THE SCARF-AND-MITTEN ADVENTURE:
A MEDITATION ON EMERGENT
POETRIES AND THE LIBRARY

by David Pavelich

No one listens to poetry. The ocean
Does not mean to be listened to.
Jack Spicer, from Language

This willingness to risk failure seems essential.
Ann Lauterbach,
from “Use this Word in a Sentence: Experimental”

One very early morning a few weeks before Thanksgiving, 1965, Lorine Niedecker, a relatively unrecognized poet living on a wound-ed, wooded peninsula near Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin, gathered the overdue books from her dinette table and pushed open her creaky door. The familiar sound of the not-yet-frozen Rock River lapped in the darkness to her right and to her left. She stepped out into the dawn with her breath clouding out before her. That afternoon in a letter to poet and publisher Cid Corman (then living in Kyoto, Japan), Neidecker wrote,

This morning I took the route thru the park to the branch library (the box by its door) to take back T.S. Eliot’s Murder in the Cathedral and Edith Sitwell’s Taken Care of [sic]. Such things I read! Ugh! This was at 6:30, the sun hardly over the horizon, frosty air but I’m always warm after oatmeal. Well, I decided there were books I could read that would give me a healthy and lovely feeling. So I came home and read all nine of your books (nine in six years) that I have besides several pages of Origin. (“Between Your House and Mine,” 74)

Niedecker’s good humor and easy language belie her critical mind. The casual, almost adolescent dismissal of “high modernist” writers such as Eliot and Sitwell is a very real aesthetic judgment. At the same time, the story of her scarf-and-mitten library adventure reveals a second judgment; her frustration with a cold, erudite poetic canon is coupled with the empty and unpeopled library (“the box by its door”). The library is a helpful resource and a treasured one, but the books that they acquire are books that Niedecker
couldn’t read without reservation. On the other hand, as a poet alone in her environment, the books in her personal library represent a poetry and a poetic culture that are as “healthy and lovely” as a warm bowl of oatmeal. These are the books that she could read without the emphatic “Ugh!”

Approximately two years after her letter to Corman, Niedecker composed one of her most accomplished, and eventually acclaimed, works. Winter-green Ridge, a lengthy poem whose triadic lines step from image to image, from theme to theme like a hiker descending a trail, was first published in 1968. Near the end of the poem, tucked into the narrator’s description of church architecture in the gray and glass cities of the 20th century, Niedecker wrote,

... a factory-long body
crawled out from a rise
of black dinosaur-necked
blower-beaked
smokestack-steeple
Murder in the Cathedral’s
proportions
Do we go to church
No use
discussing heaven...

from Collected Poems, 255-56

Churches begin to resemble factories. Black spires stab into the sky. The long screeching “e” (“beaked,” “steeple,” “Cathedral”) and the jagged “k” (“black,” “necked,” “smokestack”) collaborate in cacophony. What Felix Pollak called “malignant growth,” America’s obsession with the large always contaminating the small, is manifested even in these holy places (“What Happened...,” 42). Such a bleak poetic landscape owes at least some of its existence to Niedecker’s reading of T.S. Eliot, accomplished through the availability of a free library. Her use of Eliot’s title as a descriptor, even as a physical reality, is subtle evidence of the impact that a library can make on the work of a writer, down to the microscopic level of the poetic line. In a wider sense, the fact that Niedecker spent her life in rural poverty – living in a shack-like home that had no running water and was heated with oil – never thwarted her learning or flowering poetics, since there was a free library only a short hike away.

This brief anecdote in the life of a single poet serves as a useful prologue to a meditation on the relationship between marginalized poets and their libraries in general. In thinking this way, in phrasing it “poets and their libraries,” poets quickly become local. It is perhaps painfully obvious, although not often
considered, that even poets have to live *somewhere*. After it is written, their work may wander off into other places, becoming the world’s property while retaining the traces and languages of home. As Niedecker herself joked,

I sent University of Wisconsin Milwaukee a copy of *T & G* way back in Sept. A few days ago I wrote: Did you fail to receive? They answer they’ve placed it with regional materials. I should ask: What region – London, Wisconsin, New York? (‘Between Your House and Mine,’ 74)

It is an underlying theme of this paper to encourage thinking about poetry on both a local and global level simultaneously. It is shocking to read in Eric Ratcliffe’s survey of local poetry collections in England that some public library policies stated, “no poets in a cosmopolitan area can be considered to be local poets,” while others believed local features to be “not important” (272). Both policy types doom local poets to obscurity and alienation in their own home towns. These concepts, local and global, are not mutually exclusive, but instead support each other and exist only because of each other. By extension, actions taken by libraries and librarians to support poetry locally have global effect, and vise versa, that initiatives made by the superpowers of the library world (Library of Congress, the British Library) have deep regional and local effects.

Emergent poetry and fledgling poetry communities are, if not actually endangered species, at least neglected ones. The task of defining “emergent” is sticky and wholly subjective. We could use any single definition, or any combination, to suit our purposes:

**emergent**

1. *a:* arising unexpectedly  
   *b:* calling for prompt action:  
   **URGENT**  
   2: rising out of or as if out of a fluid  
   3: arising as a natural or logical consequence  
   4: newly formed or prominent.

   from *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*

Emergent, in our context, also points to that art which is in a state of adolescence, somewhere between the acorn and the sapling. These are the maples that arise, “unexpectedly,” in the backyard. These are the reaching cypresses along the shoreline. At the same time as they attempt to stretch themselves out of the shadows of the poetic canopy, the new poetries take on the stigma of the “as yet unaccepted.” These youthful poetries are unproven and often go dry. It is only a short extrapolation to say that emergent poetries are marginalized in their critical moments – as Niedecker’s work went almost unrecognized during its creation, and has since become a matter of international interest.¹

For the rarified purposes of librarians and libraries, a superficial distinction can be made between two halves of emerging poetry production. The first half consists of the physical products generated by an intricate constella-
tion of private presses, desktop publishers and drowsy, unwitting Kinkos employees. These are the books and magazines of America’s developing poetry. The yin to this yang is the social environment in which poems are written, read, performed and discussed – in short, the physical poem as a manifestation of a social culture.

