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Teaching Being Taught by Phillis Wheatley during the Kavanaugh Hearings

Emily Field

I couldn’t watch Dr. Christine Blasey Ford’s testimony at Brett Kavanaugh’s Senate Judiciary Committee hearing live because I was teaching my early African American Literature class on that day, September 27, 2018. Unexpected resonances between the texts I was teaching that day and the hearings reminded me of how literature teaches us even what we are not looking to learn, when we do not expect to learn it. Centuries-old texts can inform our present in surprising ways if we are willing to listen.

While Dr. Ford was facing the Senate Judiciary Committee, describing the incredibly painful experience of her alleged attempted rape at the hands of Kavanaugh and a friend, I was teaching poems by Phillis Wheatley, the first African American to publish a book (albeit in London). Wheatley was an enslaved teenager when she wrote Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral (1773), having only been in the not-yet-United States for about twelve years: she had been captured and enslaved in the Senegambia region of West Africa at around 8 years old and subjected to the Middle Passage. Wheatley lost her family, her native language, and even her given name, which she never mentioned in print. The name we know her by is a double declaration of her enslavement: “Phillis” was the name of the ship that carried her from Africa to Boston, and “Wheatley” was the name of the family who purchased her. Phillis was sickly and delicate, but the Wheatleys quickly realized her formidable intellectual capabilities, and their daughter Mary taught her to read and write. Writing anything at all was for a young enslaved person a daring act, and Phillis showed continued audacity in her efforts to have her work published. Many of Wheatley’s poems are elegies written for the dead children of white families in her master and mistress’s social circle. Some were written to Methodist and political figures, from George Whitefield to George Washington, who wrote her back a pleasant letter, saw to it that the poem she had written to him was published, and even invited her to come meet him at his headquarters in Cambridge.

Scholarly and popular attention to Wheatley often focuses on her most well-known poem, “On Being Brought from Africa to America.” As Henry Louis Gates explains in The Trials of Phillis Wheatley, the artists of the Black Arts Movement of the late 1960s and 1970s castigated Wheatley — unfairly, in Gates’s opinion — for calling her enslavement “a mercy” in that poem because it removed her from “[her] Pagan land” in West Africa and introduced her to Christianity. Others of her poems offer fleeting impressions of the suffering her enslavement caused, as in “To the Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth,” in which she imagines the pain her kidnapping must have caused her parents and meditates on the cruelty that must reside in the soul of her enslavers.

But another of Wheatley’s poems, “To the University at Cambridge, in New England,” helps us to glimpse the workings of the privileges bestowed upon Ivy League-educated white men that are still very much in effect today, and which I argue were in evidence in Kavanaugh’s responses to the Senate Judiciary Committee. “To the University at Cambridge, in New England,” written in 1767, is addressed to the all-male and all-white students at Harvard (by all accounts, at least a “peer institution” of Kavanaugh’s own beloved Yale). From her own vantage point as an enslaved young woman in Boston, Wheatley knew that attendance at a great school did not make one immune to crimes of excess. Directly addressing the students in her usual mode of apostrophe, Wheatley cites the great blessings of the formal education she herself could not receive:
Knowing that some states had laws against literacy instruction for enslaved people, students are often surprised that Wheatley could write at all, especially in iambic pentameter — Shakespeare’s own favorite meter — replete with classical allusions they don’t themselves recognize.

Students, to you ‘tis giv’n to scan
the heights

Above, to traverse the ethereal space,

And mark the systems of revolving worlds.

As a keen-eyed student pointed out in a paper last semester, Wheatley pointedly uses the word “giv’n”: the students’ opportunity to learn about astronomy and everything else is unearned, all the more reason they ought to make use of it, which she immediately urges them to do. “Improve your privileges while they stay, / ye pupils,” she tells them, also subtly warning them that such privileges might be withdrawn, if only in the afterlife.

It is here that I think the relevance to Kavanaugh emerges. When Senator Susan Collins of Maine explained her decision to vote for Brett Kavanaugh’s confirmation to the Supreme Court, she said approvingly that he “forcefully denied” Dr. Ford’s allegations against him. Indeed, he was “forceful” in his demeanor, but I hardly think that exhibiting forcefulness signals that a person has not committed sexual assault. In fact, Kavanaugh’s belligerent disrespect — his “forcefulness” — especially towards but not limited to female senators, joined many other features of his testimony that seemed calculated to suggest his innocence but that, to my ear, only signaled his belief in his own entitlement. His vehemence indicated his fear that his privileges, including the privilege of being given the benefit of the doubt, might be withdrawn, and in response, he spent as much time reasserting the basis of those privileges as he did directly denying the allegations.

