Early American #BlackLivesMatter

In 1760, probably in New York, Jupiter Hammon's poem "An Evening Thought. Salvation by Christ with Penitential Cries" was printed as a broadsheet. The sheet identified the poem as Hammon's and identified Hammon as "a Negro belonging to Mr. Lloyd of Queen's Village, on Long Island." On this basis, Hammon is regularly regarded as the first African American to publish a poem in what is now the United States. Though his poem, true to its title, concerns itself mostly with pious claims about salvation, slavery enters in its eighth stanza:

> Dear Jesus by thy precious Blood,
> The World Redemption have:
> Salvation comes now from the Lord,
> He being thy captive Slave.

Hammon was nearly fifty years old at the time of this broadsheet publication, and he had been an active Bible reader since at least his early twenties. He had every reason to know that no abiding eighteenth-century Christology took slavery as a predominant metaphor. The poetic conceit of this stanza, then, appears to be a pointed act of invention.

Detail from “Procession of Victuallers of Philadelphia, on the 15th of March, 1821,” hand-colored engraving and aquatint by Joseph Yeager after drawing by John Lewis Krimmel (Philadelphia, 1821). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

One does not have to interpret especially creatively to begin to imagine why an intelligent enslaved man with poetic leanings might figure Christ as himself enslaved. Accordingly, the alchemy of a classroom setting is all that’s required to transform this eighth stanza into a small nugget of pedagogical gold. The stanza brings together the biographical and the metaphorical aspects of this poem, enabling students and other fledgling readers to see how and why an African American voice could enter the print and literary archives of American literature and assume a critical stance toward that very enterprise. It is tempting to teach Hammon’s poem—and, indeed, much of early African American writing—in precisely this way. Like nearly all other early African American stories that matter, the one told by this poem appears to be about slavery.

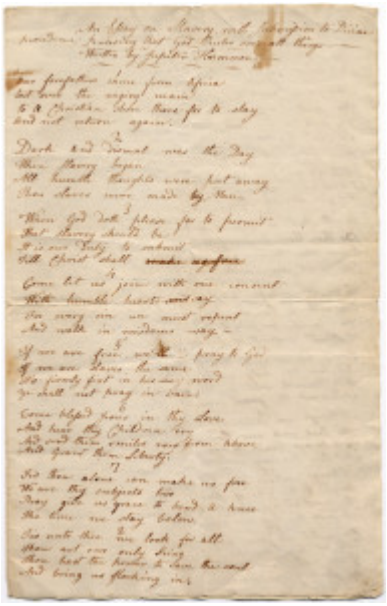
Yet the problem with such an interpretation is how overdetermined it is. Few works meriting serious literary study—as, I think, Hammon’s poems do—are so consistently interpreted along a single critical axis. One root of this problem is that Hammon’s poems are not often taught. The most popular American literature textbooks (such as the *Norton* or the *Heath* anthologies) instead abound with selections from Hammon’s contemporaries Phillis Wheatley and Olaudah Equiano, both of whose extant publications are more substantial, and both of whose autobiographical writings recount the transatlantic slave trade. These latter authors would accordingly seem to better represent eighteenth-century African American experiences to college students, not least because our students read literature to learn that there are many more experiences in the world than one finds growing up on Long Island.

The problem, then, is not interpretations of Hammon’s poems themselves, which may point toward slavery as a crucial metaphor or context; rather, the problem is an overdetermined interpretive frame that presumes that these poems matter most when they say something about slavery. The problem, in other words, is that professors and teachers have come up with few means or reasons other than slavery to interpret these extraordinary verses. When Hammon does show up in anthologies or on syllabi, his status as an enslaved African American blots out

nearly any other significant aspect of his biography or his art. Much as his white contemporaries did, we read Hammon as a slave, rather than an artist.

To be clear, in my own literature classrooms, I willingly support discussions about slavery, even when these subordinate an aesthetic engagement with poetry to a more political or broadly culturalist discussion of the time period in which the poems were written. I also acknowledge that it would be incorrect to argue that Hammon's poems harbored no interest in slavery; the recent discovery of his manuscript poem "An Essay on Slavery," for example, shows a side of Hammon that—at least by 1786—found the constrained form of the quatrain suitable to a vocal critique of the peculiar institution. Hammon, like many African Americans, enslaved or free, had thoughts about slavery. But my point here is to insist on the likelihood that, like many African Americans, Hammon also had thoughts about all kinds of things besides slavery. Presuming that Hammon's poetry matters when it's first and foremost about slavery denies the complexity of early African American experiences that may not simply conform to an interpretive paradigm of slavery and resistance.

