

**Johns Hopkins University Press Podcast Transcript**  
**Dr. Dwight McBride, President, The New School**  
*Social Research*  
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**Mary Alice Yeskey**

Welcome to the Hopkins Press Podcast. I'm Mary Alice Yeskey with the Hopkins Press Journals division. I am incredibly honored this week to be joined by President of The New School in New York City, Dr. Dwight McBride. Dr. McBride became the university's ninth President in April of 2020. Dr. McBride is an accomplished higher education leader, educator, scholar, and author. Over nearly three decades in higher education, he has encouraged innovation in scholarship and teaching, launched initiatives to build interdisciplinary strength around global challenges, created environments that foster inclusive excellence, and expanded opportunities for experiential learning.

The Summer 2022 issue of the journal *Social Research*, Books That Matter II, invited notable scholars to select one book that had a deep and lasting influence on their thinking and life. Dr. McBride's essay, "A Rising Tide Lifts all Boats", reflects on Phillis Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects*. He joined us to discuss his his essay, which not only details Wheatley's remarkable life and writing, but examines what over 200 years of analysis and criticism of Wheatley's work can show us about the history of racism in the United States and its enduring impact on African American literature.

Thank you so much for joining us today, Dr. McBride, I really appreciate your time.

**Dwight McBride**

Delighted to be with you.

**Mary Alice Yeskey**

The first question I like to ask all our guests is, tell us your academic origin story. What led you to your field of study?

**Dwight McBride**

Well that's both an easy and a difficult question to answer. I always – you know, I grew up in rural South Carolina. I was always a good student. I was naturally drawn to books and learning, in fact I was known as a “bookish” kid. And I was encouraged in those pursuits by my parents, who really saw the value in educational opportunities for both me and my sister. And they wanted us to have opportunities that they themselves didn't get to have, neither of them were able to go to college, so my sister and I were both first gen college students. I especially was fond of the mix of what I call precision and potential in language. And as an example, when I was in school especially middle school, I loved diagramming sentence.

**Mary Alice Yeskey**

Wow! That's fantastic.

**Dwight McBride**

(Laughs) And I thought there might be a future, a career in that. I was always that kid that Ms. Murphy, my 7<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher, whenever there was a sentence that no one else in the class could figure out how to diagram, Ms. Murphy said, "Dwight, would you want to come to the board?"

Mary Alice Yeskey

Wow. (laughs) That's wonderful.

Dwight McBride

I was that kid. (laughs) At the time it didn't always feel wonderful, but in retrospect, I'm pretty pleased with it. So if I guess I had to have a more concrete answer to that question, I have to say what drew me the most to the field of study was really some incredible mentors that I had the opportunity to work with at Princeton. Because I came from a place where the prestige careers that you know of when you're a first gen college student are law, business, medicine, right? I knew medicine was out for me because I didn't do blood and gore, so that was a wrap. And law was where I thought I was going to go. I'd sort of d these heroic figures on TV and so I thought I wanted to be a lawyer, but in part, just because I had not been exposed to a lot of other opportunities. And so that really happened for me as an undergraduate at Princeton where I had incredible mentors. Had the opportunity to work with really some of the most amazing names in African American and American letters: Al Raboteau, Ruth Simmons, Valerie Smith, Howard Taylor, Diana Fuss, Eduardo Cadava, the late Emory Elliott, Wahneema Lubiano, Esther Shore. There's an interesting story there - we may not have time it for today. Love her. Nell Painter, Cornell West, were all among the folks that I worked with. And I had the opportunity to be a research assistant to the incomparable Toni Morrison. That was an experience that quite literally and there's a whole, you know, story there, changed my life. And each of those mentors and those scholars, they guided my curiosities, they nurtured my love of learning. They were patient. I mean, in retrospect, I now know how busy all of those people were, but they always seem to have time for me. I never felt like I was in inconvenience to any of them. And so it was really after those heady days that I started to really think about graduate school, and thought and understood that there was a career path to be had in the study of ideas - things that really had excited me so much. So it really started there. It was a really important moment for me.

Mary Alice Yeskey

That's wonderful. And what a catalog of mentors.

Dwight McBride

I mean, again, it just happened that all of those people had converged in that place in that time. When I think about the kind of happy accident of history that some of it was, too - it was really impressive, really impressive.