In the hearings before Dr. Ford’s testimony, Kavanaugh appeared calm, judicious, and knowledgeable, whereas after Ford’s testimony he was angry, frequently raising his voice and interrupting. In order to understand the dramatic shift in Kavanaugh’s temperament from his hearings before the accusation to that he exhibited on September 27, we need to look more carefully at the substance, at the content, of his testimony. Vox published a helpful comparison of the two witnesses’ testimony showing how often Kavanaugh “dodged” questions by providing “context” instead of an answer; that “context” is most often a list of his accomplishments. The text of these evasions reveals Kavanaugh as a man who is being challenged on ideas that he holds sacred, especially about his identity and the institutions that shaped it. Chief among these is the belief that accomplishments in academics and sports prove his essential worthiness and should inoculate him against challenges to his behavior. In short, they reveal his sense of entitlement, his belief that he deserves special privileges.

Consider the following exchange in which Senator Sheldon Whitehouse of Rhode Island pressed Kavanaugh about his high school yearbook, in which he is called “Beach Week Ralph Club[s] Biggest Contributor.” Kavanaugh readily admitted that this reference was to vomiting, but when Sen. Whitehouse asked whether this “ralphing” had been “related to the consumption of alcohol,” Kavanaugh snapped back, “Senator, I was at the top of my class academically, busted my butt in school. Captain of the varsity basketball team. Got in Yale College. When I got into Yale College, got into Yale Law School. Worked my tail off.” And when Senator Mazie Hirono of Hawaii asked about drinking in college, again, the word “Yale” and the phrase “busting my butt” began popping up again: “I got into Yale Law School. That’s the number one law school in the country. I had no connections there. I got there by busting my tail in college.” When Senator Patrick Leahy of Vermont asked about the mentions of “drinking and sexual exploits,” Kavanaugh interrupted repeatedly, insisting that he be allowed to list his high school achievements: “[N]o, no, no, no, no… I’m going to talk about my high school record … I — I played sports. I was captain of the varsity basketball team. I was wide receiver and defensive back on the football team.”

It’s only natural that Kavanaugh would refer to the positive and provable portions of his record when
Kavanaugh complained frequently about how he was going to be “destroyed” by these allegations that might prevent him from ascending to the Supreme Court or perhaps even from teaching again; of course, it is Dr. Ford who has not been able to return to her job as a professor at Palo Alto University and has had to move multiple times for her safety, while Kavanaugh sits on the court and is feted in Washington. asked about these allegations, but he seems to believe that academic success and playing sports is actually incompatible with committing sexual assault. In a hearing that was not all about sports, Kavanaugh referred to “workouts” eleven times, used the word “basketball” twelve times and “football” eleven times. Worse, perhaps Kavanaugh was suggesting that his athletic and academic achievements might even outweigh his negative behavior, which if Dr. Ford’s charge is true, was not only negative, but criminal.

During the hearing, Kavanaugh was belligerent and even bullying towards the Democratic senators on the committee, repeatedly asking them if they liked to drink or had ever blacked out. Of course, these senators opposed President Trump’s conservative nominee to the court and pressed Kavanaugh on his behavior accordingly. And yet, they too failed to call Kavanaugh out for the assumptions that undergirded his responses. When Kavanaugh said, “I got into Yale Law School. That’s the number one law school in the country,” Sen. Hirono should have said, “And why do you think that academic success precludes you from committing sexual assault?” or “Why do you keep citing your academic and athletic success as a way to insulate yourself from Dr. Ford’s very serious charges?” Instead, she trotted out her own academic credentials to engage in some good-natured ribbing, saying, “I feel insulted, as a Georgetown graduate.” Not having heard her initially, and perhaps assuming that he was being taken to task in earnest, Kavanaugh bristled: “Excuse me?” But when he understood that she was joining his in-group rhetoric, he relaxed and was able to continue the joke with a conciliatory quip: “I’m sorry. It’s ranked number one, that doesn’t mean it’s number one.” It was one of the only things he apologized for all day.

Of course, there is no evidence from social scientists that playing sports or being enrolled at an Ivy League school lessens a person’s propensity for heavy drinking or committing sexual assault. In fact, research over the course of the last 30 years has consistently found student-athletes to be more likely
to commit sexual assault than non-athletes. A recent essay by Todd W. Crosset in *The Crisis of Campus Sexual Violence: Critical Perspectives on Prevention and Response*, edited by Sara Carrigan Wooten and Roland W. Mitchell, explains that collegiate sport still often creates the conditions of a “rape-prone culture” that Peggy Sanday’s trailblazing research pointed out in the 1980s: “interpersonal violence, male domination, and sex segregation.” Even in a report focused on how sport could potentially be helpful in addressing sexual violence, researchers note that “perpetration [is] more likely to be from athletes rather than non-athletes in the college setting” and that it “appears to be driven by sexual entitlement and reinforced by acceptance of rape myths” (“How Sport Can End Sexual Violence in One Generation,” Raliance Overview Report, 2017, page 16). In 2016, a study at one unnamed public university found 54% of athletes self-reporting committing a “sexually coercive act” versus 38% of nonathletes.

