Loving Blackness across Arts and Sciences

Michelle S. Hite, Deanna P. Koretsky

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MICHELLE S. HITE *Spelman College*

DEANNA P. KORETSKY *Spelman College*

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Abstract: This essay reflects on "loving Blackness" as a pedagogical tool in assigning Honorée Fanonne Jeffers's The Age of Phillis. *As such, it articulates the possibilities for regarding the inner lives of Black people beyond the constraints of anti-Blackness and white supremacy. When released from this antagonism, we challenge our students with exploring Black life on its own terms. This approach informs how we brought STEM students and advanced English literature students together to reconsider and reimagine the potential narrative strands found in pre-nineteenth-century Black history and the promises of Black futures using* The Age of Phillis *as a model.*

KEYWORDS: loving Blackness, Black futures, fugitive pedagogy

It's not hard for me to conjure this,
to have no black shame in their black joy.
These black people,
these *Free Negroes*, are my own,
and they had love.
They still do:
I'm still here.

—Honorée Fanonne Jeffers, "Free Negro Courtship #2"

In "Loving Blackness as Political Resistance," bell hooks recalls a scene from her college classroom where she offered an interpretation of Nella Larsen's *Passing* that students found untenable. Reflecting on Clare Kendry, a Black woman who lived on both sides of the color line, hooks engages the moment when Clare declares her preference for Blackness. Since Clare encounters a catastrophic end soon after this admission, hooks asks her students "to consider the possibility that to love blackness is dangerous in a white supremacist culture—so threatening, so serious a breach in the fabric of the social order, that death is the punishment" (9). This led students to share stories about the pain and burden of Blackness and remain close-mouthed in discussing loving Blackness (10).

Our teaching works to confront such silences. Rita Felski accounts for a general silence surrounding love that gets tied to an overemphasis in scholarship on critique as its primary mode. This leads to scholarship being "hyperarticulate about our adversaries and so excruciatingly tongue-tied about our loves" (13). Anti-Blackness constrains even this, since it induces speechlessness about the intrinsic value of Blackness given that, as W. E. B. Du Bois so eloquently articulates, it advances an "all-pervading desire to inculcate disdain for everything black, from Toussaint to the devil" (20). Loving Blackness, then, "is dangerous in a white supremacist culture" because it undermines white supremacist authority to foreclose on the possibilities of what Blackness can mean. Our teaching shares an interest in training students to acknowledge Blackness beyond anti-Black foreclosure and thus to recognize Black self-regard as a stunning achievement. To that end, one of our driving questions for students asks how loving Blackness becomes a possibility for those willing to embrace it. *How do Black people come to embrace counter-hegemonic ideas about who they are and what they can do?*

For Toni Morrison, social, political, and economic structures greatly inform sources of self-regard. As she explains in an essay on *Beloved*, exploring slavery's impact on how enslaved people would come to value themselves taught her to attend closely to ways that the sociopolitical world impacts how Black people hold themselves in esteem. Morrison's information came from cultural artifacts found in Black life that Black people created and produced, "the literature, the language, the custom, the posture, all of this"—which she offers as a repository for considering the fullness of Black life in time, or as a matter of history (318). Morrison's expansive view of what counts as archival informs how we teach students to rethink Black life through the lens of loving Blackness.

For us, the invitation to participate in the Society of Early Americanists (SEA) conference with our students provided an opportunity to explore the *sources of self-regard* through traditional archival sources and expanded ones. As the SEA planning committee invited a partnership with the Atlanta University Center Consortium (AUCC), the world's oldest and largest association of historically Black colleges and universities, faculty integrated Honorée Fanonne Jeffers's book of poetry *The Age of Phillis* into a range of courses, programs, and academic experiences. We decided to also create an opportunity for cross-disciplinary conversation. First, we

each taught *The Age of Phillis* in different contexts, which we outline below. Once our students had done some work with and inspired by the text, we brought them together. Through the SEA Common Reading Initiative, we extended our shared goal of teaching loving Blackness as a liberal arts project within and beyond our typical roles in an English Department. Loving Blackness provided the chief organizing concept for engaging students across disciplines and rank through the figure of Phillis Wheatley Peters.