Mary Alice Yeskey

The latest issue of the journal *Social Research* is a special issue, which is titled "Books that Matter II". Two, because it is the second time that the journal has invited notable scholars to reflect on how books deeply affect their lives and what they think and how they think and what they think about. And you're a contribution, your essay, which is called "A Rising Tide Lifts All Boats", reflects on Phillis Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects* which came out in 1773. My question is, when you were asked to contribute to the issue, when you were posed with that question, what book matters to you - was Wheatley's work an immediate choice or was picking a particular title at difficult decision for you?

Dwight McBride

I think for a little, I mean, I paused, a little, about a few other contenders that I might write on. Any number of great text by James Baldwin, but particularly *Giovanni's Room*, which has meant so much to me in a number of ways. The late Melvin Dixon's novel, *Vanishing Rooms*, was also one that I considered. A novel that I feel like has still not gotten its due, in part because Dixon died so young. I've edited a volume of his critical essays in part because of that. Because he's someone that I think if had he had a longer life, we would probably know him almost as well as Baldwin now. I really think he had that level of talent and potential. I also thought about Patricia Williams's book, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, which is an examination of some of the systemic biases, particularly racial biases in America, an American law, in particular. That book for so many reasons in my academic life, my early days in graduate school, really just opened up space for me for a different kind of thinking. And particularly what you could do with experience in the context of critical work and scholarly work, she just opened that up in a way that I'd never seen it done before. In fact, I don't mind sharing that Patricia Williams is the only person who's ever received a fan letter from me. I actually sat down and I wrote - and I used to have, I'm sure I still have it if I were to dig through my things - she actually responded.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Oh, wow.

Dwight McBride

And we've been in touch over the years as well and stay in touch with each other. But just an incredible, incredible book. But as much as I considered other books and authors, in some ways, Wheatley was a natural choice for me to honor with this essay. Her life is an extraordinary story. Her poetry is just an uncommon - when you think about the time and the context - and massive accomplishment. And now what we would talk about as her impact as well, I don't think can really be overstated. And there's, I think, a need for more people to know her story and her legacy and her work. And so that really did win out for me. And in some ways, I think it's not unlike when you think about the murdered child from Morrison's *Beloved*, for me, Wheatley continues to haunt me and that's in a similar way. Almost in a way that seems greedy in her desire. She's always been there. And sometimes in the background, sometimes in the forefront, but urging the telling of her story. And I could say more about how I came to that and came to her. But she's been with me for a long time. And so in many ways, this essay was an opportunity to return again to that story in particular in the story of her critics. I think that the story of Wheatley is one that generations of critics and scholars have continued to grapple with in terms of American literary history and American history. And at different times, people have recuperated her work, they've denigrated her work. And I think in some ways that story, the critical reception, which I do talk about in the essay, is one that also is a part of the telling of the American story of race. And her reception, her treatment, over time, and how that changed and evolved, I think is the story worth telling. And one that I think is instructive. And I think it informs a lot about American intellectual and cultural history. So that's what drew me to that critical reception of her work. And this is the first time I've been able to talk about that in print, which was a great opportunity.

Mary Alice Yeskey

And we will get to the story of the story in a minute. But you touched on how she's been with you for such a long time, which was a terrific segue for my next question. I just wanted to ask you on a more personal level, can tell us about your experience with her work. Do you remember the first time you learned about her? Do you remember the first time you read her poetry? Where was the start of that relationship you have with her?

Dwight McBride

As I said, it's a long relationship. I'm going to try to do this briefly. My own interest with her began, I think it was the fall of 1988 when I was an undergraduate at Princeton. And at the time, I presume this is still the case of Princeton, all undergraduates were required to complete an independent research paper called the Junior Paper, one each semester. And I was looking for topics at that time doing something that students today may sound a little old school, but I was searching the card catalog.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Yes. Yes. I'm with you (laughs).

