

# Acts of Curation: The Curating of Poetry & The Poetics of Curating

A roundtable discussion

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## Editor's note

This event was held on Friday, September 19, 2014, in the Poetry Collection of the University Libraries, University at Buffalo, The State University of New York as part of the UB Poetics Program's Fall 2014 Poetics Plus program. The participants were asked to prepare brief remarks, in some cases excerpted for the presentations, which were then slightly revised for this publication. There is also an audio recording of the event that includes the full roundtable conversation and question/answer period with members of the audience that followed after the last presentation. As identified in the introduction, Marta Werner also was an invited participant. Although her remarks are not included here, her presentation can be heard as part of the audio recording.

—James Maynard

## Introduction

James Maynard, Associate Curator  
The Poetry Collection of the University Libraries,  
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Good afternoon and welcome. When Myung Mi Kim first invited me last spring to organize a Poetics Plus event for this fall on the theme of “curation,” I knew I wanted to organize a discussion around different forms of curating, but really, my first thought went to the group of people I wanted to bring together today to have that conversation. My notion was to assemble a group of curators, all of whom work closely with various poetry materials, who could address the activity of curating widely. But more importantly, it is these five individuals in particular that I wanted to put in conversation with each other, because I greatly respect their work as archivists, curators, catalogers, and editors. Thus, it is my great pleasure to introduce Michael Basinski, Marie Elia, Nancy Kuhl, Edric Mesmer, and Marta Werner. Some I have known for many years, and some I have only met in person for the first time today.

**Michael Basinski** is Curator of the University at Buffalo Libraries’ Poetry Collection and Interim Director of Special Collections. The author of numerous books of poetry and a renowned performer, he also edited the 2010 collection *Gerald Locklin: A Critical Introduction* published by BlazeVox Books. For more than thirty years now he has been here diligently serving what he’s very fond of calling the “realm of the poem,” all the while standing as an important mentor to graduate students, undergrads, researchers, and young poets, not to mention those of us who are fortunate enough to work with him. If today the Poetry Collection, as Mike himself once wrote, “stands far above what is template contained and the malice and ignorance of the quotidian mind,” it does so thanks to him.

**Marie Elia** is the Poetry Collection’s processing archivist and has been working with its literary manuscript collections now for almost a year. Marie received her MLIS from the University of Pittsburgh, an MFA in Creative Writing (Poetry) from Columbia University, and a BA from Allegheny College. Before coming to Buffalo she spent five years working at the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh as the senior cataloger of Warhol’s *Time Capsules*. She also has prior experience cataloging rare books, monographs, serials, and other materials, and just last month was

featured by *Fine Books & Collections* magazine as part of their "Bright Young Librarian" series.

**Nancy Kuhl** is the Curator of Poetry for the Yale Collection of American Literature at Yale University's Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. Nancy received an MA in English literature from Ohio University and an MFA in poetry from Ohio University. I am very pleased to welcome her back to Buffalo, where she received her MLS from the Department of Library and Information Studies, and in particular back to the Poetry Collection, where she worked as a graduate student. In addition to several books and chapbooks of poetry, Nancy is the author of the exhibition catalogs *Intimate Circles: American Women in the Arts and Extravagant Crowd: Carl Van Vechten's Portraits of Women*, both from Yale University Press, and coeditor of Phylum Press, which has published poetry chapbooks since 2000.

**Edric Mesmer** is the University Libraries' Poetry Cataloger, which means he has the task of cataloging the great majority of the Poetry Collection's incoming books and other acquisitions. Edric earned a BA from the College of Geneseo; an MA in Gender, Sexuality & Culture from the University of Manchester; and an MLS from UB. He is the editor—or, as he prefers to be known, the "collator"—of the magazine *Yellow Field*, and of the chapette series Buffalo Ochre Papers, among others, as well as a poet, and this past June he won the 2014 Outriders Poetry Competition for his book manuscript *of monodies and homophony*, which will be published next year.

**Marta Werner** is professor of English at Buffalo's D'Youville College. While working on her PhD in the UB English department, Marta also worked for a period of time in the Poetry Collection. An award winning textual and Emily Dickinson scholar, she is the author, editor, or co-editor of *Emily Dickinson's Open Folios: Scenes of Reading, Surfaces of Writing* (1995), *Radical Scatters: An Electronic Archive of Emily Dickinson's Late Fragments and Related Texts, 1870-1886* (1999), *Ordinary Mysteries: The Common Journal of Nathaniel and Sophia Hawthorne, 1842-1843* (2005), *Hannah Weiner: The Book of Revelations* (2011), and, most recently, *The Gorgeous Nothings: Emily Dickinson's Envelope-Poems* (2012), which was released in both limited and trade editions by Granary Books. Marta has also held executive positions with the MLA's Committee on Scholarly Editions and the Society for Textual Scholarship.

As I said, this is an accomplished group of curators.

