

## Reading at Odds

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To begin, this essay will take the easy way (the low road?) by posing a question: what changes if the *ECTI* “Call for Papers” were to invoke Aphra Behn, or Mary Collier, or Phyllis Wheatley, rather than Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Immanuel Kant, as exemplary citizens responding to the “climate of urgency and the pressing needs of their time”? We move away from the intellectual cosmopolis of male *philosophes* to the more quotidian, differently cosmopolitan, lives of travelling, laboring, or enslaved women. The mileposts of our critical terrain change, and a different genealogy of reference and achievement emerges: women, marginalized for different reasons, set the terms by which we understand creative engagement with the difficult, contested issues that define any historical moment. The lives, and the writing, of each of these women were fissured and shaped by the world-making events: colonization (and the extermination of native peoples), militarized commerce, the opposition between landownership and labor, the inequality between women and men, and the chasm between people enslaved for their race and those who enslaved them. These women knew these divides, and their writing responded with an urgency muted in gentlemanly philosophical exposition: their concerns and explorations, and even the solutions proposed by them, help us understand more sharply their time and place. They show us the stirring possibilities, and the inevitable limits, of the creative imagination—for women as for men—as it is hurt into productivity. In sum, their writing refuses universalism or the elevated view (we call it “Enlightenment”) by tracing for us life as it was known by those at the receiving end of patriarchal and racist authority.

And that is where we have to try and begin today. We live in a world that has, at inconceivable speed, shrunk our conception of human capability, while also emphasizing human culpability. We live in fear of a microscopic virus whose bio-medical effects are only an element of its disruptive power. We shelter in place, while being conscious of the millions who cannot afford to do so, and who must staff our food supply chains, our civic services, our hospitals and our nursing homes, and our home delivery systems. We watch with trepidation the global economy slump, and the institutions we have inherited and built teeter and founder: so many jobs have been lost, including in the colleges and universities we call our own. Many argue that this virus has thrown into stark relief structural problems that we have managed to ignore or finesse for too long now: capitalist overconsumption, ecological degradation, massive socio-economic inequality (within and across nations), systems of discrimination that devalue most lives and put a premium on some others.<sup>1</sup> In the United States, systemic racism is made worse by the overlap between race and class—minorities, particularly African-Americans, are disproportionately poor.<sup>2</sup> But even when they are not poor, the threat to Black life is continuous and palpable: for every George Floyd murdered by the police, there are hundreds who have been held up, humiliated, denied basic civic procedures and courtesies. (This is a fate shared, sometimes with equal brutality, by other minorities). We have built this system for four centuries now, and it has transformed planetary life.<sup>3</sup> Much has been achieved (including the philosophical thought of Rousseau and Kant, warts and all), but the price of most such achievement has been the systematic expropriation of labor, and the denial of rights to those who labor, across the globe.

When we look back, it is hard to ignore the role played by racist colonizers in the making of the variegated forms of modernity. A look at the eighteenth-century map of the world shows us kingdoms abutting empires in Africa, Asia, South and North America, and Europe but also

large territories with different, sometimes less hierarchical, forms of collectivity and governance. Forms of slavery existed in each one of these continents, but none of them had the world-transforming power of the trans-Atlantic slave trade as it was curated by Spain, Portugal, France, Britain, and then the United States. From the sixteenth-century onwards, European powers competed for control of territories, bodies, and trade routes in the Americas and in the Caribbean, and exported lessons learnt there—and more consequentially, capital accumulated there—into their dominance of oceanic trade and colonies in Asia and Africa. Over the course of the eighteenth century, it becomes impossible to separate the growth of colonialism from that of capitalism—the one enabled the other, and vice versa. As market economies grew and transformed relations between producers and consumers between and within nations, elites built the institutions that regulated and perpetuated these relations: banks and stock markets, insurance companies, law courts and policing, standing armies, schools and universities, associations for scientific and technological discovery, and societies for the evaluation of cultural production and consumption.