Dwight McBride

And browsing the stacks. Right? And I was talking to a lot of fellow English majors. This was also one of the things that everyone communicated with each other about. It created a kind intellectual community. And just about what topics they were doing, what I wanted to do, and I eventually came across this book by a man named Jay Saunders Redding. And the name of the book, I think, was written in the 1930s, was called *To Make a Poet Black*. And in that book, Redding, he writes about this, at the time to me unknown, black woman poet from the 18th century named Phillis Wheatley. And goes on to say that she was someone who did not necessarily care about the plight of her fellow enslaved brothers and sisters. In fact, the language was so specific that it stuck with me, that he uses terms like her work is "bloodless", "unracial", and "negative". And he's talking about this in relation, you think about the 1930s, right, in relationship to a time, this is coming off the heels of the Harlem Renaissance, where the idea of race consciousness is really heightened among black thinkers. And so I thought, give me an 18th century African-American woman writing poetry, the first black woman to publish a book, 1773, who you say is an interested in the question of race? I said, I'm in. I want to know more about this. I'm not sure I buy this thing that this Redding guy is talking about, but either way, I wanted to know more about Phillis Wheatley, and that was where the story got going. And Redding in many ways didn't extend to Wheatley the kind of critical generosity that I think has certainly come to be understood today. And that is the importance of looking at context.

So after reading Redding, and then then going to read Wheatley, I read everything I could get my little hands on at the time. And in that first Junior paper, which was looking at her as a kind of early, I called it misunderstood mother of African-American literature. And as I recall, the essay was primarily a reading of Wheatley's poems with the aid of some historical context to really help to understand her focus on liberation and slavery, and how that had to be articulated in the context of the 18th century. So of course it wasn't going to sound like the 1930's talking about racism and slavery. So I talked with my then faculty advisor, Diana Fuss, about the possibility of looking at this sort of critical history of Wheatley in the senior thesis, and with her blessing, that's how the project began.

And my interest in Wheatley persisted during my time in graduate school at UCLA, where my PhD dissertation in 1996 had a chapter on Wheatley and Olaudah Equiano. Then en route to turning that project into my first book, my first monograph, which was called *Impossible Witnesses: Truth, Abolitionism and Slave Testimony*, I included in that project a chapter on Phillis Wheatley as well. So since that time, I've had not only the opportunity to teach Wheatley on many occasions, but also to participate in conferences, and panel discussions about Wheatley with fellow scholars, and actually to spend some time digging into the archives a few years ago on a residency that was sponsored by the Mellon Foundation at the American Antiquarian Society. And there I was able to just find a lot of gems, not just about Wheatley, but about people in her world, and in that circle, to really make sure I was fully understanding that context of what she was writing. So when this opportunity came up again, it was a chance to honor her impact on American letters and on me. And so in some ways, again, it was, while there were a few other contenders, this was the one that it certainly won out.

Mary Alice Yeskey

I can see why. I can see why (laughter). I wanted to ask about her writing in general. Is there a particular poem or a line or her poetry that you find yourself returning to year after year?

Dwight McBride

I anticipated this question. And so I did take the occasion to print out a few things.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Oh, please – by all means.

Dwight McBride

I can give you two, and I'd love to share both a poem and then separately a line as well. And first, her probably most often cited poem is *On Being Brought from Africa to America*. And this isn't the poem that made her famous in her own time, but it's the one that gets anthologized, Wheatley scholars return to you, et cetera. You see it everywhere. And many of her earliest critics derided the poem as evidence of some sort of shame that they (particularly black critics), shame that they presumed Wheatley felt due to her race. But the clearer reading of the poem, in my estimation, is that the poem just as throughout much of her poetry, she considers in that Christianity and her salvation, among the most important aspects of her life. So I think that explains why she prefers what she refers to in the poem as "Christian America" which is the common denominator between her and her audience at the time, to "pagan" (in quotation marks) "Africa". And in a sense, Wheatley appropriates Christianity. This is the argument I make in the essay, and the chapter of the book as well. She appropriates Christianity as a vehicle in order to empower her own very important message. And that is, namely, that blacks have reason. Which is, this is the Enlightenment. So the one of the primary arguments for supporting chattel slavery is that blacks did not participate in the same variety of humanity. They didn't have reason. They didn't possess that in the same measure as whites did. One of the hallmarks, early hallmarks of white supremacy. And so she takes that logic, and really works with it in this poem. So I do want to just share - it's very brief poem - with you in whole, and to say a few words about it. Here's the poem, it's in two parts, each of them, four lines.

