

Stories that Work

Our Philological Future • Presidential Address,
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Can I have an AMEN?

No, really, can I have an AMEN!

I say, AMEN, my brothers and sisters in the disciplines of documentary and textual and literary editing, because our time has come. The winds of scholarship are, I think, finally blowing our way. It is time to ride the current as far as we can.

Lest you all think I have lost my mind, let me admit that I am surprised to hear myself say such a thing. Indeed, when I finished my edition of Marianne Moore's poetry in 2002, *Becoming Marianne Moore: The Early Poems, 1907–1924* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), I pretty much vowed that I would never edit anything again. As all of us in this room know, editing and archiving are very hard work. My attempt to show Marianne Moore's poetry in all of her goofy textual splendor cost me gray hairs, stomach upsets, and legal fees. My edition ran into copyright changes that nearly scotched years of work. My edition was orphaned at my press and almost left for dead. In spite of hundreds of pages of discursive, classically interpretive material, it nearly failed to get me promoted. The whole experience left me exhausted.

As it turns out, I am headed back to the well of editing Marianne Moore—a well I thought I would never visit again. And fifteen years later, the well and its surroundings look very different. Since my edition appeared, many of the basic

tools that scholars need to navigate Moore's verse have made their way into the world. There are a series of wonderful editions by Heather White, who picked up where I left off, granting access to Moore's poems in multiple versions from 1924 to 1941.¹ There is a brilliantly edited and selected collection of letters.² There is a masterful, beautiful, poignant, and accurate biography that gives Moore's life a narrative arc.³ Some of the most important Moore materials in the Rosenbach Museum and Library in Philadelphia have finally been digitized in the process of basic conservation. The Moore estate has changed hands. And of course, the world of digital technology has changed dramatically. First generations of digital projects and products have tobogganed into second and third. The Smart Phone and iPad have changed computer interfaces and the portability and pourability of content. The E-ink technology, the basis for the easily readable Kindle screen that I reported on to the Society for Textual Scholarship community in 1999(!) has changed the ways in which people read and think about reading.

So I am going back to create, in concert with some of my favorite colleagues (Elizabeth Gregory, Cristanne Miller, and Heather White), a digital edition of Marianne Moore's notebooks—one of the holy grails of modernism. Moore's notebooks contain an exquisite record of a mind at work—drafts of poems, copious notes from her daily reading and research, a host of almost impossibly catholic materials that range from quotes snagged from high-toned critical commentary to snippets of advertisements for number 2 pencils and Johnnie Walker Scotch. Moore also mined her own life for poetic material on a regular basis, but not in ways that later poets would deem "confessional." Instead, like Harriet the Spy, she recorded what other people said. Her notebooks are filled with comments by her modernist peers—pieces of monologue and dialog from just about every modernist writer who passed through the New York scene in the early decades of the twentieth century. In part, I am going back because this documentary material poses every challenge possible. The notebooks are profoundly visual as well as linguistic in content. They contain multiple genres of writing. They are private and public. They contain quotes from all sorts of contemporary print sources that constitute Moore's quirky representation of the chaotic intellectual culture of the early twentieth century. They challenge the whole notion of how and why and what we annotate. To edit these notebooks, Elizabeth and Cris and Heather and I are going to have to create a "knowledge site," to use

Peter Shillingsburg's phrase, that can make sense of many, many different ways to use and interpret this material.⁴

I know that this edition might be a fool's errand. But I am also going back because I have a sense of mission. I am going back to the notebooks in the full knowledge that this damn project might take the rest of my life. It might never get off the self-sustaining funding launching pad. It might crash and burn on still-lurking issues of copyright. It might be obsolete by the time it goes live. I have none of the certainties that I have when publishing in print. Everything is a risk. I know why scholars don't take on these kinds of projects. And yet, I think this is a good time for me, and for all of us, to really lean in. Here's why.

In September of 2014, I was brave enough, or dumb enough, to take a position as an academic associate dean of the humanities at the University of Delaware. The post has been, to say the least, a challenge. Delaware is a good midsized research institution. It is, however, facing some major challenges. UD was insulated from the titanic financial meltdown of 2008. Endowments and DuPont contributions kept the school sailing on a tide of easy money that started to dry up just when the current (and exiting) president put a new "resource-based budgeting" model in place seven years ago. The long and the short is that the chickens of limited resources are just now coming home to roost in the UD College of Arts and Sciences—an odd scenario for those who have worked at Delaware for any length of time. The current budget restrictions have sent everyone scrambling, and competition for resources has become fierce. I have had to gear up arguments for the humanities that resonate with physicists, mechanical engineers, and professors of finance. I have had to sell my priorities to the parents of kids who would rather cut off their arms than send them to school to study art history, history, philosophy, or English. I've had to convince donors that their hard-earned money is best spent on culture.

All this may seem impossible. But I am happy to report that some of my arguments have been winning. So take heart. I have been carrying the day because it is just the sorts of work that those of us in this room are doing that is the most exciting to people who wouldn't know a humanity if it bit them in the rear. It is time for all of us to take advantage of a cultural moment that is now emerging. To that end, I'd like to share with you some real-life arguments that have helped me sell philology to the sharks.