THE AGE OF PHILLIS IN WISTEM

> What unique perspectives does a minority student bring to a physics class?
>
> —Supreme Court Justice John Roberts

In 2015, two thousand professional physicists and astrophysicists condemned the line of inquiry that led John Roberts and Antonin Scalia to minimize the value of diversity in STEM. As those scientists contend in their open letter to SCOTUS, “diversity among scientists [is] a crucial aspect of objective, bias-free science” (Equity and Inclusion in Physics and Astronomy Group). Accepting this view, Spelman College, a historically Black college for women of African descent and member of the AUCC, makes loving Blackness a foundational component of introducing students to the possibilities of STEM through its Women in STEM (WiSTEM) enrichment curriculum. Loving Blackness entails unsettling received ideas about ways of knowing that Black people have forged as an approach to problem solving. What Phillis Wheatley Peters may have known played a prominent role in how students in this six-week summer bridge program for intended STEM majors would begin their interdisciplinary work. Henry Louis Gates’s *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley* proved especially useful as it enabled students to consider how this early African American woman writer holds meaning for STEM students.

As we engaged it, *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley* moved readers beyond Wheatley Peters’s status as an iconic writer and reflected on Wheatley Peters as a coder. To that end, WiSTEM students were encouraged to read “On Being Brought from Africa to America” as an anagram that, as Gates writes, shifts from a poem that accommodates oppression to “a secret,

coded love letter to freedom, hiding before our very eyes" (89). Without proof of Wheatley Peters's intention, Gates settles on the potential decoding as a call for continued investment in the valuable task of serious reading. For WiSTEM, the question of design mattered for the way it emerged at the site of constraint and oppression. We explored how Black students might function as descendants of Wheatley Peters as calls for justice remain urgent, and as code and coding is so fundamental to science. Could what John C. Shields calls a "poetics of liberation" be bequeathed? As students discussed strategies to combat isolation in science and technology fields along with their commitment to social justice, they wondered about Wheatley Peters and wanted to know more about her and how she came to craft her work. Their curiosity about what she knew demonstrates loving Blackness.

Though Wheatley Peters's work bears the imprint of her oppression, reading "On Being Brought from Africa to America" as code demonstrates an ability to live beyond its dictates. Students were interested in Peters's unique personhood and how she became someone who used her craft to create a space for her authentic voice. In wanting to know her in this way, they suggested that it was possible to be curious about the lives of the enslaved. This inquiry into Black subjectivity challenges the omnipotence of racial logic and race thinking that places Black people beyond mystery, interiority, or complexity. Honorée Fanonne Jeffers's work of researching and imagining Wheatley Peters's life offered a model.

THE AGE OF PHILLIS AND NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRITISH LITERATURE

> Can beauty provide an antidote to dishonor, and love a way to "exhume buried cries" and reanimate the dead?
>
> —Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts"

Spelman offers a course called *Black Women in Nineteenth-Century British Literature*. Courses centering Black women in this area are unusual, in part, because we simply do not have many nineteenth-century British texts by women of African descent. Rather than presuming to "fill a gap," however, this course invites students to expand their ways of knowing by interrogating not only *what* we know about Black women but *how* we know

it. The course encourages students to orient their thinking about Blackness beyond representation, through and toward epistemic disruption. Grounded in methodologies exemplified by Jeffers in *The Age of Phillis*, the course takes seriously the difficulty of looking *for* and *at* what is not there.

With Jeffers's work as a model, students researched and developed their own critical and creative modes of engaging with nineteenth-century texts they found in online archives. They were then asked to curate and present their findings to students in the WiSTEM program, who asked questions and offered feedback. This feedback also helped to inform which students were selected to dialogue with Jeffers during her student colloquy event at the SEA conference. For the literature students, part of the challenge of this assignment lay in making their work legible to readers not privy to the shared critical frameworks developed over months of class readings and conversations. But arguably the greater and more urgent challenge came from the inherent limitations of embarking on this mode of study, which Jack Halberstam describes as "making common cause with the brokenness of being" (5). In shifting from receivers to producers of so-called knowledge, students had to grapple not only with what they found in the archives but with what they (knew they) would not find, as well as what they (knew they) could not say about the things they did.

