

Abolition and the Power of “We”

Olivia Carpenter
Harvard University

We are almost a nation of dancers, musicians, and poets.
—Olaudah Equiano

We have nothing to lose but our chains.
—Assata Shakur

I am a mixed-race Black woman scholar of eighteenth-century literature, and this summer, I have never felt more connected to the enslaved eighteenth-century people who are always front and center in my research and in my mind. In the wake of the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, and Rayshard Brooks, I spent a lot of time on the streets protesting, hoping my hand sewn cotton cloth mask would be enough to protect myself and other people from the deadly Covid-19 pandemic spreading across the globe. I felt more connected to enslaved persons in part because my own enormous privilege suddenly felt overwhelming. I would be able to return to my own home after a long day of marching and work from said home at my dream job the next day. I felt like “my ancestors’ wildest dreams”.¹

My other primary point of connection as I moved through the streets of my current city, ground where people like me were once enslaved, was my fear of imminent bodily harm. For the first time in my life, I knew a gun larger than my upper body would be pointed at me, that vicious dogs were present and ready to attack me, as once they had attacked runaway slaves. I know this is a time where being a strong, tall woman will not make much difference, because the militarized police who will show up to this protest will be armed, and I will not. If I was standing

on that same ground three hundred years ago, then as now, having a tall and strong body would not have made me safer.

When I talk about slavery in the eighteenth century, especially when I am apparently critical of mainstream anti-slavery rhetoric, I very often hear a response that is some variation on: “we cannot presume to judge people of a different era based on our values today.” As I feel more invested in eighteenth-century studies and its ability to speak to the heart of the issue of anti-Black racism now, I find it particularly urgent to address this argument by unpacking the “we” and the “our” in that statement. After all, I stand here free in 2020, but I most likely would have been enslaved in 1720—I want Black liberation now, and I hope I would have wanted it then.

The grammatical and existential conundrum at the heart of calling “we” the first person plural becomes crucial here. “We” can never truly take on the plural version of a first person subject position. After all, multiple persons inhabiting the subject position does not make multiple versions of “I.” Only a deeply narcissistic—and politically dangerous—subject would, in fact, make the jump from “I” to “we” in such a manner.

This narcissistic subject position loudly and persistently claims its own power in the “we” of eighteenth-century British imperialism. This perspective saturates the documents contained in colonial archives, occupying these now centuries-old reams of paper originally written to perpetuate, reinforce, and reproduce white supremacist ideology. The slave-owners’ subject position as evidenced in Jamaican colonial archives from the mid-eighteenth-century, for example, relies on a legislative mission to control and suppress Black Jamaican lives. On 10 May 1746 the assembly proposed “a bill for raising companies in the several negro-towns, and encouraging them to reduce rebellious and runaway slaves” as well as “a bill for the better order

and government of the Negroes belonging to the several negro-towns.” Five days later, on 15 May, the assembly read “an act to oblige the several inhabitants of this island to provide themselves with a sufficient number of white men capable of bearing arms” in order to prevent potential insurrections of enslaved Black people.² These proposals and many others like them collapse all slave owners into a collective subject position with white supremacy acting as the glue to hold them all together. They take for granted a colonial “we,” gendered male and racialized white, unabashedly willing to turn to violence—pitting free Black people against enslaved people, wresting small political victories from free, independent Black communities, and keeping Jamaica’s white inhabitants always ready for armed conflict against Black Jamaicans.

Today’s postcolonial scholar, ethically-conscious eighteenth-century-ist, or decent human being can comfortably condemn an eighteenth-century white supremacist “we” and indeed any figuration of a collective subject position that turns a narcissistic “I” into a violent and virulently anti-Black “we.” Each can also roundly reject this subject position’s descendent in the twenty-first century. I count myself extremely fortunate to be part of a profession in which the vast majority of my colleagues see nothing of themselves in a president who openly fantasizes about meeting anti-racist protestors with “the most vicious dogs, and most ominous weapons,” and “Many Secret Service agents just waiting for action. ‘We put the young ones, on the front line, sir, they love it.’”³ Most of my colleagues are proudly ready to denounce a contemporary sitting president’s call to use secret service agents as the twenty-first century equivalent of a slave patrol, and to display the violent “we” of this imagined white supremacist army as an effort to sooth his paranoia in the face of a movement for Black liberation.

