ASSOCIATION/VALUE: CREATIVE COLLABORATIONS IN THE LIBRARY

In her recent address to a symposium of institutional and private collectors at the Library of Congress, Alice Schreyer used the notion of “ecology” to describe the network of relations that has helped sustain private collectors, dealers, and institutional curators since the modern university emerged alongside the Golden Age of book-collecting in the late nineteenth century. At least since the early 1960s, imaginative writers also have actively participated in this network while curators and librarians have become players in the literary scene. Here, I will be reading the traces of a few transactions between poets and special collections librarians over the acquisition of papers. I want to discuss how collecting decisions affect not only the reception of contemporary literature by scholars and students, but also the conditions under which it is produced. In both abstract and quite concrete ways, curating is a form of cultural production. Looking at the development of institutional collections in contemporary literature from the perspective of the writers who enter them sheds light on the organic nature of the literary world and complicates divisions among insiders and outsiders, academic and radical or avant-garde, even poet, dealer, scholar, and curator.

My examples are rather idiosyncratic, drawn from poets whose literary careers I’ve been interested in. I’m assuming that there are many more such transactions and many more traces to be teased carefully out of collection files. I study primarily contemporary poetry and its cultures. I will limit my discussion to that field because I know it best, although I
also want to suggest that the dynamics of the poetry world are distinct and that institutional collecting has played a more significant role there than in the world of fiction. The literary history of the latter half of the twentieth century won’t be complete until we begin to understand the roles, both economic and aesthetic, that institutional collectors have played. Perhaps more than any other segment of the contemporary literary world, the library positions us to understand the relationship between these two systems of value.

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Let me back up and situate this discussion within current trends in literary studies. The idea that literary history is inseparable from the history of literary institutions has gained acceptance only recently, and there’s still little published work that connects the evolution of the poem on the page with the changing human support structures that make it possible and legible. The much-vaunted contextual turn in literary studies has, for the most part, revolved around realist novels and plays; scholars have tended to read history in and through its fictional representations rather than trace its refractions in a poem’s process. And “history” has tended to mean large-scale social, geopolitical, and economic transformation (the kinds of things people write about in novels) rather than shifts in the workaday conditions of the writing life (out of which new poetic modes are often born). When literary scholars do look critically at the institutions closest to home, we get exposés of the English department and discussions of the culture wars in the classroom, both predicated on a limited sense of the way the university intervenes in culture. In a paper presented at the RBMS preconference in Bloomington in 1995, Dan Traister offered a succinct statement of the problem. He said:

A vast bureaucracy exists to build the research libraries on which scholars depend. That bureaucracy is almost completely unstudied, not by its own constituents, but rather by those
whom it ostensibly serves. This despite the fact that, increasingly, those scholars whom it serves have come to recognize how other bureaucracies and social organizations ... demand scrutiny and interrogation.¹

Vast bureaucracies are difficult to study and easy to demonize. Cultural agency is determined more readily at an individual level; the trick is to recognize how individuals are positioned in larger social wholes. In this enterprise, I’ve found the work of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu most helpful. Let me quickly lay out a few of his terms. Bourdieu describes the relationship between art and commerce by specifying a range of different “fields” in which different kinds of value, or “capital,” circulate. In what Bourdieu calls the “field of cultural production,” where literary works are made, disseminated, and appraised, activities are aimed at maximizing the accumulation of capital, but the nature of that capital varies depending on who you are and where you are standing. Bourdieu splits the field of cultural production into two major subfields, “large-scale” and “restricted” production, corresponding to the relative importance of economic or “symbolic” capital within them. Large-scale production, for example, trade press publishing, is tied closely to fluctuations of the commercial market, whereas in the field of restricted production—the one in which most poets generally move—what matters is consecration by one’s peers.²

In the poetry world, then, there’s an inverse relationship between economic and aesthetic value: If you make a lot of money selling books, your work is probably no good. Instead, what’s up for grabs is recognition and the power to define the terms in which it takes place. When poets put themselves “out there” by publishing a poem, a little magazine, or a book, editing, writing blurbs or prefaces for other poets, giving a


reading, introducing another poet’s reading, and indeed giving or selling material to an institutional collection, they court “authorization”—the recognition of their acts as having literary value. This is a necessary, but insufficient, condition for the kind of academically ensconced reading that may lead to canonization.