If we are to believe that libraries are socio-cultural centers in America, and if we are to believe that librarians have any agency whatsoever in the preservation and dissemination of cultural commodities (i.e. novels, films, compact discs, etc.), then we also have to recognize that libraries have a role, an urgent responsibility in the creation and distribution of American poetry. Is this happening? Are recent trends in library policy subtracting from the power of libraries to encourage poetic production? Is it possible for libraries and librarians to become partners in the writing of America’s poems? As we will see, libraries can fit into literary history. Indeed, they can be the loam from which new poetry can climb.

The Materials

Since everybody loves a paradox, let me start off with this now-familiar one: the mainstream of American poetry, the part by which it has been & will be known, has long been carried forth, vibrant, in the margins. As mainstream & margin both, it represents our underground economy as poets, the gray market for our spiritual/corporeal exchanges.

Jerome Rothenberg, from
A Secret Location on the Lower East Side

That libraries are microcosms of ideological conflict is, by now, well understood. Libraries are ideal battlegrounds: open to the public, highly visible and often with liberally open doors to vying viewpoints. It’s enlightening to look to the newsstands, where newspapers and magazines nation-wide are peppered with stories of conflict in the community as they play out, tooth and nail, in the local library. For a recent case in point one can simply glance at the unassuming small town of Marshfield, Wisconsin. A stone’s throw from Horicon Marsh, a stopping ground for thousands of vacationing Canada geese, Marshfield is typically disturbed only by the birds’ perennial trumpeting. In April of 2003, however, a holocaust-denier was given exhibit space in the public library, where she chose to display Nazi and neo-Nazi artifacts and propaganda. The Jewish community and the population in general were outraged. In their own defense, those in charge of the library insisted that the exhibit cases are for open public use: there is no censorship of political stances (Waldman, 5). The policy still stands.

Behind these visible instances of clashing beliefs, a silent and invisible ideological struggle goes on continually among the books in the stacks. At the
center of this struggle stands the acquisitions librarian, arms akimbo, trying to give her attention to all sides. As Donald G. Davis Jr. has suggested, the complexities of collection development echo, indeed “mirror” the complexities of an American culture that is striated with differences: religious, political, racial and ethnic (Davis, 40ff.). Writing in 1998, Davis contended that,

In the past decade, most of the battles, local or national, in the Culture Wars that involve libraries have dealt with the selection of materials and fall into four broad categories: (1) racial and ethnic matters, (2) moral and religious values, (3) socio-political ideologies, and (4) subalternate concerns, those of groups feeling oppressed. (43)

This continues to be the case in the early years of the 21st century.

Yet, ideological differences are also made manifest in the art of writing itself. This plays out overtly in much experimental writing, though it is true for all writing. As Susan Howe solidly notes in her introduction to The Birth-mark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History, “First: the Law holds gibberish off” (2). Much innovative work, which is often accused of being such gibberish, is consciously working against this “Law,” a synonym for cultural restraint. For Howe, the “Law” is a strong arm of tradition, of canon, and its tacit control is viewed by many writers like her as reactionary, even deadening. “Gibberish” is the poetic form that attacks establishment and conservatism.

By extension, books as purchasable commodities bring their politics with them, wherever they go. Poetry in particular has become a world of polarized – in Davis’ term “balkanized” – factions. Charles Bernstein, an experimental poet, critic and professor associated with the Language poetry movement of the late 1970’s and early 1980’s, has coined the term “official verse culture” in order to draw a very clear and political line in the sand of the world of poetry. In an address at the Modern Language Association convention in 1983, Bernstein defined his distinction:

Let me be specific as to what I mean by “official verse culture” – I am referring to the poetry publishing and reviewing practices of The New York Times, The Nation, American Poetry Review, The New York Review of Books, The New Yorker, Poetry (Chicago), Antaeus, Parnassus, Atheneum Press, all the major trade publishers, the poetry series of almost all the major university presses…. Add to this the ideologically motivated selection of the vast majority of poets teaching in university writing and literature programs and of poets taught in such programs as well as the interlocking accreditation of these selections through prizes and awards judged by these same individuals. (247-48).
First and foremost “official verse culture” in Bernstein’s sense is a closed system. Poets who are trained in the system remain within it, often advancing in popular esteem, while other poets – Chicano poets, lesbian poets, and experimental poets for instance – remain at the margins. He goes on to note that, “like all literary culture, [official verse culture] is constituted by particular values,” but that it “demes the ideological nature of its practice while maintaining hegemony in terms of major media exposure and academic legitimation and funding” (248-49).

The economic colorings in Bernstein’s definition are overt. According to his complaint, jobs, grants and book contracts are all at stake. In short, the poet’s livelihood is in the balance. The act of writing poetry is still, as it was in ancient Rome, a form of labor and a form of production, and the product is up for sale. It is a commodity that provides food and roof for its writer, keeps the writer writing, and eventually keeps the writing in the hands of curious readers. It ought to be a cyclical trip. However Bernstein, in another talk, quipped that in today’s America “a piece of paper with nothing on it has a definite economic value – if you print a poem on it, this value is lost” (“The Economics of the Small Press”, 37).

When Bernstein mentions “major media exposure” as a key component to “official verse culture,” we as librarians must take notice. One imagines that Bernstein would identify snippets in *Time*, interviews on C-SPAN’s *Book TV,* or inclusion in a major book club (such as Oprah’s, for instance) as popular exposure. For us, the workers in the information industry, the major media also includes the common review journals such as *Booklist* or *Choice.* As Chris Atton points out in his uncommonly sympathetic (and overtly leftist) *Alternative Literature: A Practical Guide for Librarians,* both *Booklist* and *Choice* routinely ignore the publications of the independent press while their attention to “major publishing houses” is unflinching (112).

