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Proposal for #139 Roundtable: Phillis Wheatley Peters' Poems on Various Subjects at 250 years [Aphra Behn Society]

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Phillis and the Oceans

In "A Farewel to America to Mrs. S.W.," Phillis Wheatley Peters writes, "While for Britannia's distant shore/We sweep the liquid plain,/ And with astonish'd eyes explore/ The wide-extended main." The promise of the "liquid plain" in this poem is countered by a different depiction in her poem, "To a Gentleman on his Voyage to Great-Britain," where she paints a different picture of the ocean, "I sing not of storms o'er ocean driv'n,/ And how they howl'd along the waste of heav'n."

Wheatley Peters traveled the oceans more than most of her contemporaries, first when she was enslaved and bought to North America from the shores of modern-day Senegal or Gambia and when she traveled to Great Britain from North America at the age of nineteen and then back.

My paper examines the routes, places, and genealogies, specifically by way of water, via oceans and waterscapes, evoked by Phillis Wheatley Peters in her writing. My intent is to discuss the various counter-discursive threads of identity, Enlightenment, gender, and freedom that are uniquely and differently available through a reading of waterscapes in her work taking a critical ocean studies approach. Importantly, the Indian Ocean figures differently from the Atlantic in Wheatley-Peters' writing. Given her experience of oceanic crossings, I argue that oceans, and to an extent waterscapes, become a space for resurrecting lost memories, of commemorating trauma, yet also as routes of idealizing a uniquely *fluid* notion of freedom and selfhood in Wheatley Peters' work that other places on land don't allow.