Because such a paradigm often animates our syllabi and our anthology selections, those same syllabi and anthology selections tend to underplay and underappreciate that early African American authors were not solely enslaved and formerly enslaved. Resisting slavery—and observing the hypocrisy of American political culture—was, of course, as scholars of black history since the 1960s have shown, part of the lives of these historical actors, as it remains for many African Americans today. But there were undoubtedly many other parts of their lives. Among contemporary scholars, Frances Smith Foster has argued powerfully against confusing the nineteenth-century black press for the antislavery press. But a similar point would be evident to any reader who thinks of Hammon's piety, or Wheatley's devotion, or Frederick Douglass's courage, or William Wells Brown's showmanship, and sees in these aspects of these people's personalities a complexity that registers (sometimes subtly, but always unmistakably) in the texts they left behind. In all those cases, slavery was something with which these personalities engaged, but the affective textures and small pleasures and wry moments and petty defeats also adumbrated in their texts are most often interpreted in ways that tend to subordinate the quirks of personality to the historical forces of slavery.



Detail from “Essay on Slavery,” by Jupiter Hammon (1786). Hillhouse family papers (MS 282). Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.

By contrast, such conclusions are rarely reached with white-authored texts. One would not hesitate, for example, to interpret the metaphorical whiteness of the whale in *Moby-Dick* as a symptom of Herman Melville’s dark theological humor. Why would one hesitate to similarly value Hammon’s curious metaphoric of Christ’s slavery in “An Evening Thought” as a genuine if idiosyncratic expression of his own piety? Historical interpretations of early African American texts tend to want to pronounce what is African American about them (which, somehow, is almost always slavery). These texts less often end up on our syllabi so that we may teach our students how to honor what is individual, personal, or human about them. We often conclude instead that Melville is a satirical genius and that Hammon was a clever slave. The well-meaning condescension in this tacit contrast should give us far more pause than it tends to.

If one problem with equating early African American literature with slavery is that so doing risks reducing the experience of black Americans to the condition of being enslaved, a second problem is that such an equation creates the impression that slavery only matters when it’s being recounted. We teach texts that may justly be seen as examples of the creative ways that African Americans survived and responded to the unimaginably huge machinations of American racism, yet we do so as though such responses were the whole of the story of American racism. It’s frankly absurd that in our classrooms, black-authored texts so often carry the burden of representing to students a set of institutions that white Americans largely perpetuated. White-authored texts deserve to share the burden of telling the story of race and racism in America—and that’s true whether one looks, on the one hand, to something like Thomas Jefferson’s derisive comments on Wheatley and Ignatius Sancho, or, on the other hand, to something like the early abolitionist sentiments of an activist like Anthony Benezet. Race, racism, and slavery are an ineluctable

part of white Americans' American history. Indeed, it is these traits that allow white Americans to *have* a history in the first place, as historians have shown that no one would call themselves "white Americans" if not for the long-simmering racist pseudo-science that created an alibi for social inequity out of a "white" population that in fact has little meaningful genetic resemblance.

Hammon may seem like a desultory point of departure for these meditations, not least because, compared to the urgent political work of antiracism, the stakes for interpreting poetry don't often feel especially high. Yet as college students in our present continue to organize themselves into a movement for expansive racial justice on campuses across the county, teachers with some knowledge of Jupiter Hammon may find their expertise suddenly sought after. In November 2015, for example, students at Yale issued a demand for "An ethnic studies distributional requirement for all Yale undergraduates and the immediate promotion of the Ethnicity, Race & Migration program to departmental status," observing, with notable deference to the expertise of their professors, that "Curricula for classes that satisfy the ethnic studies distributional requirement must be designed by Yale faculty in the aforementioned areas of study." These students, like others at institutions across the country, are asking for support with their extraordinary, courageous work from faculty with relevant expertise. Giving our students the support they need requires, among other things, taking our expertise and channeling it beyond any cursory vision of "diversity" that may already reside in our syllabi and our instruction.