It is a glove thrown down in the dirt. The libraries of America are the major purchaser and peddler of America’s poems: the racy poems and racial poems, the limericks and experiments. The poets are everywhere, and they’re selling books.

What, in the face of such a cultural cliffside, is a librarian – and especially an acquisitions librarian – to do? A handful of librarians and literature activists have made suggestions as to courses of action, but predictably these suggestions differ greatly in their philosophy. Kay Ann Cassell, for example, in her column “Small Presses” from the journal *Collection Building,* forwarded the idea the librarians should first “buy poetry that has been nominated for poetry awards and the volumes that win the awards” (39). Although not an outrageous suggestion in its own right, it is surprising to find a push for prize-winning poets in a column entitled “Small Presses”. The six prizes that Cassell places emphasis on are the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Critics Circle Award, the Bollingon Prize, the Lamont Poetry Prize, the Walt Whit-
man Award and the National Book Award. But, while it is true that at one time a radical and controversial poet such as Ezra Pound could capture the 1948 Bollingen Prize while he himself was incarcerated for treason (broadcasting anti-Roosevelt and anti-Semitic radio programs from Mussolini’s Italy), times have changed. As a matter of fact, Pound’s nomination was the catalyst for some of that change, since the Library of Congress transferred the administration of the award to Yale University due to the scandal (Tytell, 302-3).

Although libraries should, due to popular interest, collect the awarded volumes, the limitations of Cassell’s suggestion are obvious when faced with the fact that approximately 2,500 books of poetry and drama were published in the United States in the year 2000. This statistic on its own is not enough, since it comes from The Bowker Annual (2002), a source that cannot possibly survey all of the small presses, the Xerox-and-staple desktop publishers or the most clandestine Thomas Paine-style letterpress work. In regards to serials, the Council of Literary Magazines and Presses admit that there is no definitive count for active literary magazines, because of their wriggly and ephemeral nature. However, their informed estimate is that upwards of 600 independent literary magazines are currently publishing in the U.S. alone. Institutions that specialize in collecting such “little magazines,” such as the Poetry Library of SUNY-Buffalo or the Department of Special Collections at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, currently hold subscriptions to well over 1200 magazines published in English from the United States to Canada and the U.K.

Not only do the six prizes listed by Cassell fail to represent even the tip of poetry’s proverbial iceberg, but the prizes themselves perpetuate the popular and economic success of writers within that “official verse culture” that many writers struggle against. The recent Pulitzer winners between 2000 and 2002 were all firmly entrenched writers, meaning they easily place poems in highly visible venues like the New Yorker or Poetry, are all older white men, and are all published by major publishing houses: C.K. Williams (Repair, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, winner in 2000), Stephen Dunn (Different Hours, W.W. Norton & Co., winner in 2001) and Carl Dennis (Practical Gods, Penguin, winner in 2002). In other words, these men were already successful writers – with or without the prizes. Writers who have been published by the unfortunately named Skanky Possum Press, or the more pleasant sounding Sun & Moon, will likely never win these funds and titles.

Historical evidence, furthermore, shows that these prizes are often tin wreaths that are empty of universal value, a sort of token laurels that are handed from established poet to established poet like a baton in a relay. The lists of prize recipients are, for the better part, queues of names from within the closed system, the roster of conservative poets. In addition, many of these poets are awarded multiple prizes for a single volume, which is oftentimes a “collected poems” or a “selected poems” (i.e. poems which were originally published
years, and sometimes decades, earlier). Now, however, previously marginalized poets like Jack Spicer, Robert Duncan and Susan Howe—each of them a devoted champion of the independent press—have all been wildly examined, in countless essays, scholarly papers and talks, and even book length studies. Critical attention as well as popular following has at least equaled and usually surpassed that of the prizewinners. In 1983, for example, the year that the Kulchur Foundation published Howe’s *Defenestration of Prague*, the National Book Award was given to Galway Kinnell’s *Selected Poems*, published by Houghton Mifflin. Not incidentally, Kinnell’s book also won the Pulitzer Prize for that year. Howe’s book remains a cornerstone in experimental writing as well as a key text in feminist poetics. This illustrates precisely Jerome Rothenberg’s message in the epigraph to this chapter: that “margins” really, by definition, are bigger and more encompassing than the center (Rothenberg, 9).

Taking one step further back in time, the National Book Critics’ Circle Award for poetry in 1982 went to *Antarctic Traveler*, a slim volume by poet Katha Pollitt that was published by Knopf; Pollitt, an active feminist critic, has long since been forgotten as a poet. The same year, in a very different world, Robert Duncan published a short book entitled *Towards an Open Universe* (Aquila Press) and a letterpress broadside entitled *In Blood’s Domain: Passages* (Black Mesa Press) – both, like Howe’s book, were roundly unacknowledged by the major media.

If Cassell’s advice is found to be too limiting, what can be a flipside for the acquisitions librarian? Perhaps the collector ought to follow the path defined by Michael Basinski, librarian at the Poetry Collection at SUNY-Buffalo, who stresses that, “to locate [underground poetry] publications a library collecting small press materials must engage, that is embrace, the culture it is collecting” (22). What this means for Basinski is that the purchasing librarian needs to become a dynamic and integral part of the poetry world, willing to engage socially (“over a cup of coffee, bottle of beer, and yes, dish of ice cream”) and intellectually (writing reviews, articles and conducting interviews) with the poets and poetry that he or she collects (23-24). One imagines a hapless librarian, incognito in goatee and shades, tripping into a Brooklyn café to “jam” with the poet on the other side of the table. Does the librarian pay for two double espressos out of the library’s budget, or out of his own pocket? In the end, Basinski goes so far as to suggest that it would be helpful, indeed necessary to the library to have a “passionate, romantic, perhaps eccentric, [underground poetry] librarian” on staff, working the scene (24). Put another way, that librarian would have to already own the shades and sport the pointed goatee.

