaching the Triangle Trade or the economic foundations of London and other cities, but drawing attention to the conditions of teaching and the production of knowledge in British higher education. There have always been traditions of Black intellectualism and activism in Britain: before arriving, I would think of Stuart Hall, Claudia Jones, Paul Gilroy,

Hazel Carby, and others. But when I moved here in 2018, I learned how different the landscape of that institutionalization was compared to the United States and Canada. The center that Stuart Hall helped to found as the heart of the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies had been closed since 2002. In 2017 the first Black Studies degree in Europe was established at Birmingham City University through the efforts of Lisa Palmer and other academics; that same year, however, the Equiano Center for the study of Black Britain at my institution was closed. In 2019, scholar Nicola Rollock released a report that there were just twenty-five Black women who were full professors in the United Kingdom in any discipline. While my university can boast that in 1828 it became the first in England to offer English as a subject of study, in 2020 our staff demographics show that the Arts and Humanities Faculty has the worst percentage of faculty of color in the institution at 5.70 percent, making me just one of eleven and the first and only person of color in my department to be hired as permanent faculty (University College London). The legacies of my institution includes both the site where Olaudah Equiano lived and wrote his masterpiece *The Interesting Narrative* and the influences of Frances Galton, the founder of eugenics.

Like so many other nations, the United Kingdom loves to decry anti-Black racism in America in order to disavow its own. These denials inadvertently function as traceable genealogies of British colonial violence not simply shaping racialization, but the production of racialized gender or, to paraphrase Hortense Spillers, that American grammar book of Black ungendering (81). I ponder that perhaps it is significant, then, that the iconic engraving of Wheatley in thoughtful repose placed at the beginning of *Poems on Various Subjects* mirrored the portrait of her patron Selina Hastings, Countess of Huntingdon, to whom the collection was dedicated: “The Countess wanted to present Wheatley as her black double,” argues Astrid Franke

(226). The countess delayed the publication of the volume until the engraving could be included: Wheatley needed to capitalize on elite white womanhood for her own (literally printed) legibility and (literally visual) visibility as an enslaved Black woman. “The UK never had chattel slavery on its own soil,” claims British writer Helen Joyce in her 2021 screed against trans people (189). But, as I make a point of asking my students with an edge of sarcasm, how did the institution of chattel slavery get there, and who was involved? The strain of British transphobia that masquerades as leftist feminism dovetails into a British liberalism that serves to illustrate how deeply the former global colonizer refuses to recognize its past actions while clinging to a false sense of historical moral superiority. She argues that the existence of trans people is merely an American ideology, much like anti-Black racism: “I am not American; I don’t know what it is like to have a psyche shaped by the legacy of slavery, lynching and Jim Crow laws,” she complains (Joyce). Postcolonial melancholia, as Paul Gilroy terms it, continues to be endemic.

It would be too easy to teach Wheatley in a simplistic way as to inflate the white British sense of moral superiority: this smug apologist narrative would enfold the 1773 publication of her poetry collection into the 1833 Slavery Abolition Act as righteous evidence of the triumph of national virtue while the wayward former settler colony doubles down on its peculiar institution. We can contemplate the decisions behind the popularity of “On Being Brought” reprinted in newspapers to advertise the volume’s publication; I speculate that the discursive resonance of the poem contributes to this burgeoning British self-image. In other words, such a reading suggests that Britain is the culmination of the progressive trajectory of Wheatley’s journey from Africa to America. In his biography of the poet, Carretta notes, “Paradoxically, although Britain was well on its way to becoming the most significant participant in the transatlantic slave trade, for years it had also been the promised land of freedom to slaves in British colonies, particularly those in

North America” (130). As we can see in her poems, Wheatley negotiated the contingencies of the definition of “freedom” based on the shifting geopolitical situation; for instance, indicated by the invocation of “freedom” in poems such as the seemingly diametrically opposed addresses of “To the King’s Most Excellent Majesty on his Repealing the American Stamp Act” compared to “To His Excellency General Washington” (14, 129, 130, 131). Writing about Black American abolitionists in Britain during the next century, Hannah-Rose Murray highlights how they “engaged with, played upon, and rejected Britain’s nationalistic pride for abolition and the dormant antislavery spirit that had taken hold of society” (19). To get from Boston to London, where she could publish her book, Wheatley had to carefully leverage the fickle and volatile forces of white guilt and white saviorism before the emergence of this British moral superiority as a reliable factor.

Wheatley’s reception in eighteenth-century Britain offers lessons for Wheatley’s reception in the twenty-first-century British classroom. Amid the flurry of visiting powerful people, she was gifted the Glasgow folio edition of *Paradise Lost* and given money by Lord Dartmouth so she could buy the works of Alexander Pope; similarly, my students encounter Milton and Pope before they will read writing by a Black woman, but perhaps this oversight will help them to reflect on the moral, aesthetic, and political education she is able to wrest from their verses and translate into resources. Wheatley is case study and model par example for the contradictions of Black women’s celebrity, according to Samantha Pinto, and London is the site that fully translates her poetic creativity to cultural commodity: “The globalized Wheatley travels to London, marking her and the labor of black celebrity as cosmopolitan” (43). Her London printer Archibald Bell advertised the volume with the prefatory material—engraving, preface, biographical sketch, the infamous “To the Publick” verification of her authorship—associated

with later editions of *Poems on Various Subjects*. In the *London Chronicle* and *The Morning Post and Advertiser*, the notice promoting the book's publication praises it as "perhaps one of the greatest instances of pure, unassisted genius, that the world ever produced" demonstrating skill not expected from "one born in the wilds of Africa" (qtd. in Robinson 197). As a teacher I am eager to teach Wheatley's importance and students are eager to learn, but we must take care to avoid echoing the historical encomiums ostensibly lauding Black excellence that exoticize and exceptionalize Wheatley. Likewise, it may be easy for students to decry the hypocrisy of the enslaver Wheatleys in promoting her talent but not emancipating her, much as London publications did in their reviews—even though in 1773 British emancipation was not to come for several decades (Robinson 199–200).

On June 7, 2020, protestors chucked the statue of enslaver Edward Colston in Bristol into the harbor, and a few days later, community outcry galvanized the removal of statue of enslaver Robert Milligan in London. Although Black Lives Matter originated in the United States, it is a planetary phenomenon that reworks the tentacles of Black enslavement that produced the modern world, requiring reckoning with the local manifestations of anti-Black racism inextricable from its transnationalism. Our students were galvanized to demand that their educations transform in accordance with antiracist principles: their multiprong advocacy dovetailed with long-running efforts to address institutional complicity with eugenics. Now the university has announced its (nebulous) commitment to hire fifty Black academics over the next five years; now Paul Gilroy heads the new Sarah Parker Remond Center for the Study of Race and Racialization, named after the Black American feminist and abolitionist who campaigned in Britain; this coming academic year I will not be the only faculty member of color in my department. When I teach Phillis Wheatley again, I intend to place the Wheatley of *Poems on Various Subjects* who skillfully

managed patrons and publishing in London alongside the Phillis Wheatley Peters who wrote “Liberty and Peace” admonishing Britain, “whose Navies swept th’ *Atlantic* o’er, / And Thunder sent to every distant Shore” (141).

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