Our topic today is what we are calling the poetics of curation, and I'm using the word "poetics" in several senses: first, in that most general way to refer to the creative and critical principles inherent in our work, but also more specifically to the particular conceptions of and assumptions about poetry that underlie and inform—sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously—our respective activities of collecting, cataloging, archiving, editing, and exhibiting. The word "curation" comes from the Latin verb *curare*, meaning to care for, and refers to a curatorship or guardianship, with an earlier, now obsolete meaning of curing or healing. Most generally, to curate something is to select, organize, and take care of it. One could argue that certain curatorial issues and attitudes are widespread in discussions of modern and contemporary poetry and poetics, as seen, for instance, in accounts of canon formation, in the recovery of historically marginalized writers, or even in theories of objectivist sincerity, to name just a few. However, less attention has been paid conversely to the poetics of curating. With this in mind, the group here was asked to reflect, in whatever form made most sense to them, on the topic in general and particularly on the poetics of their own curatorial activities.

The following questions were proposed merely to begin the conversation and see where we might end up:

- » In what ways do you "curate" poetry? For whom?
- » How would you define your own curatorial poetics? In other words, what critical and/or creative principles underlie or inform your work as a curator? Do you see your poetics in contrast or distinction to others?
- » How are different acts of curation a product of their historical moment? Are there "modern" and "postmodern" styles of curating?
- » How might different kinds of poetics (schools of poetic thought and their associated critical methodologies) translate into or influence different approaches to curating?
- » From what sources—canonical or otherwise—do you derive your thinking about curating?

- » Keeping in mind the Latin root of the word, what does it mean “to care for” a book, a text, a manuscript, or an archive? How does such care translate into professional obligations?

As a panel we prepared written remarks for today, from which we'll each be reading some brief excerpts or summaries, but then, in the hopes of making this more of a true conversation, we'll shift to a roundtable discussion before inviting the audience to join in. So if you have any questions at all for us, I hope you'll please ask them shortly.

Before we begin, I want to thank the Poetics Program and especially Myung Mi Kim for allowing us the opportunity to have this event, and also my co-panelists for all of their time in what is always a very busy month of September. Also, I'm happy to announce that tonight we will be having an 8:00 pm poetry reading with Mike, Marie, Nancy, and Edric at the Western New York Book Arts Center, 468 Washington Street, which I hope you'll all be able to attend.

## Sustained Performance or Meditation Over Time

**Edric Mesmer**, Poetry Cataloger  
University Libraries, University at Buffalo,  
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Of *Yellow Field* I call myself collator, collator of an international forum of field, where field is merely material page and what it can bespeak. Akin to curation, I consider what I do a bringing together, rather than an editing—I do not alter the content of the work contributed. In this regard, my “day job” as poetry cataloger resembles my “nighttime kitchen table” job of producing a little magazine. And contrary even to a stringency of collecting, within the parameter of a contextual mission statement, I may not even alter so much as *foster context* in providing venue. This is also to some degree what a collection does—in the case of the Poetry Collection of the University at Buffalo, it does so exhaustively.

I see my collating as in defiance of coterie. Coterie is educing, and perhaps it is coterie I most envy...but ultimately do not comparatively find of (*as much*) merit. This is not the same as saying I'm disinterested in the local, especially as it relates to and forms the root system for an international commonality—coterie itself a most knotty system! Appositely speaking, I'm most interested—not in solitude or reclusiveness, sociability being wondrous—in sustained performance or meditation over time, as exhibited in some form of productivity (else perhaps

unknowable). (Think also of “sustained performance or meditation over time” as the forging of archives...)

Of the many kinds of cultural space (presumably as many as there are little magazines, journals, archives, and collections), some become overly similar in that they replicate as though temples to a singular deity. I am more interested in a nonexclusive space for metaphorically pantheistic worship. This has not only to do with coterie but with genre, as it has also to do with gender. If schools be like disciplines, let venue be a school of schools or no school at all.

What I feel ardently for is the finding of a small magazine in a secondhand bookshop; say from Vancouver, issued in the early aughts, full of long sequential poems by an author of whom I’ve never heard...only: come to find this is not at all this author’s first, even second, publication of some length. Given that the work is good and reveals itself to be of sustenance to the literary ecosystem of this author’s locale, why does this author publish less than others? This is an author with whom I will try to make contact; ask what’s new; offer pages within *Yellow Field* to.

It might come across as grandstanding to say I would not be *as* inclined to offer as many pages to, say...John Ashbery. This is not to say I don’t admire the work of Ashbery, which I do. But in the natural vying for cultural space, I know that Ashbery will find his naturally enough. *Yellow Field* is a small space, and one I can offer to those whose work I find longstanding in its engagement and perhaps (what I’ve elsewhere called) undersung; equally, for work by emerging writers, beginning to look for venues space; as well as for continued conversation from established writers with the emergent and the undersung.

