Imagining an American National Poetics: Charles Frederick Heartman's Early 20th-Century Recovery of Phillis Wheatley Peters

For literary historians, "recovery" is a term often associated with feminist efforts beginning during the final decades of the twentieth century to seek out and then assert the value of texts created by women writers of the past (often women of color) whose cultural contributions had been disregarded or even erased. (See my slide's related quote from Brigitte Fielder.) Today, I adopt, yet somewhat reposition, the "recovery" term to revisit publications sponsored in the early twentieth century by a white Euro-American man, Charles Frederick Heartman (1883-1953). In connection with his deep personal appreciation of Phillis Wheatley Peters, Heartman used his collecting and publication skills to reassert parts of *her* legacy that had been deemphasized, while affirming and thus strengthening others. As a transatlantic immigrant and would-be cultural steward of US democratic national culture, Heartman linked up Wheatley Peters's late-career writing with a post-Revolutionary political affiliation and a poetics praxis.

A good deal of what we can now know about the "Peters" era of Wheatley Peters's writings has been enabled by Heartman's editorship, especially as extended by the cultural work of two visionary successor-collaborators—Arthur Schomburg and Alice Dunbar Nelson. Highlighting this collaboratively-formed legacy, I will examine dimensions of "Wheatley Peters" that demonstrate the agency of purposeful cultural stewardship in the construction of literary histories. I'll illustrate how textual afterlives of Wheatley Peters crossed over into the early twentieth century. I'll take a book history approach to show how these texts formed material memories of Wheatley Peters to support the construction of vital printed Black histories and will suggest how such literary resources could counter post-Reconstruction-era Jim Crow culture, while also fostering cross-racial alliance-building.

My own "recovery" of Heartman as a contributor to Wheatley Peters's legacy arose initially from learning a bit about him when I was preparing a headnote for one of the Wheatley entries in *Transatlantic Anglophone Literatures*—her poetic salute to George Washington. In researching that panegyric's Revolutionary-era publication history, I learned how Heartman had included it in his own early twentieth-century anthology of her writings. Taking note that the text on Washington had *not* appeared in her 1773 *Poems* collection, I credited Heartman for reminding us that, however famous her sole book rightly became, Phillis Wheatley *Peters* continued publishing in other formats and spaces later in life, and that the 1773 anthology of poetry was actually never her only form or site of publication.

Later, in October 2022, when Barbara and I together visited the American Antiquarian Society, the cluster of three separate publications Heartman had brought out, all in 1915, drew my more sustained attention. Reading them in that specific AAS library space brought another reminder for my ongoing study of PWP: archive-holding institutions, what they acquire and keep, how they catalog, details their databases use to describe their holdings, and who gets access to such texts and how--all such forces help determine the ideas we develop and disseminate for a figure like Wheatley Peters. As Mason Jones observed in an essay entitled "Selective Memory," "Archives . . . engage in the process of memory preservation and the creation of narratives through documentation of historical records" (1). Yet, she cautions, the agency driving this memory-shaping process is not actually carried out by the archive itself, but involves human actions and choices which, over time, demonstrate how the *communal* work of archives is more than storage: it contributes to "ontological and epistemic perspectives" of cultural memory (1). Heartman himself knew this well, as notations he inscribed within his donations to the AAS (and elsewhere) document. Thus, examining such records—in this case

from the history of cultural-memory-making around Wheatley Peters—can enrich our understandings, not just about that unique author herself and her texts, but also about the *construction* of her legacies and those of other writers of color across decades. Such an endeavor—a different kind of recovery effort, if you will—provides an important philosophical and practical undergirding for initiatives like the one embodied in our panel group today. Why? Because we seek through "The Genius of Phillis Wheatley Peters" project. not just to celebrate the "Poet and Her Legacies" of our subtitle, but also to consciously contribute to communal construction and dissemination of additional legacies—one of which we're proud to share with you today by virtue of having poet Alison Clarke with us.