'Twas mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land,  
Taught my benighted soul to understand  
That there's a God, that there's a *Saviour* too:  
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.  
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,  
"Their colour is a diabolic die."  
Remember, *Christians, Negros*, black as *Cain*,  
May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train.

And so in that first line of the poem, *On Being Brought from Africa to America*, I think that reference to Africa as a pagan land, she's directing her criticism not against Africa, but again, rather against the ignorance of the Christian God that, to her 18<sup>th</sup> century mind, plagues the continent. Wheatley then goes on to make the subtle and political statement on the racism of American society when she says *some view race with scornful eye*. And after quoting in the poem, the very next line, what is intended to be a sort of representative sentiment of many whites at the time, *their color is a diabolic die*. She moves

on to talk about her readers as Christians, and to reference them as Christians, cautioning them against such non-Christian views of the Negro. When she says, *Remember, Christians, Negros black as Cain* - and I love the play on words, because "Cain" is also the curse of Cain and Abel. It's another one of the myths that black people were the descendants of Cain, and the mark that was put on Cain for killing his brother was our blackness - that was another one of the popular myths of the time in the 18th century. But also "Cain" is sugar cane. And unrefined sugar and cane, which is black and references the Caribbean. So, it's fascinating in so many ways. *Remember, Christians, Negros black as Cain may be refined*. Again, reference to that refining process - *and join the angelic train*. So then, she next goes on to critique her society in act of what I would call interpolation. She, again, calling them Christians, calling the readers by that name, she warns them of their moral responsibility to acknowledge her and the equality of herself and of blacks. And it's that symmetrical structure of each stanza having four lines in that way of the poem. I think it's significant too, because it divides into two halves by virtue of its punctuation and its shifts in subject. But the first four lines comment on the mercy that brought her from Africa to America, where she eventually came to know the Christian God. And it's not surprising that Wheatley can look at her transition then again, in her 18th century logic and parlance from Africa to America as an act of mercy. Since to her, it brings her redemption. Now, lest think that she also views her change in social position for freedom to slavery as an act of mercy, Wheatley addresses again that white racism head on in the second half of the poem. So again, this is the argument is that I think people read Wheatley to a contextually, without a historicist lens, expecting that she's going to be articulating race politics in the way that someone in 1930, 1960, 1970 would be. It's just unimaginable.

Now, I'll say this about the favorite line, which takes us out of poetry for a moment and into her letters. She, one of the letters, which is ultimately published, to someone she knew as a friend and that is Samson Occum, who was an envoy to the Earl of Dartmouth. And in that letter, which became an open letter later, written in 1774, just after *Poems* was published in 1773. So right after it's release, that letter which is penned to Occum. Now, Occum, it's important, is an educated Native American. So these are two people of color writing to each other in the 18th century. He was a preacher, a teacher, working under the aegis of the Earl of Dartmouth. And he was wildly successful as a fundraiser, which began in England in the mid-1760's. He was largely responsible for the money that helped to found Dartmouth College - which originally was supposed to be a school for Indians in Connecticut, but of course it ended up where it is today in New Hampshire. He was also notably the first Native American to publish writings in English. And so he and Wheatley shared that benchmark as well. So there's a lot going on in that letter from Wheatley to Occum. And Wheatley's words in the letter, I think, helped to quell any doubt that she is "bloodless" (in quotation marks) or "unracial" or unconcerned about the play of the Africans. So I wanted to share one of the lines from the letter. And I think it's important because not only is the final rhetorical gesture that she makes in the letter arguably the most poignant one, it is one of my favorite lines by Wheatley for also being among the finest examples from the 18th century of what we would today, colloquially, we would call "throwing shade". In that concluding statement in the letter she says to Occum:

*How well the Cry for Liberty, and the reverse Disposition for the exercise of oppressive Power over others agree, -- I humbly think it does not require the Penetration of a Philosopher to determine.*

Now, for me, it's that combination again of sardonic tone with a powerful rhetorical turn of phrase - "the penetration of a philosopher." It would be the metaphorical equivalent today of saying "it doesn't take a rocket scientist". So for all kinds of reasons, I love that line. But for me, reading again, her

context, reading the poetry alongside her letters, you get a fuller view of Wheatley's worldview that I think Redding and some of those early critics and the 30s, 40s, they just got wrong. So those are my two go-to's that I love to talk about in terms of really exemplifying the reverse of what Redding claims about Wheatley.

