

Discover

Liberty, Then & Now

RACE, HISTORY, AND NARRATIVE: ARE WE ALLOWED TO REINTERPRET
THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE?

believe, and express oneself w/out external (or internal?) constraints, punishment, or situations of oppression. Must be balanced w/ the right & obligation to respect & uphold the liberty of others?!

Liberty Tree

Like Apollo riding a golden chariot across the sky to bring the sun
In a chariot of light from the regions of day,
The Goddess of Liberty came;

Ten thousand celestial directed the way
And hither conducted the dame
A fair budding branch from the gardens above,
Where millions with millions agree,
She brought in her hand as a pledge of her love,
And the plant she named Liberty Tree.

This reminds me of Sky Woman, an Indigenous figure in creation story
The celestial exotic struck deep in the ground,
Like a native it flourished and bore;
The fame of its fruit drew the nations around

ARE WE ALLOWED TO REINTERPRET THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE?

For freemen like brothers agree;
And their spirit did cheerly unite
And then temple was Liberty
Beneath the spreading branches
Their bread in contentment they ate,
Unvexed with the troubles of silver and gold,
The cares of the grand and the great.
With timber and tar they Old England supplied,
And supported her power on the sea;
Her battles they fought, without getting a groat,
For the honor of Liberty Tree.

But hear, O ye swains, 'tis a tale most profane,
How all the tyrannical powers,
Kings, Commons, and Lords, are uniting again
To cut down this guardian of ours
From the east to the west blow the trumpet to arms
Through the land let the sound of it flee;
Let the far and the near, all unite with a cheer,
In defence of our Liberty Tree.

Thomas Paine

I think "and" here might mean the "tyrannical" rule of the British forces, so sound meaning would mean -

what happens on trees?
Fruit hangs, leaves dry, they fall, trunks and roots hold, grow, mold, they firm; they need sunlight; trees in forests communicate like a network. What "hangs" on trees?

regions = location, so how can day (time) be a place, unless it means the borders of a day/drawn at that time...
Presigious woman
"AGREE" about WHAT? and who are the "millions and millions"?

"Sky Woman"
story of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) indigenous ppl. It is a story about reciprocity and generosity. I read about Sky Woman in a book - a memoir - and I'm remembering the story with the imagery in this line.

Shipping off hard-earned, grown or made colonies back to the UK
British Empire
"Taxation without representation"
[They had to support the crown's might, but felt used and abused in return]

In 1775, "Profane" likely meant outside the church, or even profane

"swain" -> a young man in love, or a suitor

RACE, HISTORY, AND NARRATIVE

Liberty, Then and Now



[History Now: The Journal](#) > [Black Lives in the Founding Era](#) > [Phillis Wheatley: Poet Laureate of the American Revolution](#)

History Now, Issue 60 (Summer 2021) Black Lives in the Founding Era

PHILLIS WHEATLEY

Phillis Wheatley (c. 1753–1784) became the first African American and the first enslaved person in the U.S. to publish a book of poetry. Kidnapped from West Africa as a child, she was enslaved in Boston by the Wheatley family, who taught her to read and write. She was a poetic prodigy, and her landmark book of poems was published in 1773. Her famous letter, “To His Excellency General Washington,” was written in the form of an ode and later published by those close to President Washington for public audiences.

CREATIVE ENTRY

Open Mic | Run a class open mic! Invite students to stand up in front of the class and recite their odes to put on the Statue of Liberty today aloud.

[Read More](#)

[Podcast](#)

Student Questions

Historical ideas are inherited, adapted, and reinterpreted—not created in isolation.

CLOSE READING / DISCUSSION PROMPTS / HISTORICAL MOTIFS & ANACHRONISMS

Option 1

CREATIVE ENTRY

Find an example of a historical anachronism in media today, either online / social media, in a TV show, film, news coverage, or song. Write 3 paragraphs, the first explaining the items, the second providing historical research and presenting the issues, and the third offering a solution. Or, draw, design, and / or create a visual model of (1) the historical anachronism and (2) your proposed solution.

Option 2

Purposefully invent a historical anachronism by creating a cartoon, song, image, video, or other visual/audio format. Your submission must be accompanied by a rationale statement, explaining the correct historical context for each component, and what commentary your purposeful anachronism makes obvious or implicit.

[Download Activity](#)

The complete handout has countless activities and extensions to choose from!

1

Even though the Statue of Liberty is pictured in the “Liberty Tree” video – the monument did not exist in the actual time period when Thomas Paine wrote “Liberty Tree.” **The Statue of Liberty arrived in New York Harbor in June 1885, whereas Thomas Paine wrote “Liberty Tree” in 1775, 110 years earlier.** Do you think the video creator used a historical anachronism on purpose, or was it an accident? **When the “Liberty Tree” and Statue of Liberty are presented together, what narrative are they supposed to tell about the United States?** Do you agree with that narrative? Why or why not?