The increasing heft of these institutions contributed to the loosening of monarchical governance, and, very gradually, enabled a growing awareness of individual social and political rights. However, even as we might celebrate any historically progressive ideas, we must emphasize that in practice, such rights were available only to a tiny percentage of people, both within Britain or Europe or the United States, or in the overseas territories that colonists had begun to reshape. Indeed it is arguable that the overwhelming feature of history in the eighteenth century is the European expansion of destructive forms of unfreedom, often couched in the language of civilizational difference, across the globe. These stories, and more, are contained in the archive that we now denominate “literature” (another institutional form that “criticism” and

public commentary brought into being in this period by sifting and ranking the messy, promiscuous forms of writing more generally). Thus, even if we decide that our profession requires us to teach only literary achievement, to revel in aesthetic advance or innovation, we do our archive a disservice to ignore the fact that it is a remarkable record of both progressive visions and of the material and ideological limits of those hopes. If there is any reason to examine or to teach these cultural artifacts, surely it is to be able to trace in their complex beauty the contours of individual and community hopes and disappointments, love and hatred, indifference and empathy?

All of us scholars and teachers of eighteenth-century literature, culture, and history are invested in reanimating the past; the demand of our crises-written present is that such reanimation not be for its own sake (if that is possible at all) but because we wish to understand how that past shapes our present. If we believe, as I do, that the “neoliberal globalization” mandated by the Washington Consensus is an extension of the structures of resource extraction, manufacturing, and consumption that were developed by the colonial restructuring of economies across the globe; if we believe that the racism that disfigures our present is an insidiously potent form of the racism that drove colonialism and the slave trade; if we believe that the ecological crisis that envelops us derives in part from the capitalized agriculture and carbon-intensive industries that are the backbone of modern capitalism, then we have no options but to turn to the past to understand the “pressing needs of our time.” And we have a wide array of literary texts that will encourage us and our students to explore these issues. Here, in one instance, is a semester’s worth of work: Behn’s *Oroonoko* and *The Widdow Ranter*, Henry Nevile’s *The Isle of Pines*, Alexander Pope’s *Windsor-Forest*, Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, John Gay’s *The Beggar’s Opera* and *Polly*, George Lillo’s *The London Merchant*, Stephen Duck, Mary Collier,

and Mary Leapor on land, labor, and country-house living, James Grainger's *The Sugar Cane*, Oliver Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village*, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself*, and Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent*. Each one of these texts responds innovatively to the challenges of its time: each one performs for us its uneasy navigation of difficult cultural, political, and economic issues, and each one enables us to think about the evolution of the major genres of eighteenth-century literary writing. (Yes, this is an Eng. Lit. syllabus, but it is not hard to imagine an equivalent list, and parallel critical concerns, for other national or comparative literatures).

I do not want to suggest that, as specialists in an earlier period, we should focus only on its literary or even cultural products. We have inherited the massive archive of a period when print culture began to dominate public life. This archive reminds us of the outsize role played by travelers, ship captains (including pirates), missionaries (particularly Jesuits), amateur naturalists, and colonists in sending home details of the peoples and spaces they encountered across the oceans. Their reports, redacted and systematized into printed travelogues, economic treatises, natural histories, provided the basis for the comparative commentary that argued for the civilizational superiority of Europe, and of its burgeoning commercial and market culture, over all other "stages" of socio-economic organization. The globe was mapped and taxonomized, for natural riches to be imported, for land that could be put to the service of Europeans, and for the forced labor required. None of this came easily, not only because of warfare between each of the imperial European states, but also because people at the receiving end—in Africa, in the Americas, in Asia—had to be put down violently. Empire is bloody business, one that forcefully reshapes lives in the colonies as well as the metropolis, and both literary and non-literary texts speak of those transformations.