Now, I want to contextualize this particular recovery-of-communal-agency effort, as launched by Heartman and expanded by Schomburg and Dunbar-Nelson, with biographical information about Heartman. As an avid collector of minority texts—particularly by African American writers and especially by Wheatley--his role in securing an archive of her writing anticipates similar efforts by Savannah-based African American collector Walter O. Evans, whose impact on Frederick Douglass studies Celeste Bernier and Andrew Taylor have outlined in their monumental *If I Survive* edition. Personally, Heartman—a German immigrant by way of London, had a "bootstraps-type" US work history that included being a low-paid newspaper reporter and a tenement janitor before launching his eventually influential literacy-oriented career through volunteer work in a bookshop. Perhaps, as an American migrant (though certainly not a kidnapped enslaved person), he felt some kinship with Wheatley Peters, despite their obvious differences.

Bibliographic historian Gary Donaldson has credited Heartman as having assembled "an astonishing amount of material that would otherwise have been lost" to us all today (377). Like

Donaldson, I want to acknowledge Heartman's role as a *public*-oriented collector and editor. Specifically, Heartman helped strengthen Wheatley Peters' place in early American literary history by assembling three distinct editions, all published in 1915. *Phillis Wheatley (Phillis Peters): A Critical Attempt and a Bibliography of Her Writings*; *Phillis Wheatley (Phillis Peters) Poems and Letters: First Collected Edition*; and *Six Broadsides relating to Phillis Wheatley, (Phillis Peters): With Portrait and Facsimile of Her Handwriting*.

As a clarifying prelude to examining these Heartman-arranged treatments of Wheatley Peters, I should underscore the complicated context that had already developed from prior print publications linked to her legacies. One strand in these previous publications, as Barbara's presentation has shown, relates directly to race uplift and the antislavery cause. This context played out, for Heartman, in his moves to build on a tradition of celebrating Wheatley as a Black role model writer embodying a positive vision of American democratic culture. Another interrelated context of prior print culture memory connects more closely with gender, in an intersectional context taking the poet's racial identity into account. This context is reflected in Heartman's assertion of the aesthetic power of Wheatley Peters's writings at a time when dominant cultural forces were seeking to suppress a broad heritage of women's poetry.

First, as Barbara has shown, multiple nineteenth-century cultural stewards and political activists situated Wheatley in print presentations that supported the antislavery cause, with texts published in Boston by Isaac Knapp in the 1830s and William G. Allen and Daniel Laing in 1849 (the *Wheatley, Banneker, and Horton*) book) being just two examples. Similarly, going back even further, into the late *eighteenth* century, I want to call attention to Charles Crawford's *Observations Upon Negro Slavery*, "printed and sold by Eleazer Oswald" in Philadelphia in 1784. Affiliating Wheatley Peters with Ignatius Sancho, Crawford, a prolific if not a well-

regarded poet himself, published on both sides of the Atlantic as part of an effort to carve out a meaningful social role both enabled and constrained by being a not-first-born son of a Caribbean plantation owner. [See Lewis Leary's "Charles Crawford: Forgotten Poet"]. Despite his family's lucrative ties to slavery, Crawford became an abolitionist. And in his *Observations*, Wheatley's poetry claims a role parallel to Sancho's prose writing as demonstrating one "instance of genius among Negroes," thereby refuting such pernicious racist views as David Hume's "that 'there never arose a man of genius among Negroes'" (21, 22). In Wheatley's case, Crawford asserts, poetry by the "Negro girl, who was brought a slave from Africa to Boston" reflects her "great talents" (24). Reprinting two of Wheatley's poems-- "to the University of Cambridge, in New England" and one of her elegies ("To a Clergyman, on the death of his Wife")--Crawford proposes the "considerable merit" evident in her verses as a compelling argument against slavery. "[A]dmirable" artistic expression, in his wording, counters proslavery arguments based in erroneous assumptions about racial inferiority.