I'm suggesting in other words that one step in making this student-led diversification meaningful requires faculty to admit once and for all that our curricula as they exist already tend to grant white people and white people's experiences far more diversity than they do for non-white people. As it stands, early American literature and history lessons, however unwittingly, may be reinforcing the idea that white people historically had all kinds of experiences, while black people had slavery. These unwitting lessons may stem not from the ways we teach, but from the materials we teach. With some limited exception, the authors, subjects, and characters who populate our lessons in early American literature and history classes are overwhelmingly white. White people have had the best and most unrestricted access to paper, ink, print, and paint, which have fostered their self-expression. White people have had the best and most unrestricted access to libraries, seminaries, universities, and historical societies, which have kept their records. White people's histories have been designedly exclusive and jealously guarded. White people's histories have long stood as official histories, and especially as official national histories. To counter the racism of these official histories, teachers have sought to include other voices, other experiences; and in so doing it has often made sense to counter the supremacy of pervasive whiteness with some kind of representative blackness. Yet we have done so with too little appreciation for the logic according to which attempts to make blackness into a representative counterweight indirectly confirm the pervasiveness of white American history. Many African American-authored texts can do such work very well, but we'd be

foolish and more than a little racist to imagine that they were created only for this purpose.

Importantly, however, early African American texts like Hammon's were not created to affirm the antiracist politics of our moment, either. For that reason, the act of teaching these texts stands to open up our contemporary moment to some greater analytical complexity. Black Lives Matter is but one contemporary movement among many doing amazing, necessary, and powerful work to respond to systemic, horrifying moments of racist violence. But this movement says more than that black people shouldn't be killed. Not-death is an abysmally too-low bar for survival. Black Lives Matter asserts that black people need to breathe, to live, and to thrive. To say that black lives matter is, in other words, to insist on the realization and representation of a full, complex humanity for black people outside as well as inside the academy. And so, within the de facto racism of the university context, teaching the poems of an enslaved poet as though they must be first and foremost about slavery risks reproducing the problem as though it were the solution. It is here that acknowledgment of the idiosyncrasies of Hammon's poetry may serve as a useful intervention.

If you're one of the teachers who already teaches early African American texts with care and depth, that's wonderful. The rest of us, however, need to commit to teaching more of these texts and, further, commit to teaching them in ways that acknowledge that early African American texts were created to do things besides counterbalance white American history. Some of the readiest solutions would be to make sure our syllabi and our reading lists include multiple black-authored texts when discussing early African American experiences, and multiple white-authored texts for thinking through slavery, race and racism in early America (things we do not much do, if the Society of Early Americanists syllabus exchange is any indicator of current practices).

A key pedagogical aim here would be to represent the diversity of early American black experiences themselves. Multiple, competing texts offer students a means toward understanding that there is no singular or representative "African American experience." Early black Americans were people, and people are different from each other. There are accordingly many ways and many idioms—political, poetic, and otherwise—in which early black Americans expressed themselves, with varied motivations and multiple consequences. In our well-meaning desire to create syllabi that include representative selections from early African Americans, the experiential and formal diversity internal to early African American texts is too often shortchanged. Insisting on and attending to the multiplicity of human experiences and interpretive contexts for early African American literature offers one practical and urgent occasion to show to our students that black lives matter.

Further Reading

On the recent discovery of Hammon's manuscript poem, see Cedrick May, "An

Enslaved Poet on Slavery," *Yale Alumni Magazine* (May/June 2013). For a fantastic account of the ordinary in early African American experience, see Tara Bynum, "Phillis Wheatley's Pleasures," *Common-place* 11:1 (October 2010). For a more recent, contemporary account, see Aimee Meredith Cox, *Shapeshifters: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship* (Durham, N.C., 2015). On the history of whiteness, see Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York, 2010). On the history and legacy of racism at U.S. universities, see Stephen Craig Wilder, *Ebony & Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America's Universities* (New York, 2013). More generally, my thinking about these issues owes a lot to Barbara Jeanne Fields, "Slavery, Race, and Ideology in the United States of America," *New Left Review* 181 (May-June 1990): 95–118, Frances Smith Foster, "A Narrative of the Interesting Origins and (Somewhat) Surprising Developments of African-American Print Culture," *ALH* 17:4 (Winter 2005): 714–740, M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (Durham, N.C., 2006), and Danielle Allen, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship Since Brown v. Board of Education* (Chicago, 2004).

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