I’m not saying that poets publish, edit, blurb, place their papers, etc., in order to make it into the canon, or that if they do these things, they will. In making an argument about the economics of creative work, the challenge is to avoid the alternatives of calculation and naiveté. Poets are neither oblivious cogs in an amorphous cultural machine nor canny operators devoid of inspiration. The point to recognize is that creativity does not happen in a social vacuum. In the field of cultural production, particularly the segment Bourdieu calls “restricted,” no one is “just” a poet; cultural players occupy multiple positions. Creative work is produced in collaborative relations that take many forms. What’s interesting about the quasi-economic, quasi-aesthetic exchanges within the library is that they exist in all these forms at once.

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It’s always a little shocking to observe artists, broadly construed, acting as economic agents, just as it’s odd to find bureaucratic and business figures exercising creative authority. But disturbing as these apparent reversals might be, finding them humanizes the making of culture. The business of selling materials to institutional collections is one in which even the most noncommercial writers engage. I want to turn first to the negotiations of two poets, Ted Berrigan and Lewis Warsh, both key players in the small press movement of the 1960s and 1970s, whose relatively small-scale transactions with institutional collections reveal a great deal about them and their milieu.
Berrigan was a second-generation New York School poet and master impresario of the Lower East Side arts scene. He sold the editorial archive of his magazine “C: A Journal of Poetry” to Syracuse University’s special collection in 1964, when it was only one year into publication. “C” was one of the earliest and most influential products of the so-called mimeo revolution and a spur to Lower East Side art and community. In it, Berrigan collaged his own poetry with work by his friends, then-unknown poets and artists such as Ron Padgett, Joe Brainard, Lorenzo Thomas, and Gerard Malanga, alongside first-generation New York School poetry heroes John Ashbery, Frank O’Hara, Barbara Guest, and James Schuyler. Berrigan didn’t simply select and edit his contributors; he assembled his own poems out of lines culled from their work. In “Some Notes About ‘C,’” an essay that accompanies the “C” archive, he writes, “I was and am “C” magazine.... And I intended and intend for “C” to exist as a personal aesthetic statement by me” (11). For Berrigan, the magazine was a uniquely collaborative form of poetic self-fashioning; editorship and authorship went hand in hand.

What was valuable about “C” for Berrigan—and one imagines, for Syracuse—was that its circulation defined a segment of the cultural field. Berrigan mimeographed “C” on a machine in the back room of Phoenix Books. He distributed the magazine free to neighborhood poets and artists, sold it for 25 cents in East Village cafes and the Peace Eye bookshop, sent it to art world celebrities whose addresses he found in the phone book, and gave it, he writes, to people he “met or even saw on the street that looked interesting (especially girls)” (5). Those vigorous marketing efforts resulted in personal notes, occasional financial contributions, and promises of poetry; Berrigan cultivated readers, friends, and contributors simultaneously. Though they took an economic form, money wasn’t the object of these exchanges, production—of poetry, poethood, and poetic community—was.
Selling the editorial files from “C”’s first year to Syracuse with the assistance of bookseller James Carr was a similar sort of transaction, and it also was inseparable from the poetry Berrigan was then writing. “Some Notes About ‘C’” begins, “It’s 6:15 a.m., just about a year since “C” magazine first appeared”(1). Starting out with a notation of the time, Berrigan echoes a practice that he was recycling at that point throughout his debut book of poems, The Sonnets, which he self-published in 1964 under the aegis of “C” press the same year he sold the “C” papers to Syracuse. Urgent, comic records of location such as “It is 5:15 a.m. Dear Chris, hello”3 and “It’s 8:54 a.m. in Brooklyn it’s the 28th of July and / it’s probably 8:54 in Manhattan but I’m / in Brooklyn I’m eating English muffins and drinking / pepsi” would become a poetic signature.4 In both his poetry and in marketing “C” to Syracuse, Berrigan is concerned with publishing himself in time, seeing even the most mundane experiences in the light of posterity.