One way to restore *our* sense of the necessity, the urgency, of texts written two centuries ago, is to try and revive *their* sense of the urgencies of their moment. To take a canonical poem: when Pope, in *Windsor-Forest*, celebrated Queen Anne's reign as guaranteeing future commercial and military triumphs, he also wrote of Stuart rule as a redemption from Norman tyranny. He turned to English landscapes and found in them a reprisal of classical Greek and Roman virtues, but also the materials from which to craft the warships projecting British power overseas. He listed the commodities that would be imported, and the peoples elsewhere who would benefit from the British domination of trade routes. The Treaty of Utrecht required Spain to cede to Britain the control of the trans-Atlantic slave trade—that massive contemporary engine of capital—and Pope prophesied a lustrous imperial future. In all these ways, the poem is a magnificent instance of partisan historiography couched in the idiom of nationalist and imperialist celebration. If we teach *Windsor-Forest* without pausing to reflect on the slave trade, or the commercial and imperialist triumphalism of the poem, or the poet's ability to craft an aesthetic equal to his worldly ambitions, we do a disservice to Pope's poetics *and* confirm our comfort with its racist assumptions. Pope's poetics is no more separable from his world-view than our literary criticism is from ours: he responded, in ideologically, formally, and aesthetically supple ways, to the urgent pressures of his time, and so should we to ours. To spell out the terms of Pope's poetic brilliance is to trace the poetic iconography he inherited, the contemporary debates in which he intervened, and the world-encompassing authority he claimed for his nation. All this from the point of view of the would-be imperialist, of course, but that is a point of view that needs consistent reexamination, particularly now.

Contrast this with the work of Phyllis Wheatley. If Pope sang the glories of a British Empire in the making, Wheatley wrote as one of its many, many victims. Her Boston owners, the

Wheatleys, taught her letters, and she transmuted her learning in neoclassical poetry in English and in the Bible into poems that explore states of spiritual and corporeal possibility denied to enslaved Africans. Her first collection of poems, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773), was published in London (no one in Boston wished to publish it), and celebrated by abolitionists as convincing proof of the intellectual and artistic capabilities of Africans. Reading Wheatley today is a moving reminder that her poetry, so deeply conscious of the suffering of the enslaved, seeks in Christian conceptions of the afterlife a release from earthly restraints. The law refused her people freedom, but heavenly redemption awaited, and even more, offered a fellowship shared across the racial divide that structured her life. Wheatley's religious vision, her search for transcendent freedom, lights up with political hope—both in her time as in ours. Because they are deployed by a young, enslaved woman against those who would deny her humanity and freedom, her Christian faith has a this-world liberationist power. She ventriloquizes the Methodist preacher George Whitefield's voice to exhort her fellow Africans to Christ: "He'll make you free, and Kings, and priests to God."<sup>4</sup> If there is one lesson that we can teach our students, a lesson particularly crucial today, it is that the most compelling visions of freedom originate from those who are denied them in practice.

It is not easy to believe that our critical thinking changes minds, but we have to persevere. And we have to persevere in universities and colleges where most of our disciplines simply ignore all such historical and social concerns. For every historian or sociologist or political economist who examines the historical structuring of social hierarchies and antagonisms, there are scores whose research and pedagogy resolutely avoid any such issues. Better the conservative teachers who profess a different attitude to hierarchy and governance, for they at least remind their students of all that is at stake within and without our classrooms. And

of course we churn out management students, scientists, and engineers without any interest in the ethics or sociology of their practices. They too take our classes and are intrigued by, and occasionally alienated from, the critical vocabularies we teach, whether they have to do with property relations, race, gender, or sexuality. We know that we are training future members of “the professional-managerial class”<sup>5</sup> (to which we also belong), and precisely because they will occupy leadership (if not ownership) positions, it is possible to imagine them as agents of change rather than of the confirmation or worsening of national and international socio-economic hierarchies. Yes, we might simply be providing them the cultural capital they need to identify as a class fraction, but if our concerns insist that many of the structural problems of our present can be traced back to developments in the eighteenth century, then we enable a different understanding of culture *per se*. Is this a Quixotic quest or ambition? Almost certainly, but for me, much preferable to the bland, precious antiquarianism, and the genteel pleasure in retrospect, that were the legitimating principles of the pedagogy of the early modern period or of the eighteenth century that I received when I was an undergraduate.

