Panel Title: Readings From Wheatley at 250: Black Women Poets Re-imagine the Verse of Phillis Wheatley Peters

Date and Time: 9:00am - 10:15am on Saturday February 10, 2024
Location: Room 2502A, Kansas City Convention Center, Level 2

Event Type: Poetry Reading

Event Description: Wheatley at 250: Black Women Poets Re-imagine the Verse of Phillis Wheatley Peters (fall 2023) edited by Danielle Legros Georges and Artress Bethany White represents a celebration and reconsideration of Wheatley’s 18th-century poems by 20 award-winning Black contemporary poets. This anthology, meant to enhance the poet’s legacy for today’s readers, contains a selection of Wheatley Peters’s original poems, translations/re-inscriptions of those poems, and a short reflective essay by each poet.

Event Agenda: This panel will begin with an introduction by the two editors, followed by a description of the anthology’s inception and the occasion that made it possible. Next, several anthology contributors will share their individual, artistic, and cultural responses to Wheatley’s work and why it is critical that her work continue to be read, taught, and considered.

Event Organizer: Artress Bethany White

Event Participants:


Danielle Legros Georges is a poet, essayist, translator, and professor emeritus at Lesley University. She was appointed the second Poet Laureate of the city of Boston, serving in the role from 2015 to 2019. Her most recent work is a book of translations, Island Heart: The Poems of Ida Faubert.

Tara Betts is the author of Refuse to Disappear, Break the Habit and Arc & Hue.
Tara currently teaches at DePaul University. Tara is also Poetry Editor at The Langston Hughes Review.

Kiki Petrosino is Professor of Poetry at the University of Virginia. She is the author of four books of poetry, including *White Blood: A Lyric of Virginia* and *Witch Wife*. She is a National Endowment for the Arts Fellow in Literature.

Evie Shockley’s poetry books include *semaiutomatic* (Pulitzer Prize finalist), the new black (Hurston/Wright Legacy Award winner) and, most recently, *suddenly we*. Her book of criticism is *Renegade Poetics*. She is the Zora Neale Hurston Distinguished Professor of English at Rutgers University.

(Excerpt from the Introduction to the anthology *Wheatley at 250: Black Women Poets Re-imagine the Verse of Phillis Wheatley Peters*)

**Introduction**

Phillis Wheatley Peters has been called—and is—many things, including the young African girl enslaved by Boston’s Wheatley family in 1761, and the acclaimed 18th-century transcontinental poet. In a magnificent 2006 essay “The Difficult Miracle of Black Poetry in America,” poet June Jordan names Wheatley “the first decidedly American poet on this continent, Black or white, male or female” by virtue of the keen attention Wheatley pays to the turbulent events of her times and the “revolutionaries who would forge America.” Historian Henry Louis Gates, Jr., situates the poet squarely in the colonial and post-colonial debates that sought to confirm or dismiss Black intelligence. As a consequence of her intellectual celebrity, Wheatley was thrust into a cosmopolitan sphere and found herself in conversation with such figures as George Washington and Benjamin Franklin (as well as posthumously with Thomas Jefferson whose 1785 *Notes on the State of Virginia* proffers scathing and undeserved criticism). Endorsers of Wheatley’s 1773 book *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* identified themselves as among “the most respectable characters in Boston” and included the governor and lieutenant governor of Massachusetts. They called her “a young Negro girl, who was but a few years since brought an uncultivated barbarian from Africa, and has ever since been, and now is, under the disadvantage of serving as a
slave in a family in this Town.” Of her poems, they remarked, “She has been
examined by some of the best judges, and is thought qualified to write them.” Less
restrained, David Waldstreicher, a Wheatley biographer notes, “She became fluent
and culturally literate and able to write poems in English so quickly that we
shouldn’t hesitate to call her a genius.”