Mary Alice Yeskey

I love that line. And thank you so much for sharing that story - I did not know anything about Occum.

Dwight McBride

Another amazing figure in his own right. Absolutely.

Mary Alice Yeskey

I'm going to take that rabbit hole after our conversation. To sort of circle back to what you're talking about before about your essay looking at the history of the criticism of Wheatley leads me to my next question. Because what you write about doesn't only just look at her remarkable life and writing, but it's really a close examination of the evolution of the criticism and analysis of her work, and how the voice is speaking about Wheatley, I'm going to quote you, "reads like a sociological graph of changing racial attitudes." So for those who aren't familiar with her work, or intimately familiar with the criticism of her work such that you are – can you explain, and you have to a point already, but can you explain the sort of the how and why her work fell out of favor with critics? Treating her as a symbol, even condemning her as you said, that word, "bloodless" - for her perceived lack of racial solidarity. Can you just kind of walk us through the sort of tide of that as your title as your title suggests?

Dwight McBride

Yeah, so this is hard to summarize. Because in many ways it does get at the heart of what is the driving thesis in the essay. So for the fullest, you know, treatment of this, I do recommend the essay, not just because it's mine, but I think it's where you get the fullest sense of this. But in essence, what I try to argue there is that Wheatley has variously been represented by critics as the black genius whose intellectual capacity is allowed - and this is over time – has been allowed to languish under the cruelty of slavery. She's been seen as the religious devotee, whose piety and missionary fervor exceed any concern for her own station of servitude, which we hear from the likes of Redding. She's been looked at and held up as the finest example of American poetic production from the 18th century. She's been looked at as a race traitor who's unconcerned about the plight of her people. She's been read a la myself and others as the subtly subversive poetic liberationist. And she's certainly been known and I think appropriately so as a sort of primogenitor of African American literature. And now I think in all of these instances, what seems to persist even over time is the power and the compelling nature of Wheatley's rhetorical serviceability, as a symbol of one thing or another. So I'll just a few examples which may help to kind of clarify what I'm trying to get out here. And one of her earliest contemporaneous critics was none other than Thomas Jefferson, or TJ as I like to call him (those of us who work on Jefferson a lot). Who does a very dismissive and derisive reading of Wheatley in his [1785] *Notes on the State of Virginia*. It was done in an effort to really just prop up white supremacy. And so by doing so, and I recommend just Googling "Jefferson and Phillis Wheatley" - though he misspells the name, "Whately" - and there's an argument that that's intentional too. She was wildly well known by the time Jefferson would have written *Notes on the State of Virginia*. So there's contention that Jefferson is also likely throwing shade of his own. But if you look up Notes on the State of Virginia and Phillis Wheatley, the sections will come up straight away. They're not hard to find. Because otherwise, the commitment to *Notes on the State of Virginia* is a big commitment. (Laughs). Jefferson's text really is in conversation with a number of other commentators from the late 18th century and through the middle of the 19th century, who utilized Wheatley's

achievements, both to bolster arguments, either for slavery, or to argue for slavery's abolition. Look at what an incredible mind is being ruined under this horrible institution. And you have evidence of both of them happening in that late 18th century early 19th century period. So for those, for these critics, I think *Poems*, the 1773 volume was significant as an indication of racial capacity itself. And Jefferson demeans her poetic output. Doesn't read it. Doesn't comment on the poetry in any specific way, just is derisive of it in some very, very stereotypical, horrifying ways. And there are abolitionists who hold it up - they're not reading it either - but they're just holding up the evidence of just the existence of this black woman writing a book, publishing a book itself, is an incredible accomplishment.