Basinski’s article is in many respects less helpful to librarians than Cassell’s, even though Basinski has an obvious allegiance to that poetry which he admiringly calls “unruly and rebellious” (18). Whereas Cassell attempts to alter the habits of the purchasing librarian, Basinski attempts to change her
very personality. And if that is impossible, he seems to demand that the profile of the acquisitions librarian in general match his own job description, a unique position in the library world to say the least. Anyone facing budget crunches and diminishing staff knows that it is simply unrealistic to expect such a thing in a professional, automated world. It is tantamount to saying that in order to really collect gay literature one must be gay or lesbian, or to collect Westerns one must be, in some way or other, a cowboy. If a central urban library has only one active purchaser, his or her profile would be odd in the extreme: a lesbian, Chicana, multilingual, hip-hop-listening, underground-poetry-reading genealogical researcher. Add to that the advanced degree in library science and you have a rare creature indeed.

"Collecting must be organic," insists Basinski. "There are no forms that guide the collector" (22). Yet, one cannot expect every librarian to evolve a sort of "poetics of collecting." This is theoretical responsibility dodging masking itself as "library literature." Basinski's business practices evolve more from underground literature and the social circles that encircle it than they do from any fundamental library practices (Basinski himself is an experimental poet and performer in a Buffalo, New York extension of the Fluxus movement of the 1960's). This lack of "forms," this general fluidity of policy, is perhaps the major obstruction for contemporary libraries to the creation of vital, representative poetry collections.

Perhaps the most sensible approach to collecting poetry outside of the "official verse culture" was outlined by poet, critic and professor Hank Lazer in a paper delivered to the ACRL literature discussion group in 1991. In "Experimentation and Politics: Contemporary Poetry as Commodity", Lazer tactily makes a distinction between the librarian and the library. This binary is inimical to the definition of "librarian" that Archibald MacLeish and others made popular in the decades after the Second World War – that simple equation of librarian=library. For Lazer, it is fundamental and urgent that acquisitions librarians think outside of their box-like offices and explore the bigger literary picture. His charge is therefore twofold: first to acquisitions librarians, and second to the institutions for which they work. If they are able to harmonize, the two united facets can contribute positively to what Lazer calls a "textual ecology."

In appealing to the intellectual agency of librarians, Lazer's approach is not unlike that of Cassell, Basinski or others. On all counts this is a challenge to the interestedness of the librarian. Although it might not be common practice, begins Lazer, "library staff members with purchasing authority must adopt a more skeptical, informed, investigative relationship to the social, political, and economic ramifications of their habits as poetry-consumers" (47). This is far from Basinski's dish of ice cream. It does not require plane tickets to bump elbows with the poets in Toronto. It does not require new job descriptions. Instead, it is a demand that purchasers remember Lorine Niedecker's little scarf-and-mitten adventure: a struggling but ingenious
poet of the independent press trudging in heavy boots, with heavy eyes, to a chilled library that has only the enemies in its stacks. It rests first on librarians’ shoulders to recognize the incredible diversity in poetry, and especially American poetry, which is as diverse as the neighborhoods in any city, or as the landscapes between oceans. It is up to the individual librarian to foster a precocious curiosity beyond *The New York Times Book Review*.

Coupled with Lazer’s attention to the power of the individual librarian is his acknowledgement of the cultural institution “library” itself, what we must assume is a sort of generalized concept constructed from all the libraries of the United States. This is a flaw in Lazer’s thinking. He does not specify particular libraries as more encouraging in ideology and practice than others; nor does he point out what he considers the most extreme wrong doers. Yet, despite Lazer’s outsider tendency to over generalize about “libraries,” policy makers must reply (in agreement or outrage) when he states emphatically, “I believe libraries currently cooperate with a conservative, misplaced hierarchy of values by overvaluing the importance of ‘reputable’ publication sources: trade presses and university presses” (47–48).

It is striking that Lazer believes the cooperation between libraries and “official verse culture” is conscious and intentional, and not the unconscious development of an Althusserian “ideological state apparatus”. But, as a seesaw tilts two ways, it is exactly in this intentionality and consciousness that libraries can find the power to make the change from conservative and reactionary to liberal and culturally embracing. This means a change in policy. This means a change in priorities, and, at the deepest root, this demands a change in the way policy makers and purchasers think of literary production. It is the economy of poetry that needs support. Or, as Bernstein and Lazer call it, the “commodity” of poetry.

Most important to Lazer and others is the need to reclaim collection development from the hands of approval plans. To borrow a term from Mark Czyzyk’s essay on canon formation, approval plans are one of the “mechanisms” responsible for the dissemination of certain poetries over others (“Canon Formation…,” 59). By definition, mechanisms function without thought. Approval orders arrive as a corporate suggestion, which is often taken as gospel. As a result, the books blessed with cultural authority (and automatic sales) are the trade presses and the university presses. But, while the items included in approval shipments are not in themselves unnecessary to the collection, they often restrict the specific orders of bibliographers and subject specialists to a shoestring budget. It might be impossible to tailor an intricate collection of women’s poetry, a pattern so colorful and reaching, with only a shoestring. Automatic purchases could mean that a librarian might not be able to order Lisa Jarnot’s book of poems *Some Other Kind of Mission* (Burning Deck Press), for example, though it was listed as an International Book of the Year in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1996, because it was not part of her Blackwell’s approval shipment.
Hundreds of libraries belong to approval plans. Hundreds of libraries receive the same texts. Hundreds complacently support the trade presses and haplessly create an environment wherein libraries collect a single kind of poetry over and over, while small presses and marginalized writing suffer. The base of American poetry resources in libraries is sadly this conservative culture, and only toward the apex do we see the rest of America’s writing. “Reverse that pyramid,” insists Lazer, support the independent presses (51).

