Poetry as Activism: Creative Engagement with Digitized Archival Materials
ADHO annual conference DH24 Abstract

This short paper will highlight the work-in-progress underway for the University of Delaware Library, Museums and Press's Mellon-funded "Poetry as Activism" project. The "Poetry as Activism" project seeks to push beyond the idea that digitizing collections is enough. Instead, the digitization of unique materials from UD's collections of twentieth century American poets is simply the jumping off point. The primary goal of the project is to encourage and engage various publics to use and be inspired by these materials. The project includes the creation and publication of a born-digital edited collection aimed at undergraduate students, to be published by the University of Delaware Press, which will draw on the collections and feature essays from leading scholars. In addition, the project includes support for a Poet-in-Residence, housed in the Library, who will draw inspiration from the collections to engage the community and university publics, thereby extending the use of these collections in support of creative outputs.

Since the grant period began in January 2023, the project team has digitized about half of the almost 3,858 distinct items flagged for inclusion in the project from the University of Delaware's Special Collections.[1] These items cover a wide range of literary historical periods throughout the twentieth century. The project engages a range of activist movements from large-scale, global movements for racial justice and queer liberation, movements that are both activist and artistic such as the Black Arts Movement, as well as more localized actions like late-twentieth century Indigenous land rights actions in Alaska and the campaign to stop the state execution of Stanley Tookie Williams. The project team has also successfully recruited an inaugural Poetry as Activism Poet-in-Residence to be in residence for the spring 2024 semester. The residency will culminate in a series of workshops in April 2024 on the topic of Poetry as Activism. The Poet-in-Residence engages the heart of the "Poetry as Activism" mission to showcase what can be done on a university and community level with the tools of poetry as well as the digital resources created for the project. The short paper will consider the challenges, successes, and lessons learned from connecting university and regional communities with the digitized resources created for the project at these workshops. By August 2024, work will be well underway towards the publication of an open-access edited collection on the topic of Poetry as Activism.

The short paper presented at DH2024 will consider the state of the project in August 2024 as the project nears the end of its two-year grant period. The mission of the project is to offer resources and opportunities for creative engagement with digitized archival materials—but what does this look like? The project takes inspiration from the work of Amanda Visconti, who prioritized the ideal of a participatory edition in their digital dissertation, *Infinite Ulysses*.[2] The Poetry as Activism digital publication will use the Manifold platform, the interface of which encourages the kind of participatory engagement that Visconti models in *Infinite Ulysses*. Additionally, while the project's outcomes include the creation of resources for communities,

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[1] This number does not include the A/V materials being digitized for the project, as these materials are being digitized by an external vendor.

[2] Visconti, Amanda Wyatt. "What if we build a digital edition and everyone shows up? Public Humanities, Participatory Design, and Infinite Ulysses." Transcript of presentation. *Literature Geek,* 2014.

students, and researchers to use for their own goals, this short paper will allow the project team time to reflect about how the programming components of the project offered opportunities for activist intervention in conversation with or directly inspired by the digitized materials. To play on Jacqueline Wernimont's work, whence activism in a digital collection focused on the topic of poetry as activism?[3] We hope to consider what it means to offer complementary programming in digital and physical venues that make the project available to both global and local communities, respectively. When we offer programming about the project, what is our responsibility as a project team to the activist communities that we highlight in the project's materials? Too, how can we reinvent or reimagine the digital publication as an opportunity to showcase our responsibilities as a project team to these activist communities?

The short paper will conclude by offering reflections on what it means to work on this project from the context of an academic research library. Much digital humanities scholarship considers the often invisible or "illegible" labor of librarians and libraries staff in the creation, maintenance, and execution of digital humanities projects.[4] For example, digitization is a key priority of the Poetry as Activism project in and of itself and as related to the publication of a born-digital edited collection that uses and engages digitized images. The project team hopes to create curricular activities, lesson plans, and opportunities for users of the edited collection to engage in exploring how "digital objects are distinct from physical ones—and that how, why, and by whom they are made necessarily affects the research that they enable."[5] One of the aspects of this project that is most unique is that it centers the work of the University of Delaware Library, Museums and Press's three distinct areas. The project team, including the co-Primary Investigators, consists of at least twenty individuals credited in a [team directory](#), almost all of whom are library staff.[6] The Poetry as Activism project is just one of a cohort of Mellon Public Knowledge grant recipients whose work highlights the important and groundbreaking digital humanities work being done in libraries by libraries staff to rethink standard archival, collecting, and access practices.

Overall, this short paper will offer insights about the work-in-progress for the Poetry as Activism project, potentially including an exploration of the beta version of the open-access digital publication on the Manifold platform, as well as reflections on what it means to do this work in the context of an academic research library and how this project relates to the activist call featured in so many of its materials.

[3] Wernimont, Jacqueline. "Whence Feminism? Assessing Feminist Interventions in Digital Literary Archives." *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 13, no. 1 (2013)

[4] Keralis, Spencer D. C., Rafia Mirza, and Maura Seale. "Librarians' Illegible Labor: Toward a Documentary Practice of Digital Humanities." *Debates in Digital Humanities 2023*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2023.

[5] Smith, Astrid J. and Bridget Whearty. "All the Work You Do Not See: Labor, Digitizers, and the Foundations of Digital Humanities." *Debates in Digital Humanities 2023*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2023.

[6] "Team Directory." *University of Delaware Library, Museum and Press: Poetry as Activism.* 2023. https://library.udel.edu/poetry-as-activism/team-directory/