

# Textual Scholarship in the Situation<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This essay, a version of which was presented as the 2022 Society for Textual Scholarship Presidential Address, considers the state of textual scholarship in light of converging disasters of our moment — human-induced climate change, resurgent xenophobia, religious fundamentalism, territorial warfare, violent racism, and a humanistic academy under attack from both without and within. After surveying important recent textual scholarly work in queer studies, African American literature, Native American studies, and archival studies, the essay gestures to emerging domains of theoretical and practical work on which textual scholars might draw to encourage the development of survival-oriented philology in the present.

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Loafe with me on the grass — loose the stop from  
your throat;

Not words, not music or rhyme I want — not custom or  
lecture, not even the best;

Only the lull I like, the hum of your valved voice.

— Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1867)

[. . .]Our letters

and lists, reconstructed grammars:

they replace the ways in which we were

grabbed, and pushed, then shoved.

— Joan Naviyuk Kane, “Rookeries” (2021)

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1. Versions of this essay were originally offered as the STS Presidential Address, May 26, 2022, Loyola University of Chicago; and as the 2022 Fales Lecture at New York University. My thanks to the organizers and attendees of those events, and particularly to Marta Werner, Randall Newman, Gabrielle Dean, Christopher Labarthe, Elizabeth McHenry, Lisa Gitelman, Charlotte Priddle, Thomas Augst, Paula McDowell, and Athena Pierquet.

Come ye, ye who would have peace  
Hear me what I say now  
I say come ye, ye who would have peace  
It's time to learn how to pray

— Nina Simone, “Come Ye” (1967)

BEFORE ALL ELSE, A WORD OF GRATITUDE TO THE PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES nearest me that shaped the words that follow: the several collectives of action I participate in (and I am particularly grateful for the comradeship of Amanda Gailey, Amelia Montes, Steve Ramsay, and Julia Schleck); my parents; Nicole Gray; my co-editors Ken Price, Ed Folsom, and Stephanie Browner; our University of Nebraska-Lincoln campus theoreticians, Marco Abel and Roland Végső; Christy Hyman; Will Turner; Bianca Swift; Ashlyn Stewart; Kevin McMullen; Carrie Heitman; Melissa Homestead, Hannah Alpert-Abrams; Molly Hardy; Linda Garcia Merchant; and the graduate students in my 2022 book history seminar.<sup>2</sup>

I suppose we agree that scholarly editions have been a valuable thing. They have enabled a wide range of research discoveries, pedagogical experiences, and illuminations about the past, especially the histories of textuality, authorship, and literature. It would be difficult to dispute that hard philological-historical study of textual hermeneutics and material text scholarship as well as the making of editions is a valuable enterprise. But this enterprise has often focused on white authors and canonical figures; has often been oriented explicitly or implicitly around the idea of literary genius; and has reified a notion that there are procedural standards scholars must employ, perhaps even embody, as a condition of recognizability within the field. It also participates in an industry, publishing, whose valorizations are not always intellectual or spiritual even in the university press context. The feminist, African American, and post- and anticolonial scholarship of the past few decades has revealed the depth of these tendencies in editorial work and textual scholarship.

One response to textual scholarship's hegemonic habits has been oriented toward content: if we turn away from white folks, men, and canonical authors, and work on other figures instead, we can begin to

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2. Cass Diaz, Caitlin Matheis, Jocelyn Clayton, Khadizatul Kubra, Ian Maxton, Erin Chambers, and Elva Moreno del Rio.

redress this situation. Such work has been transformative to an extent.<sup>3</sup> But one can make profoundly conservative editions of any author's work, and deeply white supremacist ones as well — witness the notorious example of Stormfront's online presentation of certain works of Martin Luther King, Jr. At the same time, radically disorienting editions of even the most-read authors are still rare. A number of voices have lately insisted that for a nurturing, generative version of textual scholarship and editing to thrive, one oriented toward justice, equality, and communality, we must rethink the methods, orientations, and what I will call the *stance* of philology as much as, or more than, its content.