Finally, Lazer approaches his conclusion with another scarlet banner: “It is critical that libraries… stake their limited resources on this utopian project of textual ecology” (54). Lazer is explicit in likening certain forms of poetic expression to rare, endangered species struggling in an increasingly homogenized ecosystem: the American library. This is an ecosystem where Darwinism is a falsehood, and survival depends on the purchaser’s will.

Ultimately, Lazer speaks in the plural; the argument here is dependent upon collective action, a unified action by libraries from Maine to New Mexico to encourage and preserve developing poetries. At the same time as acknowledging that his suggestion is “utopian” and therefore almost impossibly idealistic, Lazer also intimates that such an undertaking would do nearly as much good in the attempt as it would in the result.

Libraries’ attention to the publications of American poets from all walks, from all strongholds of politics and race and artistry, is the single most important action in the preservation of America’s literary history. Libraries must collect locally in order to preserve regional writing, as well as globally. It is only in these materials that we can later reenact the ebbs and tides, the shouts and fistfights, the divisions and comings together that characterize an artistic era. Otherwise, the portrait of poetry’s history becomes two dimensional and monochromatic, absolutely unstriated by the culture’s real colors.

In his important study of poetry broadsides from the 1960’s, James D. Sullivan argues that the publications of the small press “are useful objects of cultural historical study because they bear signs of the otherwise untraceable contingencies of literary reception in which meaning is produced” (148). After all, Allen Ginsberg’s work is only radical in juxtaposition with that of John Crowe Ransom.

After all, a book of poems is an object and a traveler.

Space and the Voice

but come here if ever before
you caught my voice far off

from If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho
translated by Anne Carson
The library can be a prosaic place. Once inside, a library-goer must cope with the slings and arrows of the public space: the phlegmy cough of the man in the next carrel, the cookie crumbs that cover a reading table like a doughy dust, the frustration of a missing book. Perhaps even less encouraging is the watchfulness, or at least the perceived watchfulness of the librarian. As Radford and Radford have made clear, the archetypal librarian is often seen as a threat, one able (and even anxious) to humiliate and punish wayward patrons (Radford & Radford, 313ff.). Like an intellectual owl, the librarian can seem a big-eyed surveyor, roundly “whoing” behind the desk. “Who are you?” “Who are you reading?” “Who told you that you can read such a thing?” Typically the teenager, suddenly broke of his bravado, will retreat to the corners to sneak his peak into Jack Kerouac’s *Pomes all Sizes*.

But the library is what we perceive it to be, and for some it can be a space in which trepidation gives way to exploration, and distance gives out to discovery. In a recent memoir teasingly entitled *True*, poet Rae Armantrout writes of having the sort of experience that the Radfords identify. As a teenager confused about sexuality and her own growing interest in modern poetry, the young Armantrout looked for answers at the local library.

> I remember discovering Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* in the North Park Library. When I went to check it out, the librarian said, ‘Oh, honey, you don’t want to read that.’ But I did. I began to see that there were other people… with whom I might want to share the world.

It’s clear that Armantrout isn’t simply suggesting that her reading encouraged her social life, although that certainly is also true; people have texts in common in much the same way that they have religions in common, or political beliefs. In fact, much later in her life many of her friendships were based to one degree or another on shared texts, such as the writings of Charles Olson or the poets anthologized in Donald Allen’s anthology *The New American Poetry* (Armantrout, 59-63). But on a second and more abstract level, Armantrout found that *The Feminine Mystique* was a manifestation of a will to communicate, an invitation to conversation. Being published, the conversation was open to all and was free of the value slanders of those who couldn’t or wouldn’t understand (for example, the librarian at the North Park Library). In a sense, all of Armantrout’s poems and paragraphs are inscribed as talk among texts. The reader of Armantrout’s memoir is holding in her hands a direct reply in this conversation.

Armantrout’s memoir reminds us that a library, even in this digital age, is important as a place. Again, it isn’t that the library is only a place, fixed in time and location, as Archibald MacLeish, poet and past Librarian of Congress, would have had it in the 1940’s (“Of the Librarian’s Profession”, 786ff.). The librarian does not have to be defined simply by the place in which she works, like a cottony spirit tethered to a haunted house. But it becomes easy
today to lose sight of the physical building through the lenses of “remote access,” ILL, and digital collections. As a place that is theoretically open to both people and texts, a library performs its role as medium for at least two modes of literary “socializing”: groups of people literally socializing together, and individuals interacting with the writings, the talk, of more distant fellow-travelers.

The evidence of this first form of sociability can be traced in some of the almost mythic anecdotes of modernist literary history. The birth of Imagism, the early twentieth century aesthetic that would shape many of the English-language poems written before, during and even after the Second World War, happened abruptly and without warning in the British Museum reading room. That was where Ezra Pound, energetically intense behind his small eyes, coined the term “Imagiste” to describe Hilda Doolittle (Kenner, 174).

That same moment he reduced her name to androgynous initials, and she began publishing as H.D. “We all read in the British Museum reading room,” remembered H.D. some four decades after the fact. “He slashed with a pencil. ‘Cut this out, shorten this line’” (End to Torment, 18).

The very same reading room was the haunt of another kind of modernist author. Gertrude Stein, having recently arrived in London as a fresh dropout from the medical school at Johns Hopkins, spent her hours and days reading through the whole history of English narrative. “She returned to her early love of Shakespeare and the Elizabethans, and became absorbed in Elizabethan prose and particularly in the prose of Greene,” wrote Stein, speaking in the third person through the fictionalized mouth of Alice B. Toklas (Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas, 84-85). For Stein, England was the England of Dickens – a dark and damp and gray-smudged place where the cold was numbing, insistent. The “dismalness” of London was partially lighted by her “discovery” of Anthony Trollope among the books of the British Museum.

It was after this intellectual bivouac that Stein began her prose experiments, which quickly led to the linguistic challenges and innovations in portraiture that were contained in Three Lives (Mellow, 67). For Stein, the library housed a company of authors that she both embraced and waged war upon. In educating herself about what had been done before, Stein was able to shatter those entrenched typologies. Grammar became a plaything, narrative too, and the slight of gender politics was something to bully, to tussle, to reprimand. As she would later write in History, or Messages from History, “Nobody needs paper to make dolls with what they have for her” (17). Paper, as H.D. also knew, was for writing.