Let it also be a place wherein intersections of disciplinarity might exhibit, as these too are part of what Curator Michael Basinski would call “the realm of the poem.” The little magazine is an extension of—and thereby extends—that realm. In the case of *Yellow Field*, I want a field that expands beyond the textual to include poetry marked visually and compositionally, as these are a part of the way we read and converse these days, and I want a little magazine to be how we converse—To be that conversation—To be conversant.

*Yellow Field* has become a space for the poetics of the local, of the international, of the visually-sonically-textual, of the inter-phemic, of the mutli-disciplinary, and, of late, of the intertextual. A little magazine is most certainly influenced by predecessors but not necessarily arrived at by repeat performance. *Yellow Field* has roots in many other littles, including some of these (in the interest of space, some from outside the U.S.): Australia’s *P76* and *Taboo Jadoo*, Canada’s *Raddle Moon* and *The Gig*, the UK’s Etruscan Books’ Etruscan Readers series. All of these little magazines

exhibit various aspects of the poetics stated above; they cull long segments of poetry in aesthetic lines that cross borders internationally; they cut by genre; they represent diversely. Eventually, if not inherently, they become conversant as a poetics. With them *Yellow Field* is conversant.

When talking with my students of the little magazine and its history, I would often refer to that icon of the little magazine Margaret Anderson, who said that in founding *The Little Review* she wanted only to find “the best conversation the world has to offer.” This regard for the poetics of a little magazine (—and I don’t mind the term “little magazine” despite its impoverished description) is not unlike the collecting that goes on within a repository like the University at Buffalo’s. It is an attempt to record “the best conversation the world has to offer” in and around poetry, without qualifying whose “best” is at question. The archive becomes, by analogy, the logging of all conversations possible to record.

And these conversations must somehow be made discoverable....  
Which brings me away from the kitchen table to my “day job”  
as cataloger.

To catalog is to care for discovery, as separate from but related to caring for the acquisition or preservation of the physical/virtual entity itself. *I care for* the representation of the poetry object (be it book, magazine, broadside...bottle, tumbler, sextant), rather than for the poetry object itself. In the pooling of resources from catalogers around the world into the international Online Computer Library Catalog, there is a need for allotting equal attention to works by John Ashbery as to those by that locally-known poet at work in Vancouver. In fact, the Ashbery poetry objects will be so more widely circulated, so many other catalogers having polished its representative record, as to warrant less attention from this cataloger.

Here, emphasis falls upon the reader in search....Upon a public. What is a public? What, a readership?

Within the ethics of librarianship (in which I presently include curation) there exists the potential for a readership of one—For many readerships of one—present and future. And [this readership of one] and [this readership of one] are equal to one another, and to the readerships of the many. It is what makes cataloging and network-tracing (—I’ll say it—) fun, and inexhaustible.

For it seems we are leaving the iconic shelf of the few for a hypercanon of the ubiquitous. And here there will be need for more little magazines, more curating, and more catalogic points-of-access for that increasingly possible readership we call One.



## “The Maker’s Rage to Order:” Poets as Curators of Poetry

Marie Elia, Processing Archivist,  
The Poetry Collection of the University Libraries,  
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In her essay “Disruption, Hesitation, Silence,” Louise Glück (1995) writes, “I am attracted to ellipsis, to the unsaid, to suggestion, to eloquent, deliberate silence.... It is analogous to the unseen; for example, to the power of ruins, to works of art either damaged or incomplete. Such works inevitably allude to larger contexts; they haunt because they are not whole, though wholeness is implied: another time, a world in which they were whole, or were to have been whole, is implied. There is no moment in which their first home is felt to be the museum” (p.73).

This resonates deeply with me as an archivist, particularly in caring for literary manuscript collections. As a professional archivist, I am bound by a code of ethics, particularly in relation to history and memory. The code states that “archival materials ... serve as evidence against which individual and social memory can be tested. Archivists preserve such primary sources to enable us to better comprehend the past, understand the present, and prepare for the future.” As a steward of the materials trusted to my care, the choices I make can help or hinder a user’s ability to understand the story of a collection. And yet, in the same way that an art conservator will make sure that her work is visible, distinguishable from the original, my choices to order and document a collection must be visible. My work is a gesture toward the whole, a guide to suggest further conclusions and inspire further examination.

Each archival collection is unique, and each has a story to tell. My job as an archivist is not to make assumptions or extrapolate wildly, but neither am I expected to work in a vacuum. The archivist listens to the materials—and by extension to their creator—to learn what is trying to be told. The basis of archival arrangement and description is *respect des fonds*, a concept consisting of two sub-principles: provenance and original order. To preserve provenance, materials that were created or assembled by a person (or organization) must be kept together, not mixed with materials from another entity; to preserve original order, the archivist maintains the physical or intellectual organization (where possible) of materials as imposed by the creator. That is to say, I may look at a seemingly haphazard grouping of a poet’s papers and see no discernible order, and I might think it makes sense to organize the materials chronologically, but as soon as I disrupt the original order, I may destroy delicate threads that would have told a story I did not anticipate. Yet maintaining original

order is balanced against the ultimate mandate to provide broad access to materials. Sometimes a collection arrives stuffed into shopping bags or boxes with no evident organizational scheme. To describe such a collection in its original state would impede access, as most collections are not described down to a single item; instead, archivists arrange materials by identifying the logical groupings within the whole, constructing a new organization when the original ordering has been lost, or establishing an order when one never existed.