In what ways can the practices associated with textual scholarship, and through which it is enacted, themselves be sites for resisting white supremacist norms; places where colonial extraction can be displaced; modes of activity that are powerful means of doing and being otherwise than prescribed by capitalist, hierarchist forms of individuation and isolation? What follows is not the outline of a program, but a suggestion or provocation. It's an attempt at imagining motivations, parameterizations, and prioritizations in textual scholarship on different bases than those that for some time have served as its practitioners' explicit or implicit common ground. The figure to which I address my imaginings of textual scholarship's work is slightly offset, from the work itself to the scholarly or collective "stance" toward this activity. A stance is a position but not a pose; it is about being poised for a thing that's coming, a version of which has come before. It is a refined posture of readiness created in a feedback loop with action — material and mental, flexible, reflexive, designed to generate potential, to adjust a little but not *too* much. My focus is not on an ideal edition or a theory of philological work, but on encouraging a mode of relation, of readiness.

I start with an appreciation of some projects that exhibit that mode already, ones in which the material being treated calls forth and requires a different structure and set of valorizations on the part of textual scholars than has governed edition-making in the past. Then I present some insights and perhaps limitations those efforts have revealed, gesturing to a few domains of theoretical musing and practical work on which we might draw to spur new kinds of work. These provocations speak out of a sense of necessity. They come from folks for whom the handling of a word, one's own or another's, may make the difference between life and death, and who therefore enact a survival-oriented philology.

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3. See BORNSTEIN 2006, on which the present essay builds.

Donald McKenzie long ago wrote, sensing the appeal of book historical methodology to his moment, that “the vital interests of most of those known to me as bibliographers are no longer fully served by description, or even by editing, but by the historical study of the making and the use of books and other documents” (1999, 11). What are our “vital interests” today? “My sense in attending BSA, SHARP and BSANZ presentations”, wrote Shef Rogers in a 2021 blog post,

is that the energy in all these societies is coming from younger scholars who are interested in how print promotes and excludes, how digital trends both expand and limit the voices that find their way into print. Where I suspect relatively few scholars ever turned to bibliography as a way to change the world (though some certainly turned to it as an alternative to theoretical vagaries), much of the current scholarly conversation about books is aimed at achieving social change.

I'd go farther: the scholars to which Shef refers see little division between the theoretical and the practical, in harmony with precedent voices who have shifted humanities scholarship in dialogue with and as an act of theory. Doing bibliography as a “sociology of texts”, McKenzie argued, would enable “what Michel Foucault called ‘an insurrection of subjugated knowledges.’”<sup>4</sup> Insurrection may have been a metaphor for McKenzie, but today we might coax it a bit closer to materially insurrectionary textual scholarship.

The ways of thinking I discuss below, though as I will suggest not all mutually compatible, align in asking those who study texts to orient all aspects of their work to the current situation. To do so means breaking out of the illusionary present tense of scholarship, which is a restricted sense of the scholar's audience, community, and needs. As Cristina Rivera Garza puts it: “find the crack on the wall of the *present* that may allow us to peek into *the now*” (2020, 64, emphasis mine).

## Recent Transformations of Textual Scholarship

Michelle Caswell puts it baldly in her book *Urgent Archives*: “neutrality or objectivity” is “a vestige of white supremacy” (2021, 10). New skepticisms about and enactments of textual scholarship broadly conceived are

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4. MCKENZIE 1999, 29, quoting FOUCAULT 1980, 81.

leaning into the shift, begun in earnest in the 1990s, away from the positivist vision of editorial practice. Here I survey a few sites of this new work, in queer studies, Black bibliography, Indigenous studies, and postcustodial approaches to archives and editions. There are many more: theoretical and practical work in feminist bibliography and data visualization; sensory and ecocritical bibliography; transformations in access through interface experimentation informed by disability studies; and new pathways for scholarly work like *Reviews in Digital Humanities*.<sup>5</sup> The dialogue going on among these many efforts is inspirational and delightfully daunting to keep up with.

Jeffrey Masten has powerfully argued — including in his STS conference plenary lecture a decade ago — for “a specifically queer philology attuned to sex/gender nonnormativity”. Many scholars — consider the work of the Digital Transgender Archive and the Homosaurus project — are embracing this attunement and modeling an intellectually pleasurable, anauthoritative mode of textual historiography whose disruptions denormalize reproductive futurism and make past sexualities and the mechanisms of their regulation more visible.<sup>6</sup> The work of Jamie Lee in archival studies similarly models revisionary queer theory and praxis. Lee reminds us that traditional archival practice and theory have perpetuated “harm to non-dominant peoples and communities through obscurity, erasure, and fixity” (2021, 3). Lee theorizes and practices a stance of “radical hospitality” for archives, centering “the personal engagements that can provide general nourishment” (2021, 5). In Lee’s vision, through the act of “gathering input from communities” and focusing on relational practices the hospitable archives would maintain a “critical self-awareness of how power works to re-create hierarchies” both inside and outside the archives (2021, 6). To accomplish this, Lee says, archives will have to abandon their lust for organization: disorderliness, “generative chaos”, kitchen-table chattiness,

