

Below are questions and discussion starters prompted by Jeffers and Wheatley's works

#### Questions about subjectivity

- How does Wheatley identify as a political subject? Does she see herself as a British colonist? An American? An African American? How might her understanding of her political subjectivity evolve over time? What factors contribute to that evolution?
- Wheatley writes during what would become the American Revolution/Revolutionary War/War for Independence. The Boston Massacre takes place on the same street as the Wheatley family home. The British occupy Boston and the occupation forces many, including Wheatley, to take refuge elsewhere. Wheatley is a war refugee. How does her status as a refugee influence her poetry? How might her status as a refugee change how we read her poems?
- Religion is a prominent theme in Wheatley's poetry. How does it work as a theme? How do you understand her spirituality as an element of her identity? Is her Christian faith important to the ways we read her poems?
- Wheatley maintained an extensive social network through letter writing -- as personal, spiritual, and political correspondence. What does Wheatley's letter writing tell us about her that we don't learn from the poems? What does Wheatley's letter writing tell us about her relationships and in particular, those with the Wheatley family and Obour Tanner?
- Jeffers spends a good deal of time in her volume re-imagining Wheatley's life before and after her enslavement. Jeffers' poems re-create her life in West Africa and her marriage to John Peters. What is the value of this creative speculation? What does this re-imagining illuminate for us about Wheatley's life that we might not notice otherwise?
- Think about the significance of naming practices for enslaved black Africans. Upon her arrival in Massachusetts, Phillis Wheatley was renamed by her enslavers. She used that name to publish and market her poetry. After marrying, she most often signed off as "Peters" or "Wheatley Peters" to acknowledge her married status, as Jeffers points out in her book. Today, she is widely known as Phillis Wheatley rather than Phillis Peters. Why do you think that is? Another way of asking this question, Who is Phillis Peters?

#### Questions about Race and the Enlightenment

- How does Wheatley Peters's poetry respond to tenets of the Enlightenment in general? How might her poetry be a response to the Enlightenment's dehumanizing rhetoric about black Africans?
- How often does Wheatley Peters reference race in her poetry? Where does she do so? In what context? Are the references overt or more subtle?
- Do you think Wheatley Peters writes with a specific racial consciousness? That is to say, does she embrace racial difference in her poetry? Does she mute it? Does she write on some racial middle ground?
- If Wheatley Peters were to write a letter to Thomas Jefferson in response to his dismissal of her poetic talents, what do you think that letter would say?
- What might Jeffers's poems about the Enlightenment tell us about the age in which Wheatley Peters wrote?

- How do Enlightenment questions about Wheatley Peters' race or cognitive ability fit into discussions of other black Atlantic and African writers: Ottobah Cugano, Ignatius Sancho, Jupiter Hammon?

#### Questions about authorship

- What is an author in early America? How might expectations of authorship differ in the 18th century compared to today?
- Why might authorship be an especially crucial avenue for self-construction for black Americans in the late 18th century? What are the stakes involved in writing amid an emerging Enlightenment Movement?
- Look at the prefatory material included in Wheatley's volume of poetry, specifically the introduction written by John Wheatley and the 'attestation' of Massachusetts's most prominent, white, male citizens all vouching for the authenticity of the volume. Why is that front matter necessary? Why does Wheatley Peters need legitimacy?
- How does Wheatley Peters represent her own writing project; how does she embody the role of author/poet?
- Wheatley Peters was not the only literate black African woman living in colonial New England. What about her circumstances made her exceptional? That is to say, why does she get to become a published author instead of, for example, her friend Obour Tanner? What might be some political and personal exigencies propelling Wheatley Peters?

#### Questions about aesthetics/poetic craft

- How would you best describe Wheatley Peters's poetic aesthetic? What does it mean to be a poet? To create? To imagine? To transcend the mundane?
- What themes are most prominent in Wheatley Peters's poetry?
- What topics does she not address? Do you find the omissions surprising? Why/why not?
- It is often noted that Wheatley Peters writes poems in a neoclassical style. What does this mean? Why is it significant that Wheatley Peters writes often in this style?
- What forms/meter/rhythms does she rely on most often? What does form tell us about her poetic values?
- How does reading Jeffers's poems help us better understand Wheatley's craft?
- What do you make of Jeffers's creative choices, her motivations for looking back to the 18th century and Wheatley? In other words, why does Jeffers not write poems about issues affecting the 21st century? How might writing a book about Wheatley also be a project about issues affecting the 21st century?
- Why and how does Wheatley work as a 21st century muse? For whom does she work as a present-day muse?

#### Questions about the transatlantic nature of Wheatley Peters's world and writings

- Who comprises the world of Phillis Wheatley Peters, and where are these people located?
- What do her transatlantic connections tell us about Wheatley Peters's life experiences?

- How might we imagine Wheatley Peters in relation to black Atlantic writers: Jupiter Hammon, Ottobah Cuguano, Ignatius Sancho, David Margate/Margrett or John Marrant? How might Wheatley Peters have imagined herself in relation to these writers?
- How does she gain access to certain social circles? How does she use that access for personal, political, and financial advantages?
- Do you think Wheatley Peters's mobility is representative or exceptional within the context of black Americans in early America? What details lead you to your conclusion?

#### Questions about Wheatley Peters's life in West Africa

- What do we know about Wheatley Peters's life before her enslavement based on her poetry?
- Which poem do you think most strongly evokes her West African roots?
- How does Wheatley represent West Africa? What might the representations tell us about Wheatley's perceptions of her birthplace?
- If Wheatley was brought to Boston at the age of 7 or 8, how much do you think she would have remembered of life in West Africa?
- Thinking about your own childhood memories, what kinds of things do you think would have comprised the earliest childhood memories for Wheatley? Can you speculate on what strategies she might have employed to retain some of those memories?

#### Questions about the archive

- How do we recover the experiences and histories of early African Americans when the records are scant, incomplete, or written from others' perspectives?
- What might be the problems inherent in thinking about early African American literary culture as a thing to be 'recovered'? What does it mean to 'recover'? What might be other, useful ways for articulating the study of early African America?
- Wheatley was not the first person of African descent living in what would become the United States to write and publish poetry. She also was not the first black woman to do so. How might we articulate Wheatley's cultural significance beyond 'first' claims?
- How would our story of Wheatley change if we imagine her "archive" in relation to the "archives" of her friends in Newport--for example, Obour Tanner or Zingo Stevens?
- What is the value of creative speculation -- like that of Jeffers -- in studying the lived experiences of early black Africans? What might be the limitations of this kind of critical-creative approach to the early black American archives and writers?