So then in the first half of the 20th century, we witnessed a rise in what I call this sort of biographical curiosity and criticism about Wheatley: her story, her biography, especially by a new generation of African-American elites. And those writings, which I talk about in the essay, are in the vein of what I would call racial uplift. The personal and political stakes for that era of black writers and thinkers was especially high, and I think should not be underestimated in terms of their commitment to the politics of racial uplift. And the racial uplift climate of the early 20th century also made it almost inevitable that these critics would dismiss Wheatley as a worthy ally. Because the story of Wheatley criticism as practiced by the Harlem Renaissance intelligentsia, given its preoccupation against - we talked about earlier - with race consciousness, in a very early 20th century lens and frame reflects those critics' political concerns more than a serious engagement with Wheatley or her work. It's profound, so profound I think some ways was the rejection of Wheatley that it was repeated nearly wholesale throughout the 1960s when Wheatley was almost uniformly viewed unfavorably. As you could imagine through the 1960s, where black power - all of these very radical notions, of what resistance looked like, and who were the heroes and heroines one was going to hold up in what would be the usable past to describe that history. So it creates a kind of canon that doesn't conveniently fit neatly in it, so she has to be in many ways written off, written out.

As scholars shifted in the 1980's to a more historicist and contextually bound reconsideration, (and we talk about that shift in the essay) of Wheatley, I think a far more sympathetic and forgiving portrait of her life and of her work begins to emerge. And no longer are we simply calling for an appreciation of Wheatley's context to render our readings of her work more sympathetic and generous. Rather, our appreciation of her context makes possible Wheatley's full identification within the racial pantheon as both artist and intellectual. And I think that shift effectively helps to authorize her would-be critics, so that they no longer need to begin their considerations of her in a defensive posture. So I don't think you have to start today by explaining away why we need to look at Wheatley. And so I argue in the essay that it necessitates appreciating the normative and hegemonic cultural and political forces that constrained Wheatley's writing, while also informing renewed considerations about her reception and standing of her work over time. So that's what the essay tries to do.

And I think in our contemporary moment, critics from a diversity of orientations and methodologies and even disciplines - historians, literary folks as well, have taken up Wheatley and her works to answer important scholarly questions that are informed by their own critical preoccupations of those subfields. And I think that's probably among the surest sign of the progress of we might call Wheatley's canonization in the American literary tradition.

So I hope that the essay helps to make the case for a way of thinking about both canons and canonicity and how the political nature of how those are informed. Because we're always in search of a usable past to answer our current realities. And so I think there's a place for Wheatley and that, but the place for her must take seriously, a historicist, and a context, a context-laden frame that really gives



her her fullest reading in terms of what was possible given the constraints under which someone like her was working.

And today we see examples of Wheatley everywhere. Not as a meme, but as a kind of a figure, a symbol. Phillis Wheatley has a Facebook page. Which is one of the things I discovered when I was doing work on her a few years ago at the American Antiquarian Society. There is a relatively new sculpture with her along with Abigail Adams and Lucy Stone, a very large life-size sculpture that sits along Commonwealth Avenue in Boston. She was a popular choice for many years in the early-to-mid eighties, popular choice for naming of schools, particularly elementary schools. There are a number of them across the country that bear her name, particularly those in minority serving districts. And it's interesting that we're having this conversation today, because just this past weekend, a friend of mine who was on his way to the Cape, snapped a picture and sent a text to me of a boat that was docked in Boston Harbor that bore the name "The Phillis Wheatley". I'm curious about who the owner is of the boat. She really has, as a symbol, worked, been working as a symbol for a long time and in some ways continues in that symbolic round, too.

**Mary Alice Yeskey**

Oh, this is all so interesting. I had about seventeen sub-questions as you explained that. But I want to respect your time. The one thing I did want to say, I read in your paper, but it wasn't until I talking to this conversation that it really struck me was - how I find it very amusing that Jefferson and the abolitionists were both just barking their points and as you said, not even reading it. And my note I just jot it down as you said that was, "it's like Twitter". It's like, "Here's a thing. I'm mad about it" and it's like, did you even read the thing? The people are just yelling at each other on both sides. It's just the Twitter of their day - basically. I just wrote "social media - question mark".

**Dwight McBride**

Well, Mary Alice, you said it. Let the record show that you said it. But I certainly agree. I mean, it is one of the things that is stunning when you read almost any of the critics from the 18th century, early 19th century, of any that actually read, do a reading of or quoting of the poems, It's all about what Wheatley represents. She is this kind of floating signifier. And that's what's fascinating about that. You can have literally people on both sides of a very contentious debate using the same text or subject as it were, right? But without, again, only possible because they're actually not reading the text.

