

Ideas for In-Class Exercises and Research Projects

Correspondence and Wheatley's Social Networks

Jeffers's *The Age of Phillis* emphasizes the social world of Phillis Wheatley. A number of poems re-create the correspondences between Wheatley and people, especially other black Americans, like her friend Obour Tanner. Inspired by Jeffers's critical-speculative mode, faculty could assign students creative projects in which they embody the persona of a figure from Wheatley's world and craft correspondence between Wheatley and that figure -- for example, Olaudah Equiano or Jupiter Hammon. The correspondence could be in the form of letter-writing, or it could be a series of poems like that of Jeffers. The creative project can be accompanied by a self-reflexive essay in which students talk through the critical dimensions of their creative choices. Note: Elsewhere on this website are resources related to Wheatley's social networks.

- As a variation of this assignment, students could do a research project. Students read with a particular emphasis those poems in Jeffers's book that focus on Wheatley's social relationships -- with Obour Tanner, Samson Occom, John Peters, George Washington, etc. They select one of those relationships (or another one) and conduct research to learn more about the relationship and its literary consequences. Why, for example, does Wheatley's correspondence with Occom matter in terms of what we (think) know about her and her creative pursuits. Why is it important to attend to the social world of Wheatley in order to understand her craft and cultural significance?

A Network Tree

Similar to the diagram located elsewhere on this website, students can create their own graphics illustrating Wheatley's social/business/personal relationships. The graphic could re-create an early Black Atlantic from the perspective of Wheatley.

- For a more advanced undergraduate course, this assignment could take a more traditional approach. First, faculty can introduce students to Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*. Then, have students consider Gilroy's theory from the perspective of Wheatley. They might also read the work of Will Harris and April Langley. Students can write a research paper in which they discuss Wheatley's connections across the Atlantic -- being sure to account for West Africa -- and speculate on how those connections energized (or stifled) her literary endeavors.

The Age of Phillis: A Timeline

Jeffers's book re-imagines the world of Phillis Wheatley following a chronological order. The poems begin, more or less, with her birth and end with her death. In between, the poems evoke historical events like the transatlantic slave trade, the Revolutionary War, the Great Awakening and revivalism, the escape of enslaved people from various owners, and so forth. Students can craft a timeline based on the events evoked in Jeffers's book. Those events, Jeffers inherently argues, make up the 'age' of Phillis Wheatley. Students can then compare the timeline they created from Jeffers's book with the timeline included on this website. Where do the timelines overlap? More important, where do the timelines differ? What events are emphasized in one but not the other? What can students make of those differences? How might timelines work as a

critical argument. How can timelines shape our understanding about a person or event? Students can conduct their own research and create their own timelines with 10 data points, or dates. That way, they must decide what they think are the 10 moments that best illustrate Wheatley and her historical/cultural significance. The timelines can be accompanied by a self-reflexive essay.

Wheatley Historiography

Using Jeffers's *The Age of Phillis* as a point of departure, students can think through the many afterlives of Phillis Wheatley from the early 19th century to the present. First, they read Jeffers's book. They focus on how and why she remembers Wheatley. They might discuss how the book commemorates black life in early America in general. Why does commemoration matter? What is the rhetorical project for Jeffers? In other words, what does she want readers to know about Wheatley and early black lives? How does Jeffers's agenda relate to that of others who have written about Wheatley, either creatively or critically? Here, you can choose whomever -- Brooks, Bassard, Bynum, Carretta. There is even a good deal of children's literature about Wheatley. What questions do these works bring up about authority, about commemorating black lives. Who gets to shape the legacy of early black lives, many of whom did not leave behind written records? In the case of Wheatley, how has her legacy been shaped over the centuries? Students can interrogate how the agendas of Jeffers and others relate to Wheatley's -- or what we imagine might have been Wheatley's agenda.

- As a research project, students can create an annotated bibliography of Wheatley sources beginning in the 19th century. The bibliography on this website can help them get started. To push this assignment further, students can write a historiography of Wheatley criticism with an emphasis on how scholars have wrestled with Wheatley's legacy and cultural significance over the last two centuries.
- Another option is a research paper in which students track the many afterlives of Phillis Wheatley. How has Wheatley been commemorated, or celebrated, over the centuries -- from her inclusion in one of the first African American literary anthologies in the 19th century to 2020 with publication of Jeffers's book?