Recent literary history shows poets and poetry scenes moving away from libraries as sources for poetry and as cultural and social centers, creating for themselves instead a network of spaces out of bars, cafes, gallery spaces and lofts. The absence of libraries is conspicuous. It is precisely this absence that librarians need to acknowledge, and now is precisely the time to ask the critical questions that scholars and poets are already asking: What is the
social nature of poetry? What are its forms and what, in the long run, are its
results? And finally, can libraries fit into this social system and make a return
to their historical centrality in the production of poetry and community?

In the recent Norwegian film *Elling*, a middle-aged man with a nervous ago-
raphobic disorder discovers that he, Elling, is a poet. Having scribbled his
first awkward poems, and having disguised himself in trench coat and sung-
glasses, Elling sets out for a poetry “meeting” that he finds advertised in the
local newspaper. “It is perfectly natural that we poets go to meetings,” thinks
Elling, unconvincingly. He soon discovers that the venue is a bar in inner
Oslo – the outside all brick and graffiti, the inside glowing with glass and
neon. The poetry, of course, begins late. Elling has already had a few orange
sodas by the time the first reader finally steps on stage. Before reading her
extremely brief poems, she shyly recalls, “I wrote these poems while sick
with malaria in Cambodia.” The poems are imagistic, haiku-like and full of
birds and exotic brambles. But the second reader learned more from Mick
Jagger than from Basho, and he literally screams his poem about a particu-
larly violent homosexual encounter, all the time grinding his pelvis into the
microphone stand. The beer flows. The crowd cheers. The poet yells, “Let
go!” Almost in direct response to this command, Elling runs to the bathroom
and throws up.

Certainly readings are the most common poetry event. Contemporary poetry
readings and their attendees are even more diverse (and some are more har-
rowing) than the three characters that attended the reading sketched above;
the older Romantic, the shy and worldly Earth Mother, the leather-and-tattoo
Decadent are only caricatures of a populace that borrows from the worlds of
snowflakes and fingerprints their tendency to be absolutely unique. Read-
ings pop up everywhere. Poets pop up to people them.

That is what first makes Elling such a representative poet, his sudden ap-
pearance in the Oslo scene. Elling is also quintessential for thinking, “It is
perfectly natural that… poets go to meetings.” In his own way, Elling speaks
a truth that is almost a tautology. Poets are social creatures, whether they
interact face-to-face (as did Pound and H.D.) or within texts (as did Stein and
Trollope). The conversation has no one language, no single direction. Yet,
the conversation must happen for the poem to exist in the world. Even Em-
ily Dickinson, that mythological hermit, reached out in letters and poems to
Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a complete stranger and an older man. The
need to interact and to share is, for many poets, an urgent one.

Open poetry readings answer a poet’s need to find an audience for his words
at the same time as it generates new ideas and new incarnations of an exist-
ing work. In most cases, open readings only require that the poet sign up
to be included in the evening’s event. He will likely be given five or ten
minutes to read. As only one person in a roster that could include a dozen,
the poet instantly becomes part of a group. For this historical moment, the
“scene” is defined by these twelve poets. It also true that much of the audience will likely consist of poets who need to answer the very same desires. Joseph Harrington points out that, “an open reading series tends to maintain open access and formal equality and tends to collapse or at least blur the binary distinction between artist and audience” (172). In other words, these events tend to aesthetic democracy and outward participation.

Creativity blooms further out of this compost. Poets encourage each other, critique each other, and often collaborate on writing. It’s a common sight at a reading to see a poet scrawling desperately in her notebook, like a child at a coloring book, trying to catch the idea or phrase before it escapes into the air. Perelman notes such an experience when he describes the poet Barrett Watten furiously writing while Perelman performed: “he was using the words I was speaking to write with” (33-34). What’s more, a performing poet often changes the written poem in her rendition, choosing to repeat a line or to excise an entire stanza, or sometimes adding impromptu shades and hues to the poem. Real-time mistakes also contribute to the changing picture of the poem; at a reading in Buffalo, the Korean-American poet Myung Mi Kim slipped on a line and twisted her hand as if to erase the words in mid-air. Then she proceeded to repeat the poem altogether, giving it a remarkable repetitive force. 4  “Poetry readings are part of the long biography of poems,” posits Peter Middleton, “part of the distribution from poet to readers, and readers to readers, which takes place through silent reading, memory, active analysis, discussion, performance, publication, and all the many processes whereby thoughts, feelings and knowledge circulate” (293). The long biography of the poem includes its variations at the microphone.

The generative energy in a reading or reading series is directly proportional to the feeling of community that surrounds it. A fertile writing community is one that feels free of threat or inhibition. Harrington interviewed many Bay Area poets and collected some amazing, candid comments about their work and communities. “It makes me feel good about myself,” said one. Another quipped, “It’s sometimes what gets me through the drudgery of work.” Yet another exclaimed that “poetry is the essence,” that it helps you to “develop yourself spiritually” (Harrington, 180-182). These feelings all lead to further creativity and an enriched relationship to other poets.

Related to these community-oriented readings is what might be called the “celebrity reading.” These readings are an opportunity to reach a large audience, many of whom may have never attended a poetry reading before. Of course, only large public and university libraries can afford to have such events. But results can be damaging to any accusations that poetry is a “dead art”. When Alice Walker, a Pulitzer Prize winning poet and novelist, read at the Chicago Public Library in the spring of 1997, she attracted a crowd that filled every seat in the CPL’s auditorium (Higashi, 53). One can imagine a stepping-stone theory of poetry reading, wherein a convert to poetry might
first read Alice Walker, then shakily step to Nikki Giovanni, and perhaps confidently find dry footing in Harryette Mullen.