Archivists also practice selection, particularly those charged with the care of corporate, government, or institutional archives; they choose which materials to preserve or discard, understanding that not everything can be maintained in perpetuity. My role in a literary manuscript collection rarely calls for discarding materials, but I do make choices by what I choose to highlight when I describe the collection. I try to listen to the materials and represent them as they are. Although my description usually comes straight from the source—the name and date from a batch of letters, the titles and dates on manuscript drafts—so much of my work to assemble an archival finding aid, a document that represents the collection, is interpretive.

As a writer, specifically as a poet, I use language to conjure, to compel readers to see what I want them to see. Deception, “deliberate silence,” manipulation—all of these methods are fair game. When I worked as a bibliographic cataloger—comparable to but different from a processing archivist—I often felt that my library catalog records were like poems: Highly symbolic language that represented a large concept. The codes for certain sets of data, the choosing of subject headings from an approved list that most appropriately described the book, this felt like writing a poem in form: The beauty was finding the elegance within a prescribed framework. Archival description allows more freedom—or more leeway, at least. The archivist, within recommended guidelines, is at liberty to create the documentation that she feels is most effective to aid in discovery of the materials. I often find myself staring at a collection and wondering where to begin, not unlike staring at a line on the page and wondering how to make a poem out of it.

As an archivist, my role is different from a curator of art or manuscripts. I do not select the collections that come under my care, but “care” is where my role does take a turn toward curation. I take care of the materials: Physically, I try to protect them from damage and deterioration; intellectually, I promote their use to keep them “alive.” But I do make choices along the way that are similar to a curator assembling an exhibition or deciding to acquire a new item. Ultimately, I decide which breadcrumbs will be left out for readers and researchers to follow to the

collection. I decide how to summarize and contextualize a collection when I create a Scope and Content note for the finding aid. I create an avatar, the collection's face to the world, doing my best to amplify its voice.

In another essay, "Invitation and Exclusion," Louise Glück (1995) writes "The human voice [in "The Idea of Order at Key West"] is the artist's instrument, as instance of 'the maker's rage,' the rage to order, to give or discern form... And the poem is a poem of independence—the independent figure of the singer, the song itself, which becomes an environment, a made thing independent of its origins, subsuming, mastering those origins. Origins... are here secondary. The song is sung, and it is impossible not to stand in awe of a process so majestic, so exhilarating, so conspicuously private" (p. 118). The curator, like the poet or the singer, creates something new. However faithful to the materials, our choosing, arranging, describing, emphasis or de-emphasis of items creates a new context out of the original. As an archivist who is charged with—gifted with—the role of caring for poetry and sharing it with the world, I like to think that my choices broaden the reach of poetry and individual poets. My "rage to order words" preserves the work and sustains it in memory.

## References

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## Who Cares? Notes for "Acts of Curation"

Nancy Kuhl, Curator of Poetry Yale Collection of American Literature  
Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library  
Yale University

I imagine that, like me, every literary curator works with his heart on his sleeve—what we do is, after all, rooted deeply in the enchantments of language and voice. Here is literature and its making; here, in the writer's hand, is a record of her mind. Manuscripts and notebooks are obvious examples of this, but sometimes the address is more direct. Among the poem drafts and typescripts, letter files, snapshots, and printed matter Langston Hughes included in his archive at the Yale Library was Ralph Ellison's 1945 article "Richard Wright's Blues," a reprint from the *Antioch Review*. Above the title, Hughes has written: "This young man is our best critic. Langston." This should not be misunderstood to be an unsent note to an unidentified friend—here, Hughes was addressing distant future readers. He was addressing me—and you, too. Such messages appear

throughout the poet's archive; he speaks to us, directly, and to others yet to come. Curating a literary collection is suffused with such points of contact, with the lasting and deep impression of the humanity of those whose creative work and life-records for which we care (and we interact with the records and traces of the body as much as those of the mind—take Walt Whitman's eyeglasses, for example, or T. S. Eliot's waistcoat, or a key to the Yale lock Gertrude Stein mentions in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*).

In his prompting remarks for “Acts of Curation,” Jim Maynard highlights the etymology of the word *curate*, calling our attention to the role of care that underlies what we now call curating. Truly, in all its present possibilities, the word *curate* suggests mindful attention and thoughtful selection. In the context of library collections—where “care” must be understood to suggest in part the durational acts of *taking care* or *caring for*—perhaps etymology also reveals something about the ways time and the progression of cultural imagination inform the work of curators of poetry collections in institutional contexts.