**Mary Alice Yeskey**

Right. And it speaks to the necessity for a more complex viewing of her. That 360 has to happen.

**Dwight McBride**

I worry that one of the ways of thinking about the history of conflict in American public life is that the paradigm that seems to hold the most sway over time is that we do not let the details or the content or the nuance of the issues involved get in the way of our deeply held beliefs. This is an example of that - we can certainly cite many examples of it today - where people have fervently held beliefs about things that they've not always done the homework on. And I worry about what it means for things like the public square, what it means for the democratic commons, if we literally, if nuance is no longer possible. That really gets in the way of us having real conversations about really important issues and about coming to understand each other better. It's important.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Yeah, because that's not a conversation. That's just two people giving speeches.

Dwight McBride

That's right.

Mary Alice Yeskey

There's no listening going on. Interesting. So interesting. So, do you think there are parallels with this evolution of criticism of Wheatley's work? Do you see that with other writers or notable figures? Are there similar sort of, ebbs and flows - is this sort of a common lifespan for folks seen from that era or in general? Do you see any of that?

Dwight McBride

I think there are many authors whose lives are in the same place as the people who are in the same place and writing get revisited long after their dead. I will say that. Wheatley, of course, has the advantage of having a long period of time over many of the other writers that we might consider. But there are many of them that get reassessed long after their dead. And I think that the advent of cultural studies in the 1980s and 90s and the expanded curricula in higher education have really opened up more exciting re-evaluations. So figures like Wheatley, like Occum – there are people that are in some ways being rediscovered.

And one that, you know, comes to mind, a more contemporary example, and one that I've long been engaged with is of course James Baldwin. Baldwin was lauded for his first novel, *Go Tell it on the Mountain*. But his fame peaked, again for his time, during the civil rights era, upon the publication of his essays on race relations in *The Fire Next Time* in 1963. And really, reputationally was never really stable after that in terms of its height. He always enjoyed a certain amount of fame and notoriety as well. But his later novels were met with diminishing critical acclaim. People absolutely didn't know what to do with *Giovanni's Room* that came after *Go Tell it on the Mountain*. A novel that is was called "raceless" again because it had no black characters, took place in Europe, and so, people had no idea. What does that mean - a black gay writer has written a book that doesn't take like place in America, with no black characters. And is it African-American fiction? In some ways the critical apparatus wasn't prepared to deal with Baldwin at the time. His later novels and his attempts at film, screenwriting, not to mention, ], his bumpy relationship and his explorations in the theater. During his time, didn't get near the acclaim that they have since. And I think that dichotomy, where there was an early period of genius writing that gradually declined, is no longer the critical assessment that we have of Baldwin. My colleague Eddie Glaude at Princeton said a few years ago that today Jimmy is everywhere. And not long after Baldwin's death in '87, there was a kind of critical resurgence of interest that began. And what many have, I think, rightly called a kind of Renaissance, Baldwin Renaissance. And in part I feel in a small way I participated in that, with the publication of a book in 1999 called *James Baldwin Now*. And there's a whole story about how that book came into being. It actually started from a panel at the MLA, the Modern Language Association meeting in 1997, it was on the 10th anniversary of Baldwin's death. And we got such an overwhelming response from the call for papers that I thought, "we have to do something here." I had no idea this many people were thinking about it - but we must have gotten 40 calls for three papers on a panel. So that's how that project came into being.

I think in part, much of that renewed interest is fueled by the widening of disciplinary tools and methodologies. The ability to really do more with the cultural issues, the gender issues, the sexuality,

the issues of nation and nationality that race and ethnicity that Baldwin was in many ways ahead of the critical apparatus in terms of the level of sophistication with which he was working in his work. It would have been inconceivable that a journal focused on Baldwin, like the *James Baldwin Review*, which full disclosure, I'm one of the founding editors for as well, that that could have existed in the 1980s, much less than 1960s, when Baldwin's fame was really at its height. But in 2022, right, that journal is now being read in over 100 countries around the world. And to say nothing of Baldwin similar to Wheatley in this way, his service ability as a figure for social justice movements, like Black Lives Matter, outside of the academic world. He's quoted everywhere. He's a meme everywhere.

Mary Alice Yeskey

All over Instagram.