Eighteenth-century studies is uniquely positioned to remind today's would-be anti-racist that the collective anxieties of eighteenth-century white supremacists spill over into the collective anxieties of twenty-first-century white supremacists. Through analysis of eighteenth-century literary texts, historical documents, visual arts, or anything and everything else, today's eighteenth-century-ist can and should use the privilege that comes with a scholarly platform to unpack the nuances of race and racism. Doing scholarly work on the eighteenth century and race means discovering the many complex ideological twists and turns that keep 2020 and 1720 looking eerily similar to one another. Any twenty-first-century battle against anti-Black racism instantly becomes more powerful with the backing of carefully honed historical evidence. When echoes of eighteenth-century slave masters reverberate profoundly through the internet media of 2020, today's eighteenth-century scholar has seemingly endless ammunition to use against those sound bites by confronting them with their own history.

In an era in which Ibram X Kendi's *How to Be Anti-Racist* and Robin DiAngelo's *White Fragility* are selling faster than bookstores are able to stock them, eighteenth-century literary studies in particular offers valuable perspectives on the history of deploying literature towards anti-racist ends. Turning a literary critic's eye to Abolitionist thought from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries means encountering a very different kind of "we." Instead, an anti-slavery subject position emerges with a collective goal to oppose proslavery ideological, political, and economic commitments. Readers of Kendi and DiAngelo can look back in literary history to Olaudah Equiano and William Wilberforce, two eighteenth-century figures who use literature to push for an Abolitionist vision of collectivity.

However, in the eighteenth century and today, Abolitionist collectivity was a slippery enterprise, one that could easily become all too uncannily reminiscent of its opposing tradition.

For all their insistence that Black people did not deserve subjection to the cruelties of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, eighteenth-century Abolitionists were still capable of supporting anti-Black ideology. They were often unready and unwilling to allow the collective power of “we,” to be anything other than white. To be Abolitionist in the eighteenth century was often to support a movement that was paradoxically anti-racist and white supremacist at the same time. Take, for example, the famous 1787 Wedgwood medallion depicting a Black man kneeling in chains, looking up to an imaginary and absent subject, and presumably pleading the caption: “Am I not a man and a brother?” In its own late eighteenth-century moment, the medallion crucially reminds the person holding it that the suffering of enslaved Black people was palpably present every time a smattering of sugar was stirred into a British person’s cup of tea.

Eighteenth-century British slave-owners blatantly rejected any bids for Black people to occupy the position of an empowered subject. On the whole, the proslavery mission was to answer any plea for fraternity with a resounding negative and steadfastly to refuse to imagine a collective “we” that could include Black subjectivity. Abolitionists could and did extend that fraternity to Black subjects, but the medallion’s fraught image and caption betrays a congruent refusal to refigure that collective “we.” The medallion freezes the Black man in its center always in a position of imploring a more powerful person to give him the freedom he lacks. While his appeal is not violently rejected, the medallion nevertheless leaves him in a perpetual state of subordination.

Power and privilege remain firmly in the hands of white people, even with the most benevolent and humanitarian intentions possible. Lynn Festa theorizes this phenomenon in eighteenth-century images and texts like the Wedgwood medallion that hyper-emphasize the humanity of Black subjects. Festa dubs the phenomenon “redundant personification.” The

kneeling man begging others to recognize his membership in a collective human community provides the pained face necessary to “humanize” the suffering of enslaved Black people.