We work in universities and colleges where the present crisis has caused the lay-offs of service staff and of non-tenured faculty (many tenured and tenure-track faculty have seen cuts to their salaries or retirement funds). We are watching as low-income, first-generation students who have made precarious entry into higher education are now slipping away, given the financial difficulties faced by their families. Many of us have mobilized to try and convince our administrators that there are more creative ways of using university resources, including endowment funds, to avoid cuts in budgets. Few administrators, perhaps because their salaries now rival that of CEOs of corporations (as does their view of their responsibilities), have paid heed. They refuse the redistribution of resources that would—in principle—make universities



answerable to their communities as a whole, rather than to their highest-paid employees. Does our scholarly understanding of the eighteenth-century cause us to mobilize, as best we can, to remind our administrators that they and their bloated salaries are unethical examples of the values that we claim to embody? Again, that depends on the eighteenth century each of us inhabits in our scholarship and pedagogy; if we live at odds with the period we study, the chances are that we will find ways of committing ourselves to progressive change in our own. If, on the other hand, we turn to the past to find stories of contentment and gentlemanly ease (with a few resolvable romantic hiccups, of course), and take uncritical pleasure in the world they conjure (landscapes developed from the enclosure of commons; the land-grabbing, commodity-intensive, culture of country houses; landowners and laborers who know their station; a genteelly patriarchal social order; a divinely-ordained racial hierarchy), we are likely to make common cause with those who believe that whatever is, is right.<sup>6</sup>

I have listed our academic challenges, and I should note that there are many, many scholars who work hard to meet them (their writing is not listed for lack of space, not for lack of gratitude). I will conclude with a troubling concern: disciplinary specialization might render us less than effective in our response to our overlapping crises today. Our disciplines operate behind intellectual and academic fortifications that limit our views and the range of our imaginations. Our university appointments encourage us to become insular inhabitants of closed territories; we have to relearn how to be citizens of the world. If that makes us tentative in our analyses, or unsure about our conclusions, that is all to the good, for the certainties and comforts of our inheritance need constant reexamination. To learn differently is to parochialize our disciplinary specialization, to recognize its Eurocentric limits, but we must not do so only to re-center it within our intellectual practices. There is an inviting world of knowledge and learning outside

our field: to wit, what do they know of eighteenth-century culture who only the eighteenth century know?

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Behrooz Ghamari Tabrizi, "The Two-Headed Hydra of Racism and Imperialism," *Counterpunch*, June 25, 2020; <https://www.counterpunch.org/2020/06/25/the-two-headed-hydra-of-racism-and-imperialism/#gsc.tab=0>

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, the report of the American Psychological Association, "Ethnic and Racial Minorities & Socioeconomic Status": <https://www.apa.org/pi/ses/resources/publications/minorities>

<sup>3</sup> Mark Maslin and Simon Lewis, "Why the Anthropocene began with European colonisation, mass slavery and the 'great dying' of the 16th century," *The Conversation*, June 25, 2020. <https://theconversation.com/why-the-anthropocene-began-with-european-colonisation-mass-slavery-and-the-great-dying-of-the-16th-century-140661>

<sup>4</sup> Phillis Wheatley, "An Ode of Verses on the Much Lamented Death of the Rev. Mr George Whitefield," (l. 44). When this poem was reprinted in the London edition, this line was changed to: "You shall be sons, and kings, and priests to GOD." Patricia C. Willis analyzes this change, and a few others that dilute the poem's references to American's suffering at the hands of the British, to suggest that the patronage of the Countess of Huntingdon in London (Whitefield was her chaplain) caused Wheatley's poem to be "thoroughly defanged" (172). Willis' argument is a fine reminder that power and politesse have long operated to dull the critical edge of literary writing. "Phillis Wheatley, George Whitefield, and the Countess of Huntingdon in the Beinecke Library," *The Yale University Library Gazette*, 80, no. 3/4 (2006): 161-76. I should note that the University of Pennsylvania has just decided to remove Whitefield's statue from its campus, prompted by the activist scholarship of students and faculty: <http://pennandslaveryproject.org/exhibits/show/campus/earlycampus/georgewhitefield>

<sup>5</sup> The phrase was coined by Barbara and John Ehrenreich in their essay, "The Professional-Managerial Class," *Radical America*, 11, no. 2 (1977): 7-32.

<sup>6</sup> My reference is, of course, to Pope's ratification of the Great Chain of Being in *An Essay on Man* (1734):

All Discord, Harmony, not understood;  
 All partial Evil, universal Good:  
 And, spite of Pride, in erring Reason's spite,  
 One truth is clear, "Whatever IS, is RIGHT."  
 (l. 289-92)