“It’s 6:15 a.m., just about a year since “C” magazine first appeared,” he writes in “Some Notes,” “and just as at that time I was scrounging around for money to buy stencils, stamps, paper, etc. (not to mention pay the rent buy food pepsis etc.) so today I am rushing to finish this so I can scrounge up some money to buy the paper for issue number 8.” “Some Notes About ‘C’” was itself a species of scrounging. A memo from bookseller James F. Carr to Syracuse dean Frank Piskor accompanies the document, confirming the library’s agreement to purchase “C”’s correspondence, business records, and manuscripts, as well as the essay that Berrigan wrote especially for the collection, at the rate of $1 per page (it was a little over ten pages long). Without revealing the sum Syracuse paid for the one-year-old mimeo magazine’s editorial archive, we can say that it was more than Berrigan made by selling copies of “C” (or The Sonnets, for that matter) and that it was enough to finance

the next several issues. Like the other scenes of exchange in the field of restricted production where Berrigan lived and worked, the Syracuse transaction was both about the money and not. Like “C”’s other patrons, the library also is a reader and, ultimately, a collaborator in Lower East Side avant-garde activity. Berrigan not only writes “C” into the library, he writes the library into both “C” and his own poetry. Money may be the most concrete object of exchange, but authorization—“I was and am ‘C’ magazine”—is its real prize.

And once in the Syracuse collection, Berrigan and “C” are authorized by association. Syracuse has strong holdings in both American Poetry and American Literary Radicalism, a collection that contains, among other things, a large archive from Grove Press, including materials surrounding Donald Allen’s landmark anthology, *The New American Poetry*. As a graduate student in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 1960, Berrigan read the Allen anthology with great interest and identification; he would later claim that its selection of Ashbery and O’Hara helped get him on the bus for his own go at New York poethood. And when Grove republished *The Sonnets* in 1967 and the “C” papers were housed alongside the anthology’s, Berrigan did, in a sense, arrive.

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Lewis Warsh’s transactions with NYU’s Fales collection reveal a similar process of authorization by association. Unlike Berrigan, though, Warsh did not coordinate his institutional activities so directly with his own self-fashioning as a poet. In Warsh’s case, the value accrued in collaboration with the library rests with the community. Warsh is known primarily as an editor and a publisher. He and Anne Waldman ran Angel Hair Press from 1966 to 1978. Through its magazine and books, Angel Hair helped define the community of writers on the Lower East Side in the late 1960s in the same the way that “C” had in the earlier part of the decade. Around the same time, and just a few blocks across
town, Mel Edelstien was quietly developing the Avant-Garde Collection at the Fales. Edelstien collected impressive runs of experimental poetry magazines such as Bernadette Mayer and Vito Acconci’s mimeo 0 to 9, Clayton Eshelman’s Caterpillar, and Cid Corman’s Origin, along with selected editorial files from these and related little mags (in fact, a good portion of the remaining “C” files found their way there). The Angel Hair Press archive is one of the largest and most complete of these collections.

At the beginning of Angel Hair’s correspondence files, one finds the record of the Fales acquisition process itself, a series of letters between Warsh’s representative, Jack Shoemaker of Serendipity Books, and Dr. Ted Grieder, Edelstien’s successor as curator of special collections. The archive came in installments, beginning in 1972. Negotiations for the second batch of letters appear to have been protracted. Grieder was a skeptical reader, questioning one letter writer’s “current position in the scene” and wondering why there wasn’t more correspondence from another (it turns out that this person lived down the street from Warsh). Suggesting that he would face resistance from the “more tradition-oriented” colleagues whose approval he needed for the purchase, Grieder asked Warsh to provide a “complete dossier” on each of the letter writers in his archive.

