

# Voices of the past, present, and future : how eighteenth-century Black writers reshape twenty-first-century academia — talking back to the enlightenment : practicing anti-racist teaching and learning in eighteenth-century British literature (Roundtable)

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# *Voices of the Past, Present, and Future: How Eighteenth-Century Black Writers Reshape Twenty-First-Century Academia—Talking Back to the Enlightenment: Practicing Anti-Racist Teaching and Learning in Eighteenth-Century British Literature (Roundtable)*

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To study US history, one must reopen wounds from the past trauma that has seeped down from generation to generation, inflicting pain on individuals of the Black community. The same discrimination remains an ugly scar that is ever present in today's social climate. This cycle of hatred has evolved over time, rooted in the transatlantic slave trade. Studying the writings of Black authors—such as Phillis Wheatley, Olaudah Equiano, and Ottobah Cugoano—is necessary to reshape academic discourse. These writings serve as important foundations for progressive acts toward racial justice. In an attempt to incorporate more Black voices into class curricula, members of academia have an important role in deciding who will be included on course reading lists and research activities. If students and teachers want to shape an inclusive space, they must hold conversations and discuss not only the root causes of racial discrimination but also how it has affected the current social climate in the United States. It is important to consider Black voices of the eighteenth century because students should be made aware of why the past is connected to racial discrimination in the present and why these issues perpetuate themselves. Wheatley, Equiano, and Cugoano each contribute to this dialogue. These writers were able to defend themselves, often writing with tropes like the “noble Negro” and using scriptural passages as a means of disproving the slander spewed by white egotistical male theorists like Immanuel Kant and David Hume.<sup>1</sup>

Wheatley uses religious rhetoric to make her writing palatable for an eighteenth-century audience in her poem “On Being Brought from Africa to America.” Wheatley's last couplet is a word of caution: “Remember, *Christians, Negros*, black as Cain, / May be refin'd and join th'angelic train,”<sup>2</sup> reminding believers who hold prejudice against Black individuals that they are seen as equals to white people in God's eyes. This subtle jab works well with Wheatley's argument because she uses Christian rhetoric familiar to her readers as a source of agency; she exposes racial discrimination and situates herself within more human terms. Since I believe that discourses on the civil justice of the Black community should remain a part of academic discussion as a means of addressing racial injustices, Wheatley's written contribution serves as a vital source of support and a touchstone for educators and readers.

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1. Ayanna Jackson-Fowler, “Phyllis Wheatley, Olaudah Equiano, and Ottobah Cugoano: Legacy of the Noble Negro,” in *Transatlantic Literature of the Long Eighteenth Century*, ed. Kamille Stone Stanton and Julie A. Chappell (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), 51–64. This article gives an overview of the term, using Wylie Sypher's apt phrasing: it is “the African who united the traits of the white man, so that he might not be repulsive . . . and the traits of the Negro, so that he might arouse pity.” For more from Sypher, see Sypher, *Guinea's Captive Kings: British Anti-Slavery Literature of the XVIIIth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1942).

2. Phillis Wheatley, *Phyllis Wheatley: Complete Writings*, ed. Vincent Carretta (New York: Penguin Books, 2001).

Following Wheatley, Equiano and Cugoano were not afraid to use the “noble Negro” trope or their audience’s expectations about religion and identity to their advantage. These writers utilized Christian scripture as a means of disproving proslavery advocates by repositioning God’s message for racial equality in their narratives. In Equiano’s *Narrative*, he states, “Might not an African ask you, ‘learned you this from your God . . . do unto all men as you would men should do unto you,’” a passage from Matthew 7:12 that he directs toward the perpetrators of the slave trade.<sup>3</sup> Equiano uses the word of God and is given agency by calling out Christian slave traders on their inhumane acts toward enslaved individuals and by exposing the blatant hypocrisy taking place. Similarly, Cugoano’s *Thoughts and Sentiments* is a personal account of his life in which he relies on the Christian doctrine to support his narrative. Cugoano states that it is “the incumbent duty of all men of enlightened understanding, and of every man that has any claim or affinity to the name of Christian, that the base treatment which the African Slaves undergo, ought to be abolished; and it is moreover evident, that the whole, or any part of that iniquitous traffic of slavery, can no where, or in any degree, be admitted, but among those who must eventually resign their own claim to any degree of sensibility and humanity.”<sup>4</sup> Based on his reasoning, persons engaging in the slave enterprise cannot claim to be humane, nor, through Cugoano’s linking this argument to Christianity, can they claim to be Christians. Similar to Wheatley, Cugoano and Equiano use religious rhetoric to co-opt the language of slavery and instead use it for abolitionism and personal liberation.

Given the brave choices made by these writers, it is our job as academics to give back agency to the eighteenth-century voices that have been drowned out by white supremacy. Our job is to break that mold and address the voices that have been marginalized and disregarded for centuries. I believe that through honest conversations about American history, students are able to understand how the past has shaped the current social climate and racial injustices.

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3. Equiano, *Interesting Narrative*, 190.

4. Ottobah Cugoano, “Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery: And Commerce of the Human Species, Humbly Submitted to the Inhabitants of Great-Britain, by Ottobah Cugoano, A Native of Africa,” in *Black Atlantic Writers of the Eighteenth Century: Living the New Exodus in England and the Americas*, ed. Adam Potkay and Sandra Burr (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995), 129–58, 130.