

Wheatley in London

Submissions are invited for a forum that is scheduled for publication in the Fall 2024 issue of *Studies in Romanticism* titled, “Wheatley in London,” guest edited by Bakary Diaby (Skidmore College) and Abigail Zitin (Rutgers University). The title of this forum refers to a biographical fact: Phillis Wheatley traveled to London in the summer of 1773, prior to the September publication of her *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. The literary-historical implications of this fact are far reaching, touching on Wheatley’s place in the canons of African-American, Black Diasporic, American, and British literature. The aim of this forum is to situate Wheatley’s career in relation to British studies, shoring up the significance of London, and of Britain more generally, as one of the multiple contexts she negotiated during her short and remarkable life.

Wheatley’s writing addressed audiences in the metropole as well as the American colonies, but she is still largely taught as a founding figure for African-American literature. “Wheatley in London” asks what happens when we return her to a context in which she also flourished: transatlantic evangelical English-language print culture of the 1770s. Our aim is to reconstruct the contingency of her development as an author and public figure—before the full emergence of African-American literature, before U.S. nationhood. What are the implications of this reframing for Wheatley pedagogy and scholarship from the perspective of the capitol of the British Empire?

Attention to the British context reminds us that there were Black intellectuals in 1770s London; that there was a thriving abolitionist movement and an array of evangelical Christian sects that intersected with that movement in complicated ways. Thanks to the publication of laboring-class poets, “natural genius” was in vogue. Still, no matter how skillful and innovative Wheatley’s use of conventions like the heroic couplet, those conventions retain their association with white British poets, sometimes posing a dilemma for readers and critics. Some are tempted to cast her as a Miltonic or a Romantic visionary, thereby trapping in amber the idea of “Augustan” poets as boring conservatives ever to be reacted against. Others—notably, Black feminists from June Jordan to Honorée Fanonne Jeffers—have asked us to imagine what Wheatley (Peters) might have written could she have expressed herself freely.

Building on the explosion of interest in Wheatley in recent years, including a recent Special Issue in *Early American Literature* edited by Tara A Bynum, Brigitte Fielder, and Cassander L. Smith, we invite contributors to focus on the view from London in 1773. “Wheatley in London” seeks to augment our understanding of the role of *poet* as an aspect of Wheatley’s self-fashioning—poetry as a vocation but also, on the verge of its Romantic transfiguration, as a career.

We invite contributions of short essays (between 3,000 and 6,000 words) by February 1, 2024. Submissions should be sent to the forum co-editors, Bakary Diaby ([bdiaby@skidmore.edu](mailto:bdiaby@skidmore.edu)) and Abigail Zitin ([abigail.zitin@rutgers.edu](mailto:abigail.zitin@rutgers.edu)). Any queries should also be addressed to the forum co-editors.