Presumably this was necessary because English citizens, most of whom would never see a plantation or the inside of a slave ship, did not often get to see this suffering firsthand.

Humanizing the kneeling man comes at a cost, however, and Black would-be subjects in pursuit of liberation must pay the price. Festa explains that the patent need for white Abolitionists to overemphasize what is already there—i.e. to insist on the humanity of people who are already human—paradoxically calls into question black subjects’ humanity by implication. Put another way, anyone who needs to insist so fiercely and repeatedly that Black subjects are human implicitly buys into the logic that Black subjects lack humanity. This humanity instead belongs to the creators and owners of Wedgewood medallions—humanity becomes something they already own, while others must have their humanity given to them. Membership in a collective subject position, a position in which humanity is always already confirmed, is for white subjects to bestow or to withhold.⁴

“We affirm that Black lives matter.” How many academic institutions—and major corporations, non-profits, small businesses, volunteer groups, social clubs, and Instagram accounts put out some variation of this message during the summer of 2020? The problem of redundant personification at the heart of the Wedgewood medallion resurfaces in many of the black squares, hashtags, and official support statements that proliferated on social media in the wake of the murder of George Floyd. If these “we” statements, in particular, are the descendants of eighteenth-century media like the Wedgewood medallion, they inherit much of the latter’s presuppositions. They share an implicit commitment to the idea that “mattering” in this case, is the prerogative of “we” to affirm or denounce. It also similarly reinforces an epistemic

framework in which the humanity of those who are not Black is always already known, while Black people can only hope to belong after much protest. “We stand with protestors,” presupposes that the speakers are not themselves protesting. “We affirm that Black lives matter,” presupposes that the speakers are not themselves Black.

My analysis here is not an attempt to discredit the sincerity of all statements in support of Black Lives Matter. I would of course rather see well-intentioned gestures than blatant attacks. However, eighteenth-century studies can confront today’s mainstream efforts towards anti-racism with their own history too. William Wilberforce, often lauded as an anti-slavery champion, had this to say after winning his fight against the transatlantic slave trade: Abolitionists “had for the present no object immediately before them, but that of putting stop directly to the carrying of men in British ships to be sold as slaves in the British Islands, in the West Indies,” and that “we were not to say that because a man had two wounds we should refrain from curing one, because it was not in our power to heal both wounds immediately.”⁵ There goes that “we” again. Whether or not the slave trade ends, and by extension, whether or not the end of the trade will lead to the end of the institution of slavery, apparently occurs entirely at the discretion of white English subjects. Black liberation will come if and only if an implicitly white “we” can keep its priorities straight. Wilberforce deserves to be celebrated for monumental efforts towards Black liberation and for withstanding relentless public opposition from enormously powerful people when he fought for his fellow human beings. My point is not to denounce Wilberforce, but to insist that eighteenth-century studies is particularly well-positioned to know that Wilberforce’s stance desperately needs an update that has not been entirely forthcoming.

This urgent and necessary update would immediately trouble the “we” Wilberforce uses in his statement, and by extension, the “we” in many affirmative statements for Black Lives Matter. In 2006, Darcus Howe wrote of growing up as a person of Afro-Caribbean descent: “We had been constantly told that it was William Wilberforce who was responsible for our freedom,” but such an understanding of Black liberation ignores Black agency in the Caribbean that ultimately led to “defeat for the Spanish, French, and British, and the declaration of independence by Haiti.” Howe goes on: “We were at the heart of our own liberation. No imperial force could contain us in slavery [...] Slavery was not ended by an act of charity for some downtrodden folk.”⁶ What happens when today’s scholar begins thinking about the history of Abolition not by centering Wilberforce—or any other leading white Abolitionist—and instead prioritizes the Haitian Revolution? More pointedly, what happens when the “we” statements of major institutions no longer oppose the “we” subject position Howe mobilizes? What if, instead of standing with Black Lives Matter, these institutions always already included Black leadership at every level? What if they were already deeply invested in ways Black lives not only matter, but thrive, because the powerful collective subject position, the “we” in that “we” statement, never excluded Black subjects in the first place?