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5. See, e.g., The Women Writers Project, @<https://www.wwp.northeastern.edu/>; S. WERNER 2020; OZMENT 2020; D’IGNAZIO and KLEIN 2020; The Women’s Print History Project, @<https://womensprinthistoryproject.com>; M. WERNER 2021; FRETWELL 2013.

6. MASTEN 2016, 20; see also Masten’s discussions of the relations among bibliography, textual scholarship, and philology, 32–38. TRETTIEN 2022; The Digital Transgender Archive, @<https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/>; The Homosaurus: An International LGBTQ+ Linked Data Vocabulary, @<https://homosaurus.org>; and most recently the workshop “Queer Bibliography: Tools, Practices, Methods, Approaches”, to be held in London in February 2023, @<http://bit.ly/QueerBibliography2023>.

unexpected encounters, emotional storytelling — all these must enter archives space in order to nurture “a world-making practice that recognizes all the ways people and their histories have been oppressed, erased, and denigrated”, to the end of focalizing “the voices and visions and living histories of those who have experienced the inhospitable” (2021, 7). Elsewhere Lee figures the archives as a (queer) body in both metaphorical and material terms, and the implications of her various meditations carry us beyond hospitality’s customary dyad of host and guest, archivist and patron. Here there is a blurring of boundaries, an opening of the archives to being shaped by communities and visitors. I would add that this entails a reciprocal burden of world-making on the part of visitors as well, who will need to do their part to maintain this new flow, to learn new ways and forms of play informed by the community of archivists.<sup>7</sup>

Derrick Spires’s conception of “liberation bibliography” and the work of the Black Bibliography Project, the Colored Conventions Project, and the Black Book Interactive Project remind us of the long history of philological and bibliographical work to defend Black communities and to retheorize relations to text that have countered the white supremacism of mainstream media.<sup>8</sup> African Americans began reprinting previously published texts at least as early as the 1790s, and Black church history has a rich tradition of editing for community survival. There’s a direct line from early liberation bibliography by Richard Allen, Absalom Jones, and William Douglass to, taking an example from my community, “Roots of Justice: Historical Truth and Reconciliation in Lincoln and Nebraska: A Bibliography of Resources about the History in Nebraska of Native Americans, African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans and Recent Refugees”, recently assembled by a coalition of community members and academics.<sup>9</sup>

Consider also Zachary McLeod Hutchins and Cassander L. Smith’s 2021 *The Earliest African American Literatures: A Critical Reader*. This edition examines “the literary footprint of Black Africans in early America prior to 1760”, the canonical beginning of African American literature (HUTCHINS and SMITH 2021, 1). As always, the reification of Black bodies as capital

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7. See LEE 2016.

8. Among much recent work in this area see SPIRES 2022; GOLDSBY and MCGILL 2022, who assert that “we take what is ‘Black’ about Black bibliography to be its commitment to the civic uses of bibliography” (189); WOMACK 2020; FIELDER and SENCHYNE 2019; HELTON and ZAFAR 2021 (and the other essays in the same issue); and COHEN and STEIN 2014.

9. DURAN, DUNNING, JOHNSON, and OLSON 2021. JONES and ALLEN 1794; DOUGLASS 1862; see also BROOKS 2003.

requires rethinking the notion of literary property, of objects of discourse and subjects that transmit it. A section on runaway advertisements — building on similar work by the Early Caribbean Digital Archive<sup>10</sup> — includes an advertisement for a young enslaved boy who has disappeared, but also includes an advertisement originally printed next to it, for a “stray’d or stol’n” horse, to illustrate the dehumanization evidenced in these sources (HUTCHINS and SMITH 2021, 147–48). The headnotes for each item are extensive, offering both historical context and pointed interpretation of even the shortest items. The goal is, in the editors’ words, “the rememory of strategies deployed by eighteenth-century readers to contemplate the agency and subjectivity of literary black Africans” — not a modern textual theory or reading practice, but an old one (HUTCHINS and SMITH 2021, 7). And one of the key choices Hutchins and Smith made was with respect to scope and design: rather than being exhaustive, the edition is methodologically exemplary and provocative. The editors’ approach to identifying and reading texts by and about African Americans is meant to be taken up by readers and extended into the vast archive of colonial North American materials.