Dwight McBride

He's all over, right? I mean, everywhere, literally. So I do think there are examples like that where writers get this kind of reconsideration or renewal of energy or renaissance, in part because they were before their time. The critical apparatus wasn't prepared to deal with what they were bringing to the table.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Yeah, yeah, couldn't understand it yet. So interesting, and I was struck when you were talking about criticisms. When the lows of the criticism of both of these writers, how conventional wisdom is convenient and it's easy, and it doesn't involve curiosity. People asking questions, you just sort of digest – oh, that's so and so and we think this about them now. And it's just because it's easy. It's harder to think critically about things and to ask questions. I'm so grateful for your paper because it's, it's sparked so much more curiosity. And I hope it will for other readers.

Dwight McBride

Thank you.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Yeah, absolutely. My last question, without, again, without getting totally into the end of your essay, which was just beautifully written, I wanted to touch on your metaphor of the tide in the title of your piece and how you note that it will “crest to curl and then crash”. Which I just thought was beautiful and it was dramatic and a little jolting, but also filled my heart anyway with a little bit of hope. And I wanted to know what brings you hope in the years that we've had in terms of thinking about that rising tide and where we're at right now.

Dwight McBride

Well, that's a great question. I'll answer this way. It may seem almost naive at a certainly a bit cliché to say, but I really do believe that everyday brings an opportunity for new hope. That, that's how I live my life. Every day is an opportunity for progress. Another chance to put a chink in the armor of white supremacy, of anti-blackness. Another occasion to improve the lives of all of us to create a more equitable and inclusive world. And it's hard to discuss in quick snippets and sound-bites and excerpts, in no small part because, often the opportunities for hope are born out of tragedies and terrible injustices. To only see the progress which is one of the ways in which we just want to move on from race and we don't want to talk about it, but to only see the progress is to ignore the suffering. It dishonors those who are harmed by constant inequities that persist in our society. And people resist that. Because when you

do that, to only think about this triumphalist American history is to literally do violence to people who are living a reality that says, “that's not what's happening to me every day on the ground.”

So it's a part of why I structured the essay in *Social Research* around the metaphor of tides. It ebbs and it flows, just like tragedy and hope. And a concrete example, it's hard not to point to the consciousness shift that has happened in the country and the wake of George Floyd, well not even the country, but globally really, in the wake of the killing of George Floyd. Black Lives Matter of course was around and mobilizing before his death, but the issues became truly global. And in terms of the expression of anger and frustration, outrage, but also solidarity, that flowed during that very, very intense summer of 2020. And I think that's not something to let pass lightly. I think it's really something for us to continue to think about. It's important to note too, that the ongoing fights for social justice or inclusivity and for equity aren't just racial. It's becoming almost a cliché to say that when we're discussing race, we're also simultaneously discussing gender, sexuality, and class. But the fact that that notion, which at one time was a very radical idea, is actually today quite critically and theoretically commonplace, that in and of itself to me represents an opportunity for a kind of hope. And even in a world as crazy as the one we live in, trying to find that place every day to renew hope is so important to me and how I need to be in the world to do the work I need to do.

The last thing I'd say about it is the simple fact that an essay like this one, focused on a poet whose neo-classical verse is difficult, and whose politics are complicated and from another era, and with such a bold declaration about white supremacy, so openly out in the argument - that it would be published, and discussed in that time and still being discussed today, again provides another occasion for hope. I think Wheatley herself didn't have access to such bold and frank language with which to speak truth to power as we do today. And so I feel like it's an obligation to make sure that as we think about the prehistory, right, the usable past for this moment we're living through, I think her voice still has a lot to teach us in this moment about about those ebbs and flows between hope and tragedy. If indeed, and I still believe that Dr. King was right that “the arc of the moral universe bends toward justice”, ultimately, that's what sustains me.

**Mary Alice Yeskey**

Thank you so much. That was so beautifully said. She used the tools she had. What she had was a pen and a brilliant mind and did what she could. That's just a beautiful takeaway. So thank you so much for your essay, and for your time today. This has been a wonderful conversation and I can't wait for the rest of our readers and listeners to read your essay in full.

**Dwight McBride**

Thank you, Mary Alice. Thank you so much for this conversation today. I really enjoyed our time.

**Mary Alice Yeskey**

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