Recent scholarly attention to Wheatley’s work includes Honorée Fanonne
Jeffers’s well-researched 2020 collection of poems *The Age of Phillis.*
Significantly, Jeffers advances the argument for referring to Wheatley by her
married name. At the time of her death, she was still wedded to John Peters. This
important historical detail liberates Wheatley Peters from perpetual historical
adolescence; readers can now separate the celebrated but enslaved teenage poet
from the free and married author.

Phillis Wheatley Peters called herself an *Ethiop* and *African*—and a poet.
She dubbed herself friend to, among others, Obour Tanner, a fellow enslaved
woman with whom she shared a lengthy epistolary friendship; Scipio Moorehead,
a young African American painter; Samson Occom, a Mohegan Presbyterian
evangelist; and Selina Hastings, Countess of Huntingdon, who was instrumental in
the publication of Wheatley’s book. Wheatley saw her verse published in London
and Boston, on two sides of the Atlantic Ocean. In addition to naming herself wife
to John Peters, whom she married in 1778—she was mother of their children.
Historian Cornelia H. Dayton, in her article “Lost Years Recovered: John Peters
and Phillis Wheatley Peters in Milton,” offers a narrative that runs counter to the
popular, unfavorable ones regarding what transpired between the Peterses. Among
John Peters’s chief efforts, she notes, was “to insulate his wife from physically
taxing housewifery and to create space and time for her to inhabit a writer’s life
and to be a mother.”

An acclaimed writer and political actor in her lifetime, Wheatley would not
live to see herself as inspiration for an immense number of scholarly, literary, and
creative texts. She would see neither the Boston plaque recognizing the site where
she was purchased, nor her likeness in the form of a bronze statue on the city’s
Commonwealth Avenue mall, shaded as it is by elm, sweetgum, and linden trees.
She would not see the buildings and lecture halls named for her. Her unexpected
death in 1784, while still in her early 30s, and the poverty that had befallen the
Peterses prior to it, contributed to a second manuscript’s not being published. This
manuscript has never been recovered, nor has the exact site of her grave at the
Copp’s Hill Burying Ground in Boston’s North End been identified. While named for the ship Phillis that delivered her to the Americas and into the maw of the greed and attempted dehumanization that was the transatlantic slave trade, we will never know her West African name. Many, however, call her and claim her as sister and ancestor. Many name her the mother of African American literature, and a luminary of United States letters.

The idea for this anthology emerged in 2022 as we anticipated the following year as the 250th anniversary of the publication of *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* on September 1, 1773, in London. As poets and editors, we understood the commemorative year as an ideal moment to revisit Wheatley—to get close to her, to approach her work from the shared standpoints and identities of women of color, Afro-descendants, and practitioners of one of humanity’s oldest art forms. Moreover, and above all, we wanted the proposed encounters to privilege the poems themselves. We saw our project as an artistic experiment in the interpretation of Wheatley poems by poets and meant for 21st-century lay readers.

Toward this goal we invited the writers herein to each reinscribe, translate, or interpret a Wheatley poem—and to submit a brief compositional note to accompany her/their new poem. We envisioned each writer’s contribution for the anthology consisting of three parts: an original Wheatley poem, a new poem, and a compositional note that would encapsulate their thoughts, considerations, questions, approaches, concerns, or wishes with regard to the creative process of rendering the “new” Wheatley poem. Our call made clear that this undertaking was not one of scholarship but of artmaking, of interpretation, (of creating covers, if you will, in the way Nina Simone made “Feeling Good” by Anthony Newley and Leslie Bricusse inimitably her own, in the way Sinéad O’Connor re-did Prince’s “Nothing Compares to You.” We asked contributors to consider how their choices in language and form might reinvigorate Wheatley’s themes and messages. As editors, we were keen to understand what could be demanded of us to keep appreciating and interpreting Wheatley’s work—and how to make her texts exciting to readers of various ages and experiences in this moment.

Editors Danielle Legros Georges
and Artress Bethany White