This engagement of readers and communities is also a feature of postcustodial practice in archives and special collections. It has been over 40 years since F. Gerald Ham heralded what he called the “postcustodial era” of archival policy. Archivists’ rethinking of their roles in sociopolitical conflict has been unflagging, from Ham, through Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook’s essay “Archives, Records and Power” to Verne Harris’s notion of memory for justice and today’s proliferation of postcustodial partnerships with Indigenous tribes and community organizations.<sup>11</sup> This activity is about more than preserving in new ways or with new priorities, or providing access for audiences previously blocked from the archives. The South Asian American Digital Archive, for example, preserves records but also partners in the creation of “new artistic representations of South Asian Americans that combat historical erasure and re-contextualize the community’s century-old history in light of contemporary racism and xenophobia.”<sup>12</sup> Partnerships and resource prioritizations of this kind are not unprecedented among editorial projects — as for example in the cases

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10. The Early Caribbean Digital Archive, @<https://cssh.northeastern.edu/nulab/the-early-caribbean-digital-archive/>; see also ALJOE 2012 and WALDSTREICHER 1999.

11. SCHWARTZ and COOK 2002; HARRIS 2007; and see more recently BERRY 2021.

12. CASWELL 2021, 3. South Asian American Digital Archive, @<http://www.saaadigitalarchive.org>.

of the Colored Conventions' Douglass Day transcription event, or the activities of the US Latino Digital Humanities Center at the University of Houston, or the work of the Nomadic Archivists Project. The potential seems extraordinary to collaborate with practicing artists, musicians, or theatre groups to develop editorial projects that spur the kind of creativity many editions are designed to pass on.<sup>13</sup> Creative folks are curious about the histories of the objects and texts they mediate, but focalize different questions than textual scholars or literary historians customarily do, and bring with them a network of colleagues and distribution, performance, and exhibition circuits that seldom overlap with textual-scholarly ones.

Postcustodial collaborations around collections of Indigenous materials have long been underway in New Zealand, Australia, and Canada, and are burgeoning in the United States. Recataloging initiatives at the Newberry Library and the Genoa Indian Boarding School Digital Reconciliation Project are bringing tribal knowledge and priorities to the preservation and access mechanisms and policies of both digital and brick and mortar archives. The National Historical Publications and Records Commission recently partnered with the Mellon Foundation to create a program to fund "Start-Up Grants for Collaborative Digital Editions in African American, Asian American, Hispanic American, and Native American History", among the objectives of which is to cultivate "collaborations that help to bridge longstanding institutional inequities by promoting resource sharing and capacity building at all levels".<sup>14</sup>

But tribally produced editions are also appearing, with approaches that engage and revise traditional editorial norms. Consider a recent republication of Roger Williams's 1643 *A Key into the Language of America*, a text important to

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13. See "Douglass Day" at the Colored Conventions Project, @<https://coloredconventions.org/douglass-day/>; on the US Latino Digital Humanities Center, see @<https://artepublicopress.com/digital-humanities/>; Nomadic Archivists Project (NAP), @<https://www.nomadicarchivistsproject.com>.

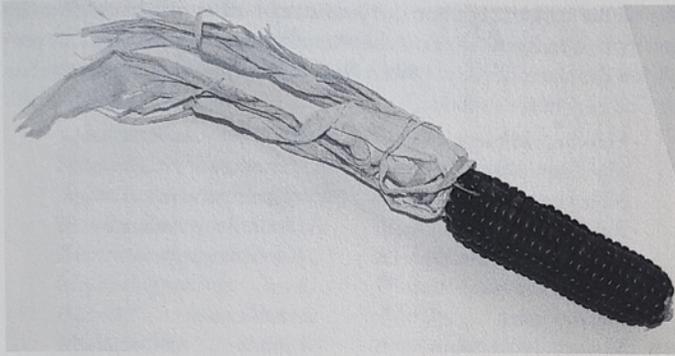
14. "Collaborative Digital Editions Start-Up Grants", National Historical Publications & Records Commission, @<https://www.archives.gov/nhprc/projects/digitaleditions>. "Help to bridge" is not to my mind the most ambitious goal, but as neoliberal partnerships go it's better than nothing. Genoa Indian School Digital Reconciliation Project, @<https://genoaindianschool.org/>; "Newberry Library Will Collaborate with Native Communities to Expand Access to Indigenous Studies Collection", Newberry Library, @<https://www.newberry.org/newberry-library-will-collaborate-native-communities-expand-access-indigenous-studies-collection>. See also CHRISTEN 2011; DUARTE and BELARDE-LEWIS 2015; and SPEARS and THOMPSON 2022.