For a dozen years I have been a curator of the Yale Collection of American Literature, a remarkable collection of books, literary archives, individual manuscripts, correspondence collections, photographs, artworks, personal effects, and other texts and objects. Archives and library collections like the Yale Collection of American Literature raise compelling questions about history and possibility. Such a collection is at once fossil record and crystal ball. It is a kind of time machine. As collections, texts and remnants accumulate and become the timeless and active mind of our culture. Caring for such a collection includes ordering and fixing what might otherwise be a chaos of image and impulse, those dreadful, hopeful, difficult, gorgeous matters that are finally the poet's domain. The curator's responsibilities must include cultivating—among our allies and our enemies—a sense of archival and poetic time that is at once historic, real, and wildly speculative.

Building a collection of books, manuscripts, and archives is, after all, a wildly speculative business. A curator is in the practice of anticipating future aesthetic and cultural trends, future scholarly interests; of any possible acquisition, one may ask: will this be interesting in 100 years? Any acquisition may feel like a gamble with limited resources (limited funds to make purchases, to be sure, but also limited staff and other resources, limited space to store collections—and these concerns multiplied over decades, perhaps centuries). The idea of not acquiring an archive or collection may be a still bigger risk—in some cases, without a permanent institutional home an archive or collection might vanish from the record, be delivered to the dump or otherwise lost for the ages.

Small and large pieces of the literary record may be lost to fire or flood or foreclosure, but most library collections are shot through with much less dramatic gaps. Like tree rings, a collection's empty spaces may show periods of scarce resources. Or they may reveal a curator's disinterest alongside her enthusiasms. If rich holdings in one area reveal something of a curator's genius, the scarcity of books and manuscripts in another area may suggest the limits of his literary imagination. Our days always become history and time itself may limit the imagination. Though I lose sleep trying to identify and address my own blind spots, I can't hope to know what the gaps I leave for future curators will reveal about my American poetry.

My past colleagues are present to me in many ways, but mostly they are guides and mentors. And yet I have my own work to do. I keep what has been handed down, preserve it, or modify it. I move among existing avenues adding my curiosities, my time-bound knowledge, the specific and often unaccountable opportunities of this moment. The Collection persists and like the proverbial river, somehow it is never the same Collection twice. It moves and changes in time, reflecting its inevitably evolving aesthetic, intellectual, and social contexts. My role as curator includes the attempt to gather the evidence of that evolution, allowing the collection to absorb it, to change alongside, or within, the worlds it documents.

Library collections have much in common with poetry: they tell our stories and house our secrets; they simultaneously inform and record the ways we know and understand ourselves. Like the art and life it documents, the archive may be starkly, luxuriously, openly, plainly, obscurely, and profoundly beautiful; it may be inexact, partial, frustrating, and opaque. Like poetry, indeed, like language, the archive offers moments of troubling ambiguity and moments of brilliant clarity. This complex richness can bring us back to the matter of *caring*, the curator's necessary preoccupation with the safety, visibility, availability, and long-term stability of his collection. The curator casts the idea of care in a most expansive way, aiming to answer at every turn the questions "who cares?" or "why care?" I mean, of course, that the curator is and must be an advocate for his collection and for that which allows it to remain vital: for funding and the development, description, and preservation it may enable; for imaginative engagement with collection users near and far—students, researchers, and interested readers of all kinds; and for long-term institutional commitments not only to our existing collections but also to the living arts they represent and the scholarly and curricular possibilities they afford.

## Towards a Poetics of the Poetry Collection

James Maynard, Associate Curator  
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As archivists, editors, catalogers, and curators, we actively build collections, finding aids, cataloging records, editions of books, magazines, and exhibitions. These are all made things, and thus subject to the many kinds of analysis that the poet Robert Duncan (2014) implied when he once defined poetics as “the contemplation of the meaning of form” (p. 30). Thinking specifically about archival collections, one could imagine different kinds of archives informed by different notions of poetics. What I would like to do in these short and loosely connected remarks is to consider the specific form of the Poetry Collection writ large, and to argue that when Charles David Abbott began assembling the collection in the mid-1930s, he began building one that to this day has been defined by a poetics of impossibility, flux, multiplicity, relationality, use, and love.

From what we know of the collection’s earliest beginning, Abbott’s dream was founded from the start by the grandiose and impossible idea of representing all of modern poetry. Indeed, all of his writings about the Poetry Collection are obsessed with the necessity and haunted by the difficulty of “completion” in regards to acquiring all Anglophone poetry publications and, wherever possible, the manuscripts and letters of Anglophone poets. In a February 1940 essay in *Poetry* magazine, he articulates his desire to furnish manuscript “materials for the whole of modern poetic activity” (p. 266) by representing “every poet who, by the standards of any existing school of criticism, was of interest or importance—sociologically, historically, or aesthetically” (p. 259) in order to provide scholars with the “complete materials” (p. 258) they might desire. Eight years later, writing in the introduction to the collection *Poets at Work* (1948), he outlines in greater detail his “endeavor to build, piece by piece, a collection of books which would include every text by a twentieth-century poet writing in English” (p. 7) and defines the overall “goal” of his project to be nothing less than “the total representation of an era’s important poetry” (p. 33). Although for some curators the qualification of importance might lead to a “great books” collection, Abbott was catholic in his professional approach to representing the total state of Anglophone poetry, and in hindsight his collection parameters appear more pragmatic than partisan. And significantly, though he speaks of poetry as a totality, in practice he never assumes it to be fully totalizable. Instead, the idea of poetry’s “completion,” the whole art as