Abolition continues in the twenty-first-century United States most especially in the fight to abolish the police and the prison industrial complex. As one of the leading theorists of the relationship between American chattel slavery and today’s prison system, Angela Davis has also been cited as an author writing in the tradition of the slave narrative. In her own words, Davis reflects: “I did not want to write a conventional autobiography in which the heroic subject offers lessons to readers. I decided that I would write a political autobiography exploring the way in which I had been shaped by movements and campaigns in communities of struggle. In this sense,

you can say that I wrote myself into the tradition of Black slave narratives.”⁷ Literary critics working on the eighteenth century have the chance not only to confront today’s problems with their own pasts but also to be in conversation with the eighteenth century’s most powerful and enduring literary legacy in the twenty-first century. What happens when a study of Black liberation in literary form includes both Olaudah Equiano and Angela Davis? What happens when academic institutions, places that offer students the ability to grapple with ideas from both Equiano and Davis, divest from the prison industrial complex? Will, at last, the collective “we” of such institutions, be a “we” that includes Equiano and Davis in its subject position, rather than treating them merely as objects of study?

After all, when Equiano wrote in the opening chapter of his autobiography, “we are almost a nation of dancers, musicians, and poets,” he knew that many of his readers, for all their potential Abolitionist sympathies, likely held a worldview full of profoundly anti-Black assumptions.⁸ Using “we” to celebrate African subjectivity and artistry, Equiano insists that his readers imagine collective Blackness as something positive, beautiful, and creative as he moves into telling his own story. In so doing, Equiano contributes to a legacy twenty-first-century readers can enjoy today, a rich inheritance of possibilities for subjectivity and collectivity. I felt myself such a proud beneficiary this summer when I marched through the streets of my city reciting “Assata’s Chant,” a contribution from Assata Shakur to the same “we” Equiano put forward: “It is our duty to fight for our freedom. / It is our duty to win. / We must love each other and support each other. / We have nothing to lose but our chains.” Living in a moment in which the legacies of transatlantic chattel slavery ravage daily life in the form of anti-Black racism, I join the “we” of Olaudah Equiano and Assata Shakur. There is room for my Black subject position in that collective.

NOTES

¹ “We are our ancestors’ wildest dreams,” now a popular quote sweeping across social media, protest signs, and t-shirts, comes from Tulane Medical School student Russell Ledet’s viral tweet of December 14, 2019. The full tweet, a caption of a photograph of Ledet and several fellow medical students reads: “We are our ancestors’ wildest dreams. In the background, an original slave quarter. In the foreground, original descendants of slaves and medical students.” Ledet, Russell. Twitter Post. December 14, 2019, 6:49 P.M.

<https://twitter.com/theguywithyes/status/1205998323355803648?lang=en>

² Jamaican Colonial Archives at the National Archives at Kew Gardens, London, CO 140, *Journals of the Assembly of Jamaica* Vol. 4.

³ Donald J. Trump, Twitter Post. May 30, 2020, 8:41 A.M.

<https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/1266711221191020544?lang=en>.

⁴ Lynn Festa, *Sentimental Figures of Empire in Eighteenth-Century Britain and France* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2006).

⁵ Quoted in William Hague, *William Wilberforce, the Life of the Great Anti-Slave Trade Campaigner* (New York: Harcourt, 2008), 355.

⁶ Darcus Howe, “Wilberforce Was Not the Great Liberator.” *New Statesman*, vol. 135, no. 4821, 2006, p. 23.

⁷ Angela Davis, *Abolition Democracy: Beyond Prison, Torture, and Empire*. (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005), 20.

⁸ Olaudah Equiano, “The Life of Olaudah Equiano” in *The Classic Slave Narratives*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Signet Classics, 2012), 34.