Warsh responded with a thick document in which he touts his correspondents’ “importance” to the point where he becomes self-conscious about the term, explaining to Grieder that “all the people involved are important, to different degrees” and that, in his opinion, “each of them has made a significant contribution, either as a writer or an editor, to the poetry world.” Awkward as they may be, though, Warsh’s 1972 assessment of his contemporaries predicts the judgment of current critics of experimental poetry. In his view, Ted Berrigan is “one of the most influential members of the N.Y. School”; Diane Di Prima is “an important member of the poetry community in the U.S.”; Allen Ginsberg is “the most important American poet of the century”; Robert Creeley is “one of the most influential poets in the country in the last 10 years”; and Charles Reznikoff,
associated with the Objectivist movement of the thirties, is “one of the best American poets of the century; extremely underrated.” Here the poet/editor adds the job of literary gatekeeper to his resumé in the service of selling his archive. The economic stakes of aesthetic judgment are absolutely direct in this exchange, and there isn’t an English professor in the room. Indeed, at the time of the Angel Hair purchase, many of Warsh’s correspondents had received little scholarly attention and, with the exception perhaps of Creeley, were hardly taught. Warsh’s canon was a personal one: as he writes in another context, Angel Hair’s list reflected not only his and Waldman’s evolving tastes as poets, but also the stream of visitors who passed through their apartment at 33 St. Mark’s Place. And though he is no Harold Bloom, his pronouncements of cultural significance will ultimately start the canonical ball rolling. (A major book on the St. Mark’s Poetry Project and related scenes is currently in the works, and it makes use of the Fales collection.) As an editor and a publisher, Warsh made art out of his social scene; transacting with the Fales, he helped make it history.

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Louis Zukofsky is perhaps best known as the Poundian protegé whose twenty-four-movement poetic autobiography, “A,” rivals The Cantos for ambitious inscrutability. His career spans the better part of the twentieth century, and although he is linked with the Objectivist movement of the 1930s as well as the Lower East Side scene decades later, he was a far less social poet than Warsh and Berrigan. In fact, he fashioned himself as a poet through his rejection of the social trappings of poethood. Over the fifty years of its composition, “A” progressively sloughs off as much evidence of its human context as possible, creating, instead, its own reflexively literary environment. In the early 1960s, Zukofsky confined himself mostly to his home in Brooklyn, preferring to concentrate on his small family and his massive poem. At the same time, he initiated a
relationship with the Humanities Resource Center (HRC) at the University of Texas at Austin that would contribute to both his own subsequent work and the development of that institution’s collection. Like Berrigan and Warsh, Zukofsky’s transactions with the library were consonant with his poetic choices and his other activities in the literary field—in his case, his anguished rejection of and by it.

In the 1962 preface to a never-published volume of poetry, Zukofsky appears to comment on the special solitude the archive was beginning to afford him. He writes:

> With the years the personal prescriptions for one’s work recede, thankfully, before an interest that nature as creator had more of a hand in it than one was aware. The work then owns perhaps something of the look of found objects in late exhibits—which arrange themselves as it were, one object near another—roots that have become sculpture, wood that appears talisman, and so on: charms, amulets maybe, but never really such things since the struggles so to speak that made them do not seem to have been human trials and evils—they appear entirely natural.¹⁵

Although the tone of the passage is difficult to decipher—a kind of uncanny relief—I read in it the satisfaction of a goal achieved. Through the writing of his magnum opus, “A,” Zukofsky sought to transform the timely vagaries of his poetry and his life into, as he put it, “one work ... always regardless of time in which it was composed ... durable as one thing from ‘itself never turning.’”⁶ In the “late exhibition” of the Texas archive, this ideal is realized.