manifested in its great variety of materials forms, stands as something unrepresentable, a sublime idea at the center of the Poetry Collection's philosophy of collecting that always exceeds the actual physical collection. "There is no end to what remains still to do, since the ideal of completeness will always beckon," Abbott writes (p. 5). "And we would keep constantly in front of us the goal of completeness, that desert mirage, forever vanishing to reappear in the distance" (p. 7). Now almost eighty years after Abbott first opened the doors of the Poetry Collection, this impossible horizon beckons and recedes as strongly as ever in the twenty-first century. Collecting poetry to the extent that we do was and is an infinite task, and in a perverse sense it's very impossibility is in part what makes it so appealing; the "poetry project," as Abbott originally called it, remains forever unfinished.

In his attempt to represent Anglophone poetry in the largest scale possible, Abbott was making a conscience decision to collect for researchers of the future. While the hand of the curator is never completely absent, invisible as it sometimes may appear, Abbott's collecting parameters were an attempt to subvert or transcend—as much as one can—the individual tastes of the contemporary moment. At first, such a position might seem to be an escape from or evasion of the politics of poetry and the endless partisan debates which surround it, but in fact the belief that all poetry is worthy of being collected is itself an ideological position of inclusion, and one that places the burden of valorization on the future. Abbott was explicit in stating that he was curating a collection for the needs of scholars to come and the canons of tomorrow and since both are presently unknowable, the best bet for creating a collection of continuing use would be to cast as wide a net as possible and to collect without prejudice—as much as one can.

If the Poetry Collection was designed to provide telescopically a glimpse of poetry's totality, its microscopic level is predicated entirely on the basis of flux. From the beginning, Abbott (1948) sought to provide for researchers every published iteration of every poem written by twentieth-century poets, a textual evolution that he described as "the whole sequential body of a poet's printed work" (pp. 7-8), with the assumption that every different version would contain textual changes of large or small significance. Consequently, every publication after a poem's first appearance is selected for the collection on account of it being some kind of variation on what has come before. Difference thus becomes the preeminent criteria for selection, providing access to "the whole life history of a poem's...development" (Abbott, 1940, p. 259) originating in what the French call "avant-textes" and their potentially multiple revisions continuing through, in some cases, appearances and often first

publications in little magazines followed by first and all subsequent book publications (e.g. first and subsequent editions, selected works, collected works) up to and including all posthumous editions. From serials to books to broadsides to anthologies and onward, textual changes are likely to appear, and, since publishing is a social activity, these may not always be the intent of the writer. And even when textual variants don't appear, every different presentation of a poem presents or stages that work in a different context—from typography to page design to illustrations to accompanying texts etc.—which can lead to a host of interpretive differences. Much archival work begins in learning how to read to read these various contexts, be they visual, historical, cultural, or social.

Textually speaking, the Poetry Collection holds a multiplicity of versions and variants that both pluralizes and embodies our understanding of poems. In other words, what textual variation teaches is that there is no abstract text apart from each material manifestation, and the longer time one spends with manuscripts that harder it becomes to privilege one over another. Thus, as with the four folios of Shakespeare or the different editions of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* or Joyce's *Ulysses* or Moore's poem "Poetry," each edition stands discretely with its own provisional authority in some kind of evolutionary relationship with all the rest.

Central to Abbott's curatorial poetics is the belief that poems are always in motion, and that certain kinds of research are made possible through analysis of these changes. If we extrapolate outwards from the work of individual poems back to the state of poetry, is it too far a stretch to propose poetry itself as a liminal condition always in a state of transition into something else? In my imagination, at least, the state of the art is an endlessly open question, unsettled diachronically by its constant change and synchronically by its multiple and often contradictory forms and theories. Thus, to speak of *the* Poetry Collection implies something falsely monolithic, as poetry is always necessarily plural.

For Abbott, the particular value of literary manuscripts, or what he called "worksheets" in distinction to fair copies (1948, p. 4), lay in the evidence they provided—the most direct and intimate evidence available, in fact—of a writer's idiosyncratic creativity. As early as the late 1930s he was already soliciting American and British poets for complete "dossiers" containing all extant drafts of individual poems (1940, p. 259). He believed he was creating a "laboratory" for the study of creativity (1948, p. 5), a research collection that, by documenting one's revisionary practices, could provide an archeological "footprint" (1948, p. 14) or "a kind of biography of the author's mind" (1940, p. 259). One gets the sense in reading his various remarks that he thought he was lifting the veil on genius and allowing critics to move "closer towards the heart of



the poem's mystery" (1948, p. 12). To our ears today this can sound uncomfortably close to the concept of intentionality and the belief that one can ever know the mind of a writer. And yet, having heard last year a truly remarkable talk by Dirk Van Hulle in which, borrowing concepts from cognitive science, he interpreted passages from Beckett and Joyce's notebooks as a form of their "extensible mind"—i.e., the mind externalized on to paper—I've since been reconsidering what a "biography of the author's mind" might mean.

Like the materials they collect, archival collections are equally a product of their historical moment. In *Collecting as Modernist Practice*, Jeremy Braddock (2012) argues that the act of collecting is "a paradigmatic form of modernist art" that can be seen equally in modernist literary anthologies and private art collections that both intervened culturally to form what he calls a "provisional institution" (p. 2, 3). Extending the ideological nature of modernist anthologies and their function as an alternative social construction, he also identifies American university archives, and the Poetry Collection in particular, as originating from that same modernist impulse to collect. While I think he is correct that a certain homology exists, I don't think his theory can account for Abbott's conscious decision to collect widely and inclusively, which seems in fact a very different collecting strategy than what Braddock derives out of partisan anthologies, magazines, and art collections. In fact, there seems something anticipatorily postmodern in Abbott's conscious decision to collect inclusively, and at the same time something Romantic about his hope to make visible the traces of poetic inspiration and creativity. That said, I don't know exactly what Abbott would make of our collections of ephemera, audio materials, mail art, photographs, artwork, and zines; they are the product of what a later generation recognizes as essential to the study of poetry. He himself situated his project squarely in what he called "the age of psychology" defined by a "contemporary will to know" the innermost workings of the mind (1948, p. 32). Here Abbott's forecasts have not come true, as multitudes of psychologists have yet to turn to manuscript studies in the ways he imagined.

If all archives share an ontological condition, it is one based on the *relationality* of their constitutive parts. Thus we speak of archives as collections, assemblages, networks, or constellations. In a large specialized collection like the Poetry Collection, where letters cross back and forth from one person's archive to another, and different literary communities overlap in the publication histories of books and in the contents pages of little magazines, one can easily develop the paranoia that all things are potentially connected. Since first hearing it quoted by Peter Tytell, a forensic document examiner specializing in typewriters and typescripts,

I've taken as talismanic what's known as the exchange principle of Edmond Locard, father of modern police work, which I would carve as a motto above the Poetry Collection doors: "Every contact leaves a trace." One could spend several lifetimes in the archive and not even begin to exhaust the connections and contacts waiting to be discovered. I am also quite fond of Alfred North Whitehead, the beloved philosopher read by many a poet, and his approach to relationality as articulated in *Process and Reality*, according to which all individual things always already exist in some relationship with everything else in their environment. More specifically, I've often thought his concept of the world as an "extensive continuum" to be a fitting description of the archive:

This extensive continuum is one relational complex in which all potential objectifications find their niche. It underlies the whole world, past, present, and future.... An extensive continuum is a complex of entities united by the various allied relationships of whole to part, and of overlapping so as to possess common parts, and of contact, and of other relationships derived from these primary relationships.... This extensive continuum expresses the solidarity of all possible standpoints throughout the whole process of the world. (Whitehead, 1978, p. 66)

All archives must make a decision regarding the competing interests of preservation and use. From its beginnings the Poetry Collection has chosen a position somewhere closer perhaps to the latter end of the spectrum than other institutions. Eschewing the value of a research collection acquiring books in mint condition, Abbot (1948) writes that "Mint copies, bindings that no finger has ever touched, pages unsullied by the human eye, are fair game for the connoisseur; we do not shoot in the same field. Our books are for use" (p. 25). In this regard and others I am a pragmatist in my personal philosophy, and would argue that the true value of the Poetry Collection lies in the ongoing use that is made of it by scholars, students, poets, and others.

Given the etymology of the word curator from the Latin *curare*, meaning to care for, I'll end these remarks with an aspect of the Poetry Collection's poetics that is more difficult to quantify and yet remains essential to its operation: love. In the introduction to *Poets at Work*, Abbott (1948) recounts his initial decision to dedicate his yet-to-be-determined research collection to the acquisition of twentieth-century Anglophone poetry: "This kind of downright master-building compels a strict specialization. It requires love, a purposed and resolute attachment that will not diminish in strength, however long and slow the period of construction" (p. 6). What can we say about care or love as a curatorial requirement that doesn't sound cliché or sentimental? However, at the

risk of both, I agree with Abbott that to curate a collection like the Poetry Collection requires such an endless dedication. Without a doubt the past two curators have been for me personal examples of such care. And I cannot imagine a future of the Poetry Collection without such care—for the endless, impossible, beautiful commitment to the ongoing evolution of Anglophone poetry in all its material forms.

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## Curralating

Michael Basinski, Curator  
The Poetry Collection of the University Libraries  
University at Buffalo, The State University of New York.

A piece of mailed arrived addressed to Michael Basinski, Cur.

Now, for more than three decades, I have labored in the poetry mines of the Poetry Collection of the University Libraries, University at Buffalo, The State University of New York. As I grow ever older, the name of the Collection ever grows longer. The Poetry Collection began in 1935, according to Charles Abbott, that person who first imagined it and founded the Collection. He fashioned the Poetry Collection to satisfy a poetry book collecting compulsion and to satiate his desire for poetry. He was an English professor and trained to do just that. However, he was convoked by the poem. Many are called but few are chosen. I might have done other things. I do not know what. Perhaps mattress tester or I could

have been a truck driver like my father or worked on a line assembling refrigerators? But there was the poem and always poetry. A curator has no free will.

So, I have been here, as in the Poetry Collection, for ninety percent of my adult working life and for more than a third of the life of the Poetry Collection. It has always been poetry and specifically a library of poetry that held me in this place. This poetry library is more than a library. The Poetry Collection is part museum and art gallery, part old-time research library, a tourist destination, Delphi, a poetry chat room, some otherworldly hybrid from the future, and it is very specific. The Collection contains poetry, poetry, poetry from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and wants and wishes it all. It is a poetry monument unlike any other. The imagination of the Collection is seductive and intoxicating. It is demanding and I find the demands most satisfying. I like the craving. I didn't set out to do this. I had no interest in working in a library, curating a monument, and I had, really, no interest in a career. I never really liked work at all. I cannot, however, imagine being any other place. What was and is endlessly completely fulfilling was and is servitude, serving an ideal in the community of poets who make poetry, the most ignored art form or our many art forms. Severin von Kusiemski! It is not a job but it is. It is not a career but it is. It is not fun but it is. A curator passionately acquiesces to the imagination of a collection. A curator must be crazy.

It always amuses me when individuals comment that I have the best job in the world. As if I show up to play in the realm of the poem each day as one would, for instance, step outside and garden, in the warm sun with leisure in July with lemonade or a beer and after the weeds are gone there are just pheromones, bees, and blossoms and the rest of the day is waiting for the moon. Contrary, arriving at work is stepping into a poetry warehouse and its metaphor I pull from memory when I once worked at Buffalo China. I pile boxes of caprice cups in one place and load conservo plates by the box onto trailers destined for Holiday Inn and White Tower. Or even more focused the Poetry Collection is a boutique supermarket because there are the consumers, the shoppers. What might they want? A folder of John Ashbery letters? An obscure magazine from Paris or Calexico, California? The book *Bad Mayonnaise* is under Wyszomierski. Curators are self-delusional.

Most of what I do is invisible. I use as guide the 1930s mandate for the Poetry Collection of the University Libraries, and that is to manifest poetry's library of record, to create a paradise for the bibliographer of twentieth- and twenty-first-century poetry, and to construct a laboratory for the study of poetic imagination. So I set out each day in a trajectory

to do that, to make that perfect picture without knowing what it is, with hardly any pieces like budget, staff, space, and with some exaggerated romantic loyalty to poetry. A curator must be dreamy and pragmatic. Negative capability. Keats would love it. I think the Poetry Collection is Eldorado. “Gaily bedight, / A gallant knight, / In sunshine and in shadow.” Shadow yes, a curator is doomed to failure. The goal is always in sight and out of reach. This is a good thing. The sting keeps the eyes and ears open in the ever quickly changing patterns and geography of the realm of the poem.

The realm of the poem is a place I enjoy more than the power of stewardship, career, academic, and other worldly accolades. Poetry first or for all curators, it is highest summoning. The stuff must be only first and there is no other call to answer.

Curators I propose should hold an unrealistic idealism and a strong dissatisfaction with the status quo. These qualities allow one to ignore the whims of academic and cultural hubris and to resist the reality that the power of authority can with one pen stroke dampen any naive idealism or succinctly, lock the doors. Therefore, I suggest a curator is never professional and always a playful amateur. Being too professional is playing to the crowd and not to the monument. The centrifugal force of conformity must be resisted. Curators should always be afraid. Deep in the night between prolonged periods of tormented sleeplessness, I dream about excommunication, exile, and assassination. At night I dream about retreat.

Every now and then, over the years, I am asked what do I do. And I offer a canned response: I administrate, I build, I look for money, or I assist faculty and students, or I say I stand round and think about poetry or I put poetry on carts and push it here and there, scrape it up and pile it up, put it on shelves, put all the red clothbound, perfect spine poetry books together and smile, and go out for Chinese food! And rush off to watch *America's Got Talent*. There have been no poets on the show. What do I do? What do curators do? Intellectual, historical, institutional tradition as a group imposes form and wants curators to follow prescribed form, obvious, definable, conservative, and utilitarian form. I suggest, however, curators are involved with the manifesting and facilitating of new forms, otherworldly forms. “Something that you feel will find its own form,” Jack Kerouac. Curators create form.