These kinds of ethical and methodological challenges have been discussed by, among others, Saidiya Hartman, whose "Venus in Two Acts" students read alongside *The Age of Phillis*. A common theme among their projects included confronting and, per Hartman, working to understand the "pessimism or despair" that attends this work as "the impossibility that conditions our knowledge of the past and animates our desire for a liberated future" (13). As one student noted, "This is the real heartbreak of it all. . . . We're missing something that can't be recovered. . . . How can that burden further the progress of freedom? Perhaps simply naming it can bring relief." Yet both Hartman's and Jeffers's works—and, ultimately, those of many of our students—move beyond "simply naming" the manifold violence inherent in archival study.

To that end, the literature students were asked to address, as part of the work they shared with WiSTEM students, notions of "knowability," conventions by which the West constructs "knowledge," and what literature offers as a point of entry into the past that other modes of knowledge production cannot. WiSTEM students, in turn, were encouraged to

interrogate their approaches to problem solving through a consideration for methods and modalities found in the humanities. By focusing these inquiries through histories of Black women that, within some academic frameworks, are considered unknowable (if they are considered at all), our students were emboldened to embrace what Fred Moten calls "the celebratory analysis of blackness . . . [which] is done not to avoid or ameliorate the hard truths of anti-blackness but in the service of its violent eradication" (viii). In this way, our students' cross-disciplinary dialogues about Black historicity came, finally, to focus on Black futures.

CONCLUSIONS

> I suggest that black studies not only names and posits the violent arithmetics of the archive, but that this citation of violence also can and should no longer ethically repeat this violence. Indeed, while not always honored, the intellectual project of black studies—with its long history of citing and surviving racial violence in numbers—provides a deliberate commentary on the ways in which blackness works against the violence that defines it.
>
> —Katherine McKittrick, "Mathematics of Black Life"

Our work with students embodies this aspect of Black Studies, which derives from Black world-making, that ethically honors Black life without repeating anti-Black violence. Even as we specialize in different areas and teach students of varied disciplinary backgrounds, our pedagogies share a commitment to exploring possibilities for Black life "that cannot be contained by black death" (McKittrick 20). *The Age of Phillis* resonates with this goal. In one of the volume's most powerful moves to correct untrue or misleading narratives surrounding the titular poet, Jeffers reframes negative assessments of John Peters's character in historical accounts of Wheatley Peters's life as an entrenched denial of Black love: "Oddly, no account that I'd read of Peters gives the most obvious, commonplace reason for why Wheatley chose him as her mate. . . . Maybe she married John Peters because they were deeply, passionately in love. Is that explanation so ridiculous? Why *wouldn't* they love each other?" (186, italics original).

By illuminating how the accepted historical record has functioned to reproduce the white supremacist belief that "black folk . . . lacked the range of emotions accepted as a norm among civilized folk" (hooks, *Salvation*, xix), Jeffers demonstrates how cultural inheritances can, and often do, maintain the anti-Blackness at the heart of Western modernity. Moreover, she insists that revisiting and reexamining all forms of inherited knowledge—even, and perhaps especially those sanctioned by our academic institutions—is, itself, an act of love. Thus, when she channels the depth of feeling she imagines between Phillis and John, their eighteenth-century love story extends seamlessly and necessarily into the first-person present tense: "they had love. / They still do: / I'm still here" (128).

It is in this spirit that we hope our individual and joint engagements with *The Age of Phillis* encouraged our students to view their work about and inspired by Jeffers's text as acts of love: love not only for the historical subjects they studied but also for themselves as products and producers of those histories. As hooks contends, "loving blackness" indicates a regard for Black life, culture, and experience that defies the dictates and precepts of white supremacy. As such, "loving blackness" embraces what Kevin Quashie calls "black aliveness," or the presumption that Black life exceeds the terms of how white supremacy regards it.

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