

An imagined reality — talking back to the enlightenment : practicing anti-racist teaching and learning in eighteenth-century British literature (Roundtable)

Nevarez, Jasmine

2021

Nevarez, J. (2021). An imagined reality — talking back to the enlightenment : practicing anti-racist teaching and learning in eighteenth-century British literature (Roundtable). *Studies in Religion and the Enlightenment*, 2(2), 18-19.

<https://dx.doi.org/10.32655/srej.2021.2.2.6>

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/148562>

<https://doi.org/10.32655/srej.2021.2.2.6>

An Imagined Reality—Talking Back to the Enlightenment: Practicing Anti-Racist Teaching and Learning in Eighteenth- Century British Literature (Roundtable)

JASMINE NEVAREZ

California State Polytechnic University, Pomona

Growing up in a predominately Caucasian school district made me exceedingly aware of my differences from my peers, teachers, and school materials. As a young student, I was encouraged to accept the history that was handed to me. The history that often left me, a Mexican American woman, out of the narrative. What is striking about movements like the *1619 Project* is that they work within the realm of lost stories to reconceptualize and reclaim a history that has been pushed to the side. The *1619 Project* brings awareness to the Eurocentricity of US history because it provides a space for Black activists, writers, and innovators to rewrite the history themselves. Black writers such as Eve L. Ewing create imagined realities that fill in the Black voices and narratives that have been lost throughout colonial history. Ewing's poem, "1773," presents a lost dialogue between past and present as it restores Black history.¹

Ewing's poem calls on the voice of Phillis Wheatley. Wheatley was one of the first African American females to be published, but only after her work was approved and her character was defended by a group of white men. In the opening paratext to Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, John Wheatley, who purchased her from slave traders, certifies her ability to write the included poems. On the following page, sixteen white men in Massachusetts write that they "assure the World, that the Poems specified in the following Page, were (as we verily believe) written by Phillis, a young Negro Girl" as a way of combatting the disbelief that Wheatley could write poetry.² Because Wheatley was a Black woman, she would not have been published without this group of white men vouching for her intelligence and her humanity. Ewing's response begins by locating the reader at a nameless grave that transforms into the resting site of Wheatley: "Pretend I wrote this at your grave / Pretend the grave is marked / Pretend we know where it is."³ The speaker paints an imagined reality as they question Wheatley from beyond the grave and receive answers not from Wheatley directly but from the racist Enlightenment rhetoric that surrounded her during her time. Ewing's poem progresses through a one-sided conversation between the speaker and speechless—a conversation that symbolizes the forced silence of the Black past (Wheatley) and the restorative narrative of the Black present (Ewing).

Ewing's poem points out the gaps within American history that silence Black voices and inserts a discourse between them that answers American complicity against Black people. She writes:

Pretend I was there with you, Phillis, when you asked in a letter to no one:
How many iambs to be a real human girl?
Which turn of phrase evidences a righteous heart?

1. Eve L. Ewing, "1773," *The New York Times*, August 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/african-american-poets.html?smid=tw-nytimes&smtyp=cur>.

2. Phillis Wheatley, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (London: A. Bell, 1773).

3. Ewing, "1773."

If I know of Ovid may I keep my children?⁴

These questions offer a perspective where Ewing unveils the truth behind these disparities: white lives have always been held with more importance than Black lives. For no matter whether Wheatley was intelligent, whether she assimilated to Eurocentric culture, or whether a group of white men “supported” her, she would never be valued like a white man is valued. Ewing brings these inequities to the surface and creates a dialogue of truth between the silent past and the exposing present.

Ewing’s piece works to restore a Black narrative by creating a dialogue between the speaker and Wheatley that encapsulates the miseries of Black history and retells it from a modern point of view. It is the narrative of the unheard that has been stolen from slavery, Jim Crow, segregation, civil rights, and now Black Lives Matter. In a way, Ewing’s poem talks back to history and reclaims the truth behind it. Ewing and the *1619 Project* invite the world to a reimagined truth to witness the Black experience of the past through the Black experience of the present.

4. Ewing, “1773.”