historians of colonialism for its unusually sympathetic portrayal of Northeastern Native people and to those people for its value in assisting linguistic and cultural recovery efforts. This edition was sponsored by a non-profit collective, the Tomaquag Museum, in Rhode Island. The Museum's director, Lorén Spears, who is Narragansett and Niantic, is one of the edition's five co-editors. "We have embarked on this project", she writes, "to make the *Key to the Language of America* more accessible and useful to Narragansett Tribal Members, other Algonquian speakers, the general public, and researchers alike" (2019, xi).<sup>15</sup> That Narragansett readers are prioritized is clear in the volume's editorial approach, which emends Williams's Narragansett, updates his English for contemporary accessibility, heavily annotates his description of Narragansett culture with community knowledge and contemporary points of relevance, and illustrates the text with maps and photographs of Narragansett material culture (see Fig. 1). One of the other co-editors is Kathleen Bragdon, a well-known specialist in Northeastern Native history and language; she's non-Native, and each of her annotations is flagged with her initials to distinguish them from the Narragansett perspective represented in the other notes.

The impact of these new approaches and of some of those I'll describe in a moment is exemplified in Whitney Trettien's 2021 hybrid print-digital edition and critical text, *Cut/Copy/Paste*. It purposefully folds together different modes of philological analysis, textual gathering, re-presentation, preservation, and distribution. "It is not new ways of reading that are structuring the field from within — close versus distant versus surface" Trettien writes, "so much as a new kind of *writing*, a new awareness of scholarship's mediation in its relation to fragmented collections and the event of publishing as itself a staged drama" (2021, 6). As inspiration for this book on the early modern period in England and digital edition of the Little Gidding Harmonies, Trettien cites "recent digital scholarship in Africana studies, Native American and indigenous studies, and race and technocultures", quoting the Early Caribbean Digital Archive's description of experiments in "methods of revisionary recovery, rereading, disembedding, and recombining" in the digital medium (2021, 11). Trettien's editorial principles include embracing "plural approaches, forms, and formats when sharing and disseminating digital resources and source materials" because "readers will approach the past through different access points and bring to it different knowledge, strengths, and abilities";

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15. See also POKAGON 2011, which none of the contributors is credited with editing; and forthcoming editions of Pokagon's birch bark books, edited by Blaire Topash-Caldwell.



Flint, or Indian, Corn. (*Tomaquag Museum*)

Saunkopaúgot	<i>Cool water</i>
Chowhêsu.	<i>It is warm.</i>
Aquie wuttâtash.	<i>Don't drink.</i>
Aquie waúmatous.	<i>Don't drink it all.</i>
Necáwni mèich teàqua.	<i>First eat something.</i>
Tawhitch mat mechóan?	<i>Why aren't you eating?</i>
Wussaúme kusópita.	<i>It is too hot.</i>
Teàguun numméitch?	<i>What shall I eat?</i>
Mateàg keesitáuanò?	<i>Is there nothing already boiled?</i>
Mateàg mécho ewò.	<i>He eats nothing.</i>
Cotchikésu assamme.	<i>Cut me a piece.</i>
Cotchekúnnemi weeyòs.	<i>Cut me some meat.</i>
Metesíttuck.	<i>Let's go eat.</i>
Pautíínnea méchimucks.	<i>Bring some food here.</i>
Numwàutous.	<i>Fill the dish.</i>
Mihtukméchakick	<i>Tree-eaters</i>

*Mihtukméchakick* are a people living between three and four hundred miles west into the land so called because of their eating only *Mihtúchquash*,<sup>13</sup> that is, trees. They are Men-eaters,<sup>14</sup> they plant no corn, but

13. KB: Goddard suggests *mihitúckquash* here (1981:347).

14. This commentary is very offensive to us and we question the validity of this statement. Through our oral history, we disagree and do not believe they were cannibals. A Haudenosaunee elder agrees with the Narragansett interpretation that he has never heard the real people speak of this, only the anthropologists.