I start my pitch with a basic premise—that no one sets out in this life to edit, curate, exhibit, or archive anything without a sense of the importance of, to use Jerome McGann's elegant phrase, "preserving the precious remains of our own alienated lives."⁵ I also begin with the premise that such preserving is basic human activity in the modern world. Every person on the planet understands the act of saving material things as a means to access memory. We are all curators and editors and archivists of our own lives. We decide which material objects to save and which to toss out as we move through the years. Each time we revisit our stuff we narrate once again for ourselves and others who we are and what we value. Acts of private curation are powerful. When I moved to Delaware and downsized my home, I faced the problem of my lifelong library of paper books. I had to decide which volumes to keep and which to give away, a task that immediately got tied up with so much more than the needs of my current scholarly life. So many of the books had notes and highlights and marginalia and traces of who I was at the time I read them. They were material mnemonic devices that stored memories of my entire adulthood, a physical record of the life I have lived inside my head. Sorting through them, I had to decide which memories were important enough to hold on to in that material form. I had to re-narrate, re-edit, re-curate my life to date.

Even those who see the humanities as the educational grasshopper that sponges off the ant of the sciences understand the activities of personal archiving. And they also understand that acts of editing, curating, archiving, exhibiting, and narrating with material objects take place on levels far beyond the personal where the stakes are indeed very high. We are the keepers and, more importantly, creators of our material cultural heritage through acts of editing, curating, and archiving. I have managed to pull down large amounts of cash by explaining to my institution that those of us who edit are in the business of telling vital cultural stories with material objects and that we are training others every day to do the same. Newsflash: academic administrators at all levels are officially sick of supporting scholars in the humanities who seem determined to talk only to other scholars. Forms of hyper-professionalized humanities research have always had a slim purchase in academia. We aren't, after all, out curing cancer or creating patents. Most administrators, however, understand that what we do as editors is important public work. They get museums and preserving and collecting things. They have watched *Antiques Roadshow* and understand that stuff, particularly

material documentary stuff, matters to people and that stuff tells stories about who we are as a people and a nation. Editors and archivists are the original public humanists, and it is time for all of us to stand up and claim that role loud and strong.

So even if you don't feel comfortable doing it, you need to make claims for the public significance of your work. You need to tell people that your research and scholarship is pitched not just to other scholars but to a wider public—that you are involved directly in the sorts of preserving, conserving, curating, and editing activities that make culture available and accessible to people beyond the six scholars who will probably read your next monograph. You need to be able to explain, in one breath, on the elevator between first and third floor, why the texts or artifacts or documents you are presenting to the world are important, and you need to do it in such a way that not only your students but also the parents of your students can understand you. You need to trace the second life of your scholarship because this is important to administrators and donors. Where and how is what you are doing making news? Making the world better? And you need to do all this with style and flair.

Our time has come as well because we are not only public humanists but also at the forefront of new forms of humanities education that make administrators sit up and take notice. The words to use here are “project-based learning.” Those of us engaged in large editorial and archival projects, be they in cyberspace or physical space, can offer our students classroom experiences that others can't by engaging them directly in the work we are doing. When you talk to your administrators, you need to tell them that project-based classes ensure that students are getting real-world experience in complex, team project planning with real-world consequences. You need to tell them that students in such classes learn to negotiate the difficult relationship between the material and the digital, that they gain skills as well as content knowledge, that they, too, are engaging in important acts of public scholarship. You need to emphasize the footprints that such projects create for institutions, the way they help advertise and brand the student experience as innovative and outward looking. Project-based classes sound a lot like internships, and that is a plus for administrators. The difference is that they are internships that we control, that we make into deeply intellectual experiences that ask all the vital questions about history, about text, about materiality, about our digital future

—questions that haunt our work. Even if you are used to doing your work by yourself, hunkered down in whatever archive drives your passion, you need to re-conceive of yourself as a team leader. You need to talk about your “lab” without flinching. And you need to do this with style and flair.

A sidebar: As a deanette, I am inclined to ask my humanities faculty members a pointed question: “How bored are you?” Seriously, if the academic major in which you teach looks like one that you could have taken when you were in college—or worse, one your mom or dad could have taken—what does that say about the humanities? All of us in this room are doing work that is SO much more interesting than most of what I see listed in course catalogs. The challenge is to remake the experience of our undergraduate learners in ways that show them the public significance of what we do. That, I think, will do more than anything else to ensure our cultural future.

I will end by sharing a story that I use with parents, administrators, and donors that is a bit more abstract but, for me, lies at the heart of what we do as public humanists. When I get up before the masses, I say this: that being trapped in a world of literal meaning is the equivalent of being trapped in hell. If we are generating students who have no access to or understanding of symbolic content or its history, transmission, and creation—students who can’t make the leap between the literal and the figurative—we are producing sad and desperate souls who have no access to the deeper meaning of anything in life. We are making kids who live in two dimensions, who confuse surface for depth, who never ask why people are using one set of words and images to communicate rather than another. Abandon all hope, ye who enter here—there is no joy, no enlightenment, no creativity.

I am happy to tell you that everything you do every day, in terms of your scholarship and your teaching, is vitally important, and that, yes, there are people out there who will listen and nod. And yes, if you get your story straight and speak clearly, with style and flair, they will open their pocketbooks.

Notes

1. Marianne Moore, *A-Quiver with Significance: Marianne Moore, 1932–1936*, ed. Heather White (Victoria, CA: ELS Editions, 2008); Marianne Moore, *Adversity & Grace: Marianne Moore, 1936–1941*, ed. Heather White (Victoria, CA: ELS Editions, 2012).
2. Marianne Moore, *The Selected Letters of Marianne Moore*, ed. Bonnie Costello, Celeste Goodridge, and Cristanne Miller (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1997).
3. Linda Leavell, *Holding on Upside Down: The Life and Work of Marianne Moore* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2013).
4. For Shillingsburg's in-depth definition of the "knowledge site," see Peter Shillingsburg, *From Gutenberg to Google: Electronic Representations of Literary Texts* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 80–125.
5. Jerome McGann, *A New Republic of Letters: Memory and Scholarship in the Age of Digital Reproduction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 47.