Unlike Thomas Jefferson, Heartman certainly would have affirmed both Crawford's anti-racist stance and the British-Caribbean-American writer's affirming assessment of her poetry—as well as the strategy of bringing these two themes together. Indeed, I see in his three-text editorial project a similar effort to link a valuing of her aesthetic legacy with a race-oriented social justice agenda. Doing so entailed revising assessments of her poetry's place in the history of American letters that had been coalescing around gender-based marginalizing of women poets at the turn into the twentieth century. Alexandra Socarides has chronicled this larger process in her monograph, *In Plain Sight: Nineteenth-Century American Women's Poetry and the Problem of Literary History*. Socarides includes Wheatley Peters in her large roster of women poets (mostly white women) whose works' importance had already, in the early twentieth century

when Heartman was publishing his editions, been severely marginalized by a combination of forces including "the rise of [literary] modernism" and a more generalized "misogyny" in US culture (3). But *In Plain Sight* also insightfully explains how, even earlier, Wheatley had suffered from the double-duty force of racism and misogyny interacting intersectionally. Socarides points to demeaning treatments of Wheatley in the two major collections of women's poetry that had included the Black woman author in their influential mid-century anthologies of women poets. These were Caroline May's 1848 *American female poets with biographical and critical notices* and Rufus Griswold's 1849 *The Female Poets of America.* Socarides proposes that May's dubbing of Wheatley as a mere "literary curiosity" (63) reduces the poet's cultural significance on aesthetic grounds. Further, she posits, "If for May the concern is Wheatley's [limited literary] talents, for Griswold it is her [insufficient] Americanness" (64), or, more precisely, not being eligible to be so classified, since she is, according to Griswold, instead forever having to be viewed as "This 'daughter of murky Senegal'" (64).

This aesthetic-political heritage of both "deserving and not deserving of a place," as Socarides sums it up, is the landscape of cultural memory around Phillis Wheatley Peters into which Heartman was intervening. His three-publication recovery of her legacies, that is, was constructing an alternative remembering, one valuing both her poetry and her American national significance, and *connecting* the two in ways that would enable further articulations of her importance in follow-up editorial activism by Schomburg and Dunbar Nelson.

Taken together the three-publication cluster embodies Heartman's efforts to position Wheatley Peters as a dynamic cultural resource. For instance, in his *Critical Attempt* text, Heartman situated her as a model of US national affiliation, as in *his* treatment of her poem to George Washington during the Revolutionary War (19ff). Similarly, Heartman's publication of

the 1784 "Liberty and Peace" poem in his *Critical Attempt* (and again in *Six Broadsides*) helped construct a vision of the poet's social significance beyond the 1773 *Poems'* authorship by an enslaved young "Wheatley" **girl** to an adult Phillis Peters, free woman touting democratic principles in a free nation. Given the time available today, and the fact that the *Critical Attempt* is widely available online, I will focus on the broadsides collection and the poems and letters edition in the remainder of my analysis of Heartman's editorial efforts.

Heartman's *Six Broadsides* collection—though modest in the number of texts presented—literally makes material memory and its effort at culture-shaping visible. Upon opening the cover, we see several indicators of Heartman's thoughtful shaping of material memory. First, the choice of assembling *Broadsides* signals a wish to expand public appreciation of the author beyond her single 1773 book to other genres conveying the breadth of her writerly productivity and having the capacity to circulate in diverse networks and for highly context-specific purposes such as comforting a grieving family. Second, though he uses a parenthetical and a smaller font, Heartman's added designation of "Phillis Peters" calls on readers to affirm her free, married identity, especially given the drop-out there of her enslaving family's "Wheatley" name. Further, Heartman announces inclusion of both her "portrait" and a "facsimile of her handwriting," which I'll say more about shortly.

Another marker of memory-making through publication and circulation of texts appears in the donor announcement. Here we learn that Heartman gifted this copy—one of only twenty-five--to the American Antiquarian Society in July 1915, the year of its publication. He reemphasized this a link in his handwritten note on another front matter page where, as collector-editor, he signs "with compliments" to a listing of the various sources from where he acquired each of the broadsides here assembled. One (designated "Number Two") is owned by the

American Antiquarian Society, where I first saw this mini-anthology. In this listing of archival sources, Heartman models an ideal of cross-institutional collaboration toward communal knowledge-making.