Part of the systemic problem with student-athletes committing sexual assault is the knowledge that they are less likely to be held accountable for their actions; student-athletes often do enjoy special privileges on campus and are in fact treated preferentially when accused of sexual assault. Student-athletes sometimes internalize the sense that they are more deserving than others. The NCAA’s own “Study of Student-Athlete Social Environments (2012-2016)” assesses “Measures of Entitlement” and revealed that 26% of male student-athletes responded “agree” or “strongly agree” with the following sentiment: “I am willing to admit that I feel I am due more in life than other people.” There is no clearer assertion of privilege than that. Attending an Ivy League school also does not serve as a bulwark against sexual perpetration, despite Kavanaugh’s repeated mentions of his Yale education (by contrast, when Dr. Ford was reviewing her biography at the start of her testimony, she declined to detail her educational background). In 2015, a survey showed that Ivy League schools had higher incidences of students reporting “nonconsensual penetration or sexual touching involving physical force or incapacitation.” Yale’s 28.1% response rate was 5 points higher than the average. As I write this, a class action lawsuit was just introduced yesterday by three Yale students for Title IX violations resulting from Yale’s refusal to honor its own stated principles against “sexual misconduct.” One of the defendants is Kavanaugh’s own fraternity, Delta Kappa Epsilon. As Susan Marine writes in “Combating Sexual Violence in the Ivy League,” “the belief that the kind of people who rape do not find their way to, and succeed in, elite institutions must be studied, countered, and changed.”

None of this is to imply that being an athlete or attending an Ivy League school should be considered evidence that Kavanaugh is guilty of the allegations against him. But Kavanaugh’s insistence on being allowed repeatedly to list his athletic and academic accomplishments strikes me as an assertion of entitlement, a demand that he be given the benefit of the doubt bestowed upon him by gender, class, and racial privilege that he has been accustomed to receiving. In his testimony, Kavanaugh complained frequently about how he was going to be “destroyed” by these allegations that might prevent him from ascending to the Supreme Court or perhaps even from teaching again; of course, it is Dr. Ford who has not been able to return to her job as a professor at Palo Alto University and has had to move multiple times for her safety, while Kavanaugh sits on the court and is feted in Washington.

Unlike Brett Kavanaugh, Phillis Wheatley had no racial, class, or gender privilege to which to appeal. At the end of “To the University of Cambridge, in New England,”

*Empty liquor bottles decorate the window at Harvard’s Mather House undergraduate dormitory. (Photo Credit: Gabriel Field)*
Wheatley purposefully invokes the irony at the heart of her poem: an enslaved Black woman is daring to chastise the students at Harvard. Of course, Wheatley herself could not have been admitted to Harvard unless she had lived another 100–plus years (Alberta Virginia Scott was the first African American woman to graduate from Radcliffe in 1898). Wheatley concludes her poem with a sharp admonishment to the Harvard students to eschew sin, coupled with a reminder of her own subjugated social position:

Let sin, that baneful evil to the soul,
By you be shunn’d, nor once remit your guard;
An Ethiop tells you ’tis your greatest foe;
Its transient sweetness turns to endless pain,
And in immense perdition sinks the soul.

Wheatley audaciously confronted college boys’ propensity to sin, and although we can’t know what kind of sin she was referring to, scholar Joanna enslavement was a form of rescue insofar as it brought her to her Christian faith. They long for her to take a more militant stand, to “tell her truth” in ways they expect to hear it. Further, Wheatley’s biography does not conform to Massachusetts–born students’ assumption that slavery was something that happened in the South on sprawling plantations, not in polite homes in Boston, where as you can see on the cover image, Wheatley was referred to euphemistically as a “servant.” Knowing that some states had laws against literacy instruction for enslaved people, students are often surprised that Wheatley could write at all, especially in iambic pentameter—Shakespeare’s own favorite meter—replete with classical allusions they don’t themselves recognize.

This defamiliarization, the unmooring of our expectations, can be profoundly productive. In the case of Wheatley, it turns on end what we have been taught about slavery and about African American literacy. Wheatley also teaches us to listen harder for moments of resistance, for the times when she writes against what her white audience would want to hear, or on frequencies they might not even catch. Wheatley’s words may well have been intended to strike African American audiences quite differently, as when she explicitly mentions Harvard students’ privileges and calls on them to take advantage of them for good. In African American literary theory, this is called “double-voicing,” a term borrowed by Michael Awkward and Henry Louis Gates from Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin.

Sometimes, an instructor decides to suspend her regularly scheduled lesson plan to devote class time to puzzling through current events, but in this case, I thought we would learn much more from listening closely to Wheatley than to Brett Kavanaugh.

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