Repeated assertions of autonomy and “nature as creator” notwithstanding, however, Zukofsky’s canon was obviously the product of what he called in another context “fleshy pencils,” and, in 1960, he discovered that handwrit-

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Zukofsky’s initial participation in this boom was on a significantly lower key. Through Feldman’s efforts, the University of Texas Press agreed to publish “Letters to Louis Zukofsky 1923-55” in exchange for HRC receiving the originals. This publication project was stalled and, ultimately, tabled due to Zukofsky’s inability to get permission from Dorothy Pound for Pound’s letters until 1965. Presented with his entire collection of Modernist-inflected materials, however, HRC agreed to a different deal: it would “buy” Zukofsky’s archive, and Zukofsky would “pay” the University of Texas for its publication of his extremely idiosyncratic work of Shakespeare scholarship, *Bottom: On Shakespeare*, a two-volume collage that seeks to unify the entirety of Shakespeare’s dramatic oeuvre around the phrase, “love sees.” This arrangement would result in a significantly larger first-edition printing than Zukofsky, who had planned to self-publish a hundred copies, had ever anticipated. What’s fascinating here is that the negotiations between Zukofsky, Feldman, and F.W. Roberts, then director of HRC, end up being editorial in nature: Roberts wanted a well-known figure to write a preface to *Bottom*; Zukofsky successfully argued against it. Feldman demanded
that Bottom be dedicated “To Lew David Feldman who made it possible,” and, embarrassingly enough for Zukofsky, he prevailed.

The Bottom transaction was the beginning of a twenty-year relationship between the Zukofskys and HRC. Zukofsky’s wife, Celia, did much of the organizing of the various sales and gifts and continued the process of culling and cataloguing thousands of pages of letters, notes, manuscripts, printers’ galleys, first editions, etc., after Louis’s death. The awkward compromise between art and commerce, editing and sales, persisted throughout the relationship. In the heat of the first sale to Texas, Zukofsky wrote to Cid Corman that he was now aware of the market every time he put pen to paper. His packaging of material was certainly an exercise in marketing. The first submission to the archive includes a blurb page (compiled and typed by Celia) entitled “A Major Poet in Minor Publications.” The sheet contains excerpts from favorable notices on Zukofsky, ranging from a review of one of his books in Poetry magazine, to a curt, but positive, letter from Pound, to what appears to be a letter in praise of Zukofsky from Corman to William Carlos Williams. Also submitted with the manuscripts for sale was a 154-item bibliography of Zukofsky’s printed work, a list of his public readings, including lists of poetry read, and an extraordinary 201-item list of references to Zukofsky, with asterisks marking especially favorable notices. The resemblance of this process of selection and organization to Zukofsky’s poetic compulsion to cull and compile is striking. The Zukofskys divided the material for sale mostly by chronology—organizing periodic packages of the new work—but they were careful not to make the material too readily available, as Zukofsky suggested in a letter to Corman; and they appear to have withheld certain materials related to early “A” until later installments.

The practice of building his collection at Texas seems to me peculiarly Zukofskyan in its cultivated autonomy from the market and its intent to produce a unified, static system out of the flux of life. Jean Baudrillard has
argued with respect to private collectors that the collection allows the subject to “assert himself as an autonomous totality outside the world.”

This fantasy may work for the private collector, but transacting with an institution is, of course, an unavoidably social process. Housed in Texas, strewn with the markings of “fleshly pencils,” and available for consumption by strangers, Zukofsky’s collection reveals its subject to be thoroughly immersed in the world.