2

As you read **Emma Lazarus’ biography**, trace the chain of events that made “The New Colossus” possible. Born to a Sephardic Jewish refugee family in 1849, her legacy reminds us how **personal history and public voices shape the stories we tell**. Identify moments where history is being connected across different time periods; details that help explain why Emma Lazarus might have connected the symbolism of the Statue of Liberty to immigration, refuge, and refugees; connections between historical events and Emma Lazarus’ own family history; examples of how history is passed down through families or communities; and evidence that one generation influenced the next.

RACE, HISTORY, AND NARRATIVE

Liberty, Then and Now

From Phillis Wheatley writing an ode to George Washington as the first African American to publish a book of poetry, to Ariana Brown's contemporary spoken word performances about thrift stores, the city bus, and racism, students create their own poetic works.



ODE TO THE CITY BUS

The longest relationship I have ever been in has been with the public transportation system...Thank you to every Black bus driver who got me home safe. Thank you to every brown bus driver who got me home safe...Automobile of the movement...Thank you to every bus driver...who saw in me a daughter, who let me write this poem in the ride home, in the rain."



ODE TO THRIFT STORES

"I remember 'This Will Be,' some Natalie Cole, or Otis Redding, or Earth, Wind & Fire shooting through the speakers, my mom humming about everlasting love while scouring the kitchen utensils, and I know the rich girl is wrong, that thrift stores are anything but sad."

”

Clint Smith's "Ode to the Only Black Kid in the Class"

Phillis Wheatley: Poet Laureate

1. How did Phillis Wheatley come to be in the American colonies? Include both a direct quote and your summary.

Direct quote: _____

Paraphrase / summary / interpretation: _____

2. The article states that "Wheatley explicitly links the ideal of freedom from British tyranny with the ideal of freedom for enslaved African Americans." Provide three examples from the poems and analysis included in the article.

A. _____

B. _____

C. _____

3. The official US Poet Laureate position was not established until 1985-1986, and there were no state or royal laureateships for an enslaved African American woman in the 1770s.

A. Is it a historical anachronism to call Phillis Wheatley a "Poet Laureate"? Explain your reasoning.

B. Is bestowing this title on her today an act of reparative justice? Why or why not? Explain.

4. According to the article, what are two reasons that Phillis Wheatley wrote the ode to George Washington?

5. What happened when Phillis Wheatley left London?

Direct quote: _____

Paraphrase / summary / interpretation: _____

6. In her poem "America," how does Wheatley use metaphor in a way that "posits a double meaning"? What two groups does she compare?

[Download Activity](#)

7. Was Phillis Wheatley a British loyalist?

Direct quote: _____

Paraphrase / summary / interpretation: _____

8. As a free Black woman writing against British rule, what risks did Phillis Wheatley face?

Direct quote: _____

Paraphrase / summary / interpretation: _____

9. What does "Freedom's Cause" mean in the article?

Direct quote: _____

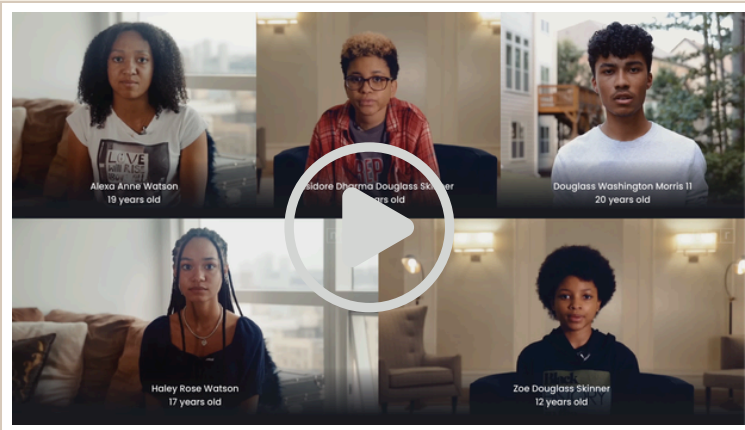
Paraphrase / summary / interpretation: _____

10. How did Wheatley become "a political actor in one of America's worst crises"?

Direct quote: _____

Paraphrase / summary / interpretation: _____

“What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?”

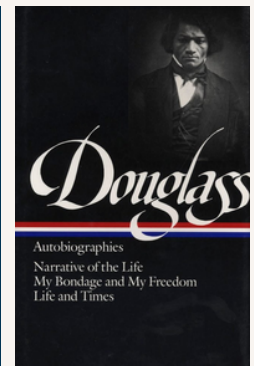
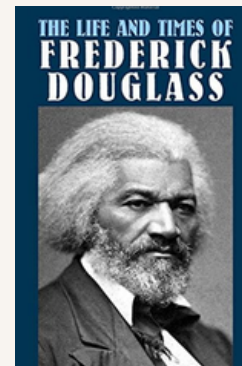


“What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?”
From 1852 to 2020, Frederick Douglass’
Descendants Read His Speech.

“The fact is, ladies and gentlemen, the distance between this platform and the slave plantation, from which I escaped, is considerable ...Your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery.”



Actors perform Frederick Douglass’ impactful speeches. Because Douglass’ actual voice was never recorded, these performances offer an opportunity to hear the potency of his words with timely urgency over a century after his time.
[Access them here.](#)



[Read the Speech](#)