Besides poetry readings there are its twin siblings, talks and workshops, the poetry scenes’ answers to university lectures and M.F.A. creative writing seminars. The recent development of the talk is made paramount in accounts of the Language movement of the late 1970’s and early 1980’s, where the genre was developed, for all intents and purposes, into an art form of its own. Since most of America’s poetry communities exist outside of any academic setting, talks provide a method of communicating a vast array of intellectual ideas or concerns from poet to poet, or from poet to audience. Far ranging topics most often fit into categories such as critical readings into poetry; theorizing and aesthetics; or reconstructions of literary history. In one account of the late ’70’s, Bob Perelman describes the now famous Talk Series of the Bay Area – in the course of which he hints at performances and talks by poets like Lyn Hejinian and David Antin:

A coffee house in the Haight-Ashbery district of San Francisco, The Grand Piano, was the site of a long-running series of readings; a performance of Zukofsky’s “A”-24; and a production of a Frank O’Hara play, Try! Try! The Talk Series that I curated would include a presentation of Shklovsky and Russian Formalism, a meditation of open versus closed forms, or an improvised performance piece. (The Marginalization of Poetry, 16)

As Perelman suggests, previously airtight borders between “poetry,” or imaginative writing, and “lecture,” or intellectual instruction, have been made permeable. No priority or privilege is given to either poetry or criticism: facets of one are absorbed by the other until the word “performance” becomes equally true for a rendition of Zukofsky’s final movement of “A” and a talk by David Antin. The talk is transformed into something at once informational, artistic and social. Certainly, lines from Zukofsky’s poem are self-referential in this context, such as “I did not want to break up my form” (“A”, 567). Even more relevant is the eventual coinage of the term “talk poems” to pinpoint Antin’s unique, seminal style (Perloff, i).

The most common contemporary form of the poetry workshop gradually merged into a single concept from two opposing tributaries. The first of these was created by the sudden genesis of university creative writing programs after World War II, perhaps the most notable being the University of Iowa’s famous Iowa Writers Workshop. Officially created in 1936 (mature after being the seedling idea of poet Carl Sandburg), it wasn’t until the middle of the following decade that the program fully developed as academe, and professors, visiting lecturers and seminars endowed it with legitimacy (Iowa Writers Workshop, History). The idea for the workshop was almost classical. In academic venues such as the University of Iowa, the structure of the workshop is typically centripetal. Courses are based around a poetry
“star,” typically a popular and published poet, with the students or participants orbiting around her. The instructor creates assignments, suggests readings and critiques the work of the participants. This is a twentieth century analogue to the lyceum.

The second tributary gained water in the 1950’s and 1960’s as an anti-academy response to the rise of institutional creative writing programs. These workshops tended to the centrifugal, meaning there was no central poetry star around whom satellites could gravitate. Authority was decentralized. The workshop leader (or leaders) and the participants were almost always on equal footing in the local poetry community. Often, these gatherings would challenge both the intellect and the creativity of the writers, insisting that left- and right-brain activity were not uneasy bedfellows. A famous example of this species of workshop is vividly described by Daniel Kane in *All Poets Welcome: The Lower East Side Poetry Scene in the 1960’s*. Bernadette Mayer’s workshops at the St. Marks Poetry Project, intensely active between 1971 and 1974, attracted many young New York writers who would later develop into the Language poets mentioned earlier. Mayer infused her meetings with a dancing variousness. The poetry produced therefore cannot be pigeonholed into one style – it lists from the hermetic to the simple, from comical to political. Similarly, Mayer’s “A Reading List to be Added To” included such far-ranging books as Barthes’ *The Pleasure of the Text*, Dante’s *La Vita Nuova* and the *Curious George* series (Kane, 188). As Kane makes clear, Mayer and the Poetry Project created an environment where poets such as Charles Bernstein and Hannah Weiner “socialized and theorized with one another.” The result of this early encouragement is an entire literary movement that encompassed both American coasts, and a vast collective *oeuvre* composed of hundreds of books and magazines.

A legendary instance of such a poetry workshop finding success in a library’s space is that of Jack Spicer’s “Poetry as Magic” workshop, which took place at the San Francisco Public Library. During the spring months of 1957, a group of poets gathered weekly in a seminar room at the public library to participate in this singular experiment – an experiment based as much on social chemistry as on avant-garde writing. Spicer, surrounded by poets such as Robert Duncan and Helen Adam, would assign preposterous and provocative tasks. “Invent a universe.” “Write a poem in which the poet becomes a flesh-eating beast.” “Evoke magic spirits” (Ellingham and Killian, 78-84). These fantastical writing assignments demanded risk-taking, opening each poet up to bizarre imaginative trips and even outright silliness. “How would you cook a baby?” For Spicer and others, the resultant poems were simply secondary bi-products of the community (although many of the poems found their way into publication). Michael Davidson suggests, “these rituals were designed less for the purpose of evaluating students than for reinforcing bonds among members” (152).
It is difficult to underestimate the value of community in American poetry. As we have seen, poems are not only born through communal interaction, but also exist within and inform the community in which they are born. As Harrington has written, “in order fully to understand contemporary poetry as it exists, one must do so in terms of the meanings, uses, and effects of poetry in the lives and communities of readers and writers” (171). This means turning “poetry” as a concrete noun into “poetry” as an abstract one, turning our attention from the material text to everything which surrounds the creating of those texts. Even if a library cannot afford to purchase more volumes of poetry for the collection, it might be able to encourage an atmosphere in which original poetry can take shape.

It is essential for libraries and librarians to recognize the value of that space that they can provide for readings, talks or workshops, because in this recognition is the potential for a second kind of “ecology” of poetry (to return to Lazer’s “textual ecology”). The successful examples of Jack Spicer’s “Poetry as Magic” workshop and Alice Walker’s reading at the Chicago Public Library are indeed worth aspiring to as a form of social ecology, or social preservation. Seminar rooms were virtually designed for workshops and writing groups. Theaters are precious. It seems almost laughable to point out the value in a table and ten chairs, or in a room offset from unsympathetic eyes.

Events created by libraries need to avoid the calendar’s ghetto of the “poetry month” or the “poetry day.” Poetry needs to find elbowroom in all months, all weeks, in order for it to survive. Although some praise should be granted the ALA’s National Poetry Month as a much-needed publicity campaign, it also unwillingly helps to estrange poetry from general attention, from general display (April is, we’re told, the cruelest month). It would be inconceivable to develop a National Fiction Month, or a Biography Week. The “oddity” of poetry is only fortified by special treatment. Why not integrate poetry into the year’s general events? In one account, the Huntington Public Library decided to have an annual “Black Poetry Day,” which falls on October 17 (the birth date of Jupiter Hammon, the first African-American poet to publish his poetry in the United States). On the one hand, this initiative leap-frogged into many venues such as public schools and other libraries, and it helped to spread education about black poets (Ransom, 88-94). Over the years, it has attracted important poets such as June Jordan and Michael Harper for readings and discussions. These moments are invaluable. But on the other hand, it gives the impression that black poets (or poets in general) only need a single day – a single moment – to be heard, and can be shelved for the rest of the year.

Poets need to be heard always and often. To borrow a term from Chris Higashi, re-acclimating the public to the poem’s voice requires “immersion” (52). Otherwise, the voice will always be far off.
Exchange Privileges

In one section of her recent autobiographical sketch *Ceci n’est pas Rosmarie*, a section entitled “What Books?”, poet and publisher Rosmarie Waldrop remembers her childhood in post-World War II Germany.

There was no public library in my home town. The high school had a few mealy cupboards full. So had the Catholic church where I avoided the devotional shelves and went for *Ben Hur, Fabiola, The Last Days of Pompeii*. Father’s bookcase held the German classics, opera librettos and books on flying (airplanes and more fantastic attempts). During one convalescence I read Schiller’s *Complete Plays* and was amused to find, marked in his hand, the lines that made up half of my father’s conversation. But there was a decent bookstore. I made friends with the manager, spent what pocket money I had, and managed exchange privileges. (*Ceci n’est pas Keith, Ceci n’est pas Rosmarie*, 66)

Needless to say, the situation for Waldrop was much more grim than it was for Niedecker, who at least had a library to make braving the raw hands, the wind and cold worthwhile. Their commonality, however, lies in two things – a lack of a satisfying library and their dependence on personal book hoards and bookstores (from independent sellers as well as Borders and Barnes & Noble) or from online resources (Amazon.com being the largest, but there also smaller groups like Small Press Distribution). The pattern is much like that implied by Niedecker in her letter to Corman: displeased with the library, she returns home, alone, and settles in to read the “healthy” and “lovely” books from her own shelves. Community is killed. The old myth of the Dickinsonian hermit is reborn.

Libraries can change that pattern, and draw poets out. The scarf and mitten adventure can become an undertaking of warmth and community, instead of something dusky. Later in her memoir, Waldrop recalls her experience in coming to the United States and joining the student body at the University of Michigan. “Graduate school was a pleasure,” she smiles, listing off the things that thrilled her. “Most important: an excellent library where – amazingly – students were allowed in the stacks” (74). *Most important*. Her nostalgic tone is unmistakable. It is as if she felt welcomed, “amazingly” embraced by the library itself. Soon after, she began translating the poems of the Dadaists, Surrealists and Expressionists into English (from books found in the library), and she co-founded the magazine *Burning Deck*. Since then she has written dozens of books and printed dozens more under the *Burning Deck* imprint.

Libbie Rifkin has impressed upon special collections librarians the importance of recognizing the act of curating, of collection development, of events
programming, in short the *act of librarianship*, as an act of cultural production (Rifkin, 123ff.). Rifkin views the relationship between a special collections library and a poet as symbiotic. In purchasing personal papers, archival materials and personal libraries from poets, repositories are providing badly needed economic and moral support to an art form that often feels slighted. The library in turn gets important unique material and, to put it bluntly, a good reputation in the poetry world. Her words are not irrelevant after passing through the cherry wood doors of the special collections library. They carry truth for any librarian who works where even a handful of poetry volumes are housed. Rifkin, like Hank Lazer and others, sees the librarian as a potential participant in a system of literary ecology.

A common thread runs between the fabrics of commentary on poetry and libraries – cooperation and empathy. Rifkin pleads to librarians to look at libraries “from the perspective of the writers who enter them,” and claims that by doing so they will gain insight into the “organic nature of the literary world” (123). Collaboration between poets and librarians can result in “exchange privileges” for both sides. The sense of support and interest that a library can supply is a sort of intense rouser for poets, and their continued attraction to the library can increase patronage and the circulation of an otherwise forgotten section of the Dewey table. Poet Brenda Hillman, for example, implores libraries to choose “a local poetry advisor or two with eclectic tastes” who can advise purchasers on “must haves” (53). This is only one possibility. Poets can be entertainers, teachers, volunteers and events organizers.

In the sense that “poetry” is a synonym for the very best in human expression and interaction, librarians themselves must become “poets” to collaborate in the construction of a new ecology. Young leaves will grow from a neglected corner of the community, as Niedecker wrote,

> And when an old boat rots ashore  
> itself once living plant  
> it sprouts.

from *Collected Works*, 284


Pollak, Felix. “To Hold with the Hares and Run with the Hounds: The Littlemagger as Librarian.” *COSMEP* 1974.


Ransom, Stanley A. “Celebrate Black Poetry Day!” *Bridging Cultures: Ethnic Services in the*...
Footnotes

1 The first conference devoted solely to Niedecker's work will take place in Milwaukee, WI, October 9-11, 2003. The three-day conference will include lectures, readings and performances by dozens of international (and local) critics, poets and teachers. It is co-hosted by Woodland Pattern Book Center, the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and the Milwaukee Public Library.


4 I attended this reading at SUNY-Buffalo, April 2002.