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I want to close by gesturing very briefly at another example of curating as a form of cultural production. As if the others weren’t elliptical enough, this one takes place not in the library but, rather, in the work of Allen Ginsberg, whose collection found its way there. Ginsberg seems significant to mention in the context of this discussion for a number of reasons: because his body of creative work was itself a very purposeful archive of contemporary America; because his career forces us to confront and, ideally, overcome the alternatives of calculation and naiveté, commerce and art; and because the purchase of his collection was a significant event in the market for twentieth-century literary manuscript materials, as well, potentially, as in the institutional history of Stanford and the Bay Area literary world and in the landscape of modern American poetry more generally. There is much to be said about all of these things and many other histories of contemporary literature to be written in the library.

Throughout this essay, I’ve been trying to suggest some new ways of thinking about how collecting decisions—collaborations between curators, writers, and the fields they represent—in fact make literary history. I’ll end with a poem that seems to lay the groundwork for this kind of fruitful convergence.

“Death and Fame,” one of Ginsberg’s last poems, begins this way:

When I die
I don’t care what happens to my body
throw ashes in the air, scatter ‘em in East River
bury an urn in Elizabeth New Jersey, B’nai Israel Cemetery
But I want a big funeral
St. Patrick’s Cathedral, St. Mark’s Church, the largest syna-
gogue in Manhattan⁸

Dated February 22, 1997, less than two months before Ginsberg died, “Death and Fame” fantasizes the ideal funeral; it’s a party to which literally everybody comes, the guest list a wild democratic catalog of family, Buddhist teachers, monks and gurus, and then, “most important, lovers over half-century / Dozens, a hundred, more, older fellows bald & rich / young boys met naked recently in bed, crowds surprised to see each other, / innumerable, intimate, exchanging memories.”⁹ A full third of the poem is given over to these memories. The prospective deceased takes clear pleasure in ventriloquizing “gossip from loves of 1948, ghost of Neal Cassady/ commingling with flesh and / youthful blood of 1997.” “Death and Fame” figures a posterity Ginsberg can live with.

I remember reading this poem in The New Yorker the week after his death. By then, the Buffalo Poetics listserv (a virtual community of mostly writers and readers of experimental poetry) surged with posted remem-
brances; it seemed that everyone had had a personal encounter with “Allen,” as everyone called him, if only escorting him across campus for one of the countless readings he gave at universities worldwide. And the accounts were certainly peppered, if not with seduction scenes and sexual initiations, then with unexpected intimacies both readerly and interper-
sonal. Reading “Death and Fame” in the midst of this, I remember feeling a sense of unease at the poem’s prescience; there was something disturbing about the poet’s deathbed confidence, his outsized ego, the mainstream

choice of publication venue. It seemed that Ginsberg, the spokesman for spontaneity and famed practitioner of “first thought, best thought,” had calculated, even choreographed, his own posthumous reception.

Of course, as anybody who has seen the facsimile of the drafts of “Howl” knows, Ginsberg’s poetic process was always weighted toward careful revision, his “confessing out the soul” tuned by a market researcher’s keen sense of pitch. From the dedication page of the 1956 City Lights publication of *Howl and Other Poems*, where he not only names Kerouac, Burroughs, and Cassady, but mentions all of their books and declares them “published in Heaven,” Ginsberg was always a poet of what Leon Edel called “the age of the archive…the great, blaring age of public relations as distinct from private relations.”

“Death and Fame” is the last will and testament of precisely the persona who announced himself in 1956, in the opening lines of poems such as “Howl,” “America,” and “Supermarket in California,” all of which figure the poet at a prophetic remove from his contemporary life-world. Ginsberg’s supreme self-consciousness in those poems enabled him to speak to and for a generation weaned on surveillance, even as it kept him from a full-out, present-tense communion with them. This sense of disconnection—always a little prematurely posthumous—finds its logical conclusion in the gently sardonic close to “Death and Fame”:

Super-fans, poetasters, aging Beatniks & Deadheads, autograph-hunters, distinguished paparazzi, intelligent gawkers

Everyone knew they were part of “History” except the deceased
Who never knew exactly what was happening even when I was alive.