Heartman does not offer an editorial rationale for how and why he's chosen the particular six texts included in this collection. Several points are inferable from the choices themselves, however. Re-circulating "To the Hon'ble Thomas Hubbard, Esq; On the Death of Mrs. Thankfull Leonard" enshrines an earlier version of an elegy that also appeared later, with several noteworthy revisions, in the 1773 book, as "To the Honourable T. H. Esq; on the Death of his Daughter." Heartman thereby reemphasizes Wheatley Peters's role as an artist writing for local American communities and their needs ahead of her internationally published book. Relatedly, by closing this collection with a page of Wheatley Peters's own handwriting, he reminds readers of her personhood and her writing as inscribed processes embracing individual agency and diverse literacies. On another front of legacy-building, by including Jupiter Hammon's poetic "Address to Miss Phillis Wheatley, Ethiopian Poetess," Heartman affirms her connections to broader African literary networks of exchange than readers of her one London-published and white-managed book of poetry might otherwise apprehend. Accordingly, this move represents one strategy for responding to Griswold's diminishment of Wheatley in classifying her a bound to "murky Senegal." Hammon's Black authorial voice confidently rejects that identity as a negative one. Taking the presence of Hammon's poem into account also helps someone reading this material today understand Heartman's use of "relating to" in the "Six Broadsides Relating to Phillis Wheatley." One goal of the edition is to alert 1915 recipients of this text that, beyond appreciating Wheatley Peters and her writings, it was time to recognize her place in a larger, multifaceted cultural repository of African and global cultures.

Another of Heartman's 1915 limited edition publications clearly sought to enact similarly expansive cultural stewardship. Here's the complete title: *Phillis Wheatley (Phillis Peters) Poems and Letters, First Collected Edition, Edited by Chas. Fred. Heartman, with an Appreciation by Arthur A. Schomburg*. The "Schomburg" name stands out immediately, given his vital contributions to constructing African American literary history, as seen in the New York research center bearing his name. Heartman's connection to Schomburg helped enable that history-building. In 1916, as part of his Bibliographic Americana series, Heartman would publish Schomburg's *Bibliographical Checklist of American Negro Poetry*. A substantial section of *the checklist* is its six-page listing of Heartman's own bibliography of Wheatley's writings. And the synergy connecting the work these men did to foster Black women's writing doesn't end there.

One of the copies of the Heartman-edited 1915 collection of Wheatley Peters's *Poems and Letters* made its way to Alice Dunbar Nelson. (According to an online exhibition on Dunbar-Nelson's authorial career, her copy was "Warmly inscribed in Spanish by Arturo Alfonso Schomburg to Dunbar-Nelson.") Thus, we can document how Heartman's and Schomburg's curatorial work enabled an African American woman writer to immerse in a foremother's literary legacy by reading texts such as "His Excellency, General Washington." That poem, composed and published originally in the mid-1770s, after the 1773 *book*, was, as I noted earlier, reprinted in Heartman's 1915 *Poems and Letters* collection as well as in his *Critical Attempt*. Subsequently, Dunbar-Nelson would herself connect the cultural capital of the first US President with the legacy of Wheatley Peters through this same text. *The Dunbar Speaker and Entertainer* again reprinted the Washington poem. As a Black woman editor embracing pedagogical responsibilities for her race, Dunbar-Nelson underscored her anthology's cultural leadership aims in the dedication. There, she envisioned her collection as enabling "children of the race" to "read

and learn about their own people." From material memories of Wheatley Peters passed on through Heartman and Schomburg, Dunbar-Nelson drew a powerful culture-shaping resource. Now, through "The Genius of Phillis Wheatley Peters," our ever-growing collaborative team aims to further extend this crucial legacy, which is surely especially important to nurture and grow in a time when determined forces continue to marshal against such work, in schools, in university classrooms, and beyond.