Figure 1. Page 11 from WILLIAMS 2019, showing editorial apparatus.

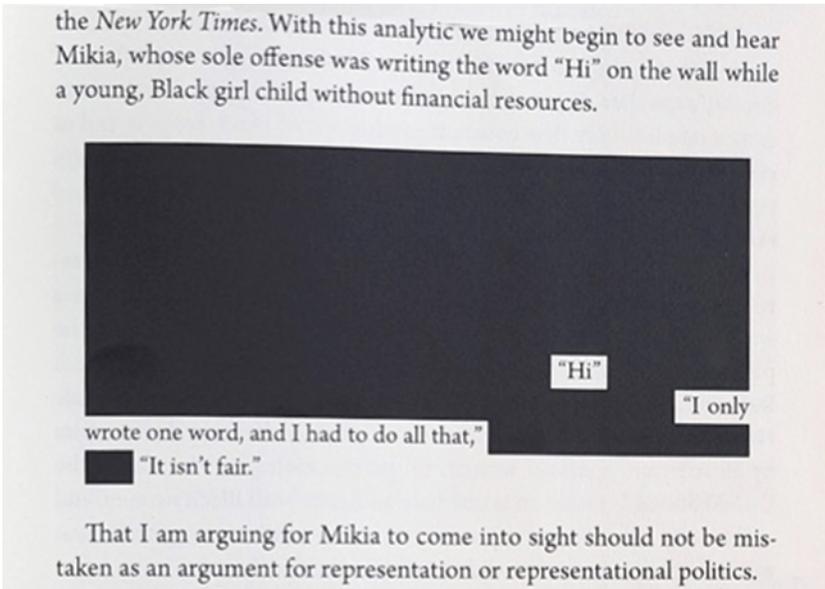
promoting “emotion, embodiment, and affective experiences”; challenging “the whitewashed, patriarchal, heteronormative brand of historicism still dominant in bibliography and literary studies”; and making “the labor of those who helped build these resources visible”, including “all who have collected, curated, bound, conserved, catalogued, encoded, scanned, and uploaded my primary source materials in the nearly four centuries since they first entered the world” (13–14).

These are not the usual editorial principles and habits: be scientific; use the highest and latest scholarly standards; do not interrogate the way authority has of compounding (redacting) credit; strip away as much “noise” as possible — the messy labor history of edition-making, the rumors or deprecated theories, your emotional reaction to the material, the story of the rabbit holes and tech glitches and format changes that delayed publication, the political life of the text. Trettien’s principles are daunting if you’re on a production schedule — “specify your audience” is a classic rule, for example, but hewing to the first priority on her list alone, about embracing plural approaches, can be tremendously time consuming. Indeed, to fulfill the demands Trettien lists will in many cases mean *an edition is not feasible for reasons having nothing to do with copyright, textual complexity, or archival absence*. Three intellectual interventions underlie some of the work I have just described and offer yet more challenging problematics for textual scholars today: Afropessimist and Afrofuturist thought; the notion of disappropriation; and destituent potentiality.

## Redacting the Editorial Hold

Christina Sharpe’s *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* is an essential text of and for editorial theory. It redefines a series of fundamental components of philology: citation, redaction, annotation, orthography, and etymology. And it shuttles its readers into a consciousness of the suspended temporality in which they live, which is the legacy of legalized, racialized slavery, a regime of time built and maintained by language no less than by violence. Philology’s marriage with historicism crumples under the weight of Sharpe’s pursuit of the resonances of four words: the wake, the ship, the hold, and the weather are all redefined in relation to the middle passage, the carceral economy, police violence, and the miasma of white supremacist normalization of Black death, deprecation, and surveillance. Sharpe writes: “The disaster of Black subjection was and *is* planned; terror is disaster and ‘terror has a history’ and it is deeply atemporal” (2016, 5). That paradox





**Figure 3.** Sharpe's redaction of a news report about the prosecution of fourteen-year-old Mikia Hutchings for vandalism as a result of her family's inability to pay a \$100 restitution fee to her school. From SHARPE 2014, 123.

Sharpe pushes further: "What happens when we proceed as if we *know* this, antiblackness, to be the ground on which we stand, the ground from which we attempt to speak, for instance, an 'I' or a 'we' who know, an 'I' or a 'we' who care?" (2016, 7). Indigenous genocide and dispossession also proceed under a regime of normalization of violence and the prescription of time — the freezing of Native history into a never-contemporary temporality underwriting (in all senses of that word) the taking and desacralization of the literal ground from which the non-Native "I" or "we" attempt to speak. Sharpe refers to normalization by the figure of orthography, but it's not just a figure — this basic element of editorial practice is part of a larger palette of research standards that have helped maintain power hierarchies through everyday forms of judgment, selection, and exclusion. The philologist's appeal to historicism sits in tension with the activity of supporting living communities in ways that bibliographic scholarship sometimes has trouble foregrounding. It also undermines its own ability to connect us to the past, at least with respect to helping readers experience what reading might have been like in earlier times. Thinking of our relation to orthography, to historicism, and to the archive in terms of fidelity, reproduction, precision, preservation — does this enact or undermine humanistic inquiry?

Consider Tamara Lanier’s case against Harvard University, a suit begun in 2019 demanding conveyance of images made by Louis Agassiz of her enslaved ancestors. The case suggests not only parallels with the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act and Native land back efforts, but — with the Harvard administration’s resistance — how deeply the material record of the past is regarded as an extractable resource, not just a law-giving point of reference.<sup>17</sup> The legal ruling in 2021 went against Lanier because the judge cited common law’s premise that subjects of photographs have no property interest in them.<sup>18</sup> That’s what Sharpe would call the hold and the weather, and it holds everyone — forty of Agassiz’s descendants lobbied unsuccessfully in a letter to Harvard to convey the images to Lanier. Legal norms notwithstanding, Harvard could have put its money where its PR image is, opened a dialogue, gotten creative, and channeled some love and some resources to a community that helped make it what it is today. As it stands, the case appears on the outside to be an asterisk to the Presidential Initiative on Harvard & the Legacy of Slavery.<sup>19</sup> Textual scholars can play an important mediating role in cases like this, which I suspect will become more common.

There’s no copyright statement in Fred Moten and Stefano Harney’s *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* — open access, you might say (see Fig. 4, below). But not quite: there’s no mention of copyright, a Creative Commons license, or open access *at all*. By default the book falls under the property regime of the Berne Convention — at least, where it circulates under that law. But its availability in PDF and other digital forms and its refusal altogether to acknowledge the ownership framework destitute copyright. A similar form of refusal attends Moten and Harney’s discussions of politics, critique, and the academy. I quail at the thought of summarizing what is a complex and profoundly poetic argument but consider some of its implications for the concept of the “critical scholarly edition”. The problems associated with that phrase’s two modifiers have been the subject of editorial theory for at least a century and a half. Moten and Harney’s vision suggests that such editorial-theoretical debate has

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17. For coverage of the story, see HARTECOLLIS 2019 and JORGENSEN 2019. For a meditation on archives and cases like Lanier’s, see DRAKE 2021.

18. See ANON. 2021.

19. See BROWN-NAGIN, ET AL. 2022. As the committee writes in its report to the university’s President, “We recommend that the University leverage its scholarly excellence and expertise in education to confront systemic and enduring inequities that impact descendant communities in the United States” (58).

The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study

Stefano Harney and Fred Moten

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**Figure 4.** The copyright page in the PDF edition of MOTEN and HARNEY 2013.

functioned within a more or less closed system that is limited by, because it is a component of, capital's expansion.

With respect to the term "critical": of what they call the "anti-social energy" of critique, Moten and Harney write,

Critique endangers the sociality it is supposed to defend, not because it might turn inward to damage politics but because it would turn to politics and then turn outward [. . .] were it not for preservation, which is given in celebration of what we defend, the sociopoetic force we wrap

tightly round us, since we are poor. Taking down our critique, our own positions, our fortifications, is self-defense alloyed with self-preservation. (2013, 19)

How can textual scholarship — driven by a profoundly preservative impulse on one hand, and by a critical one on the other — take on a socially cohering energy, be a sociopoetic force, be a celebration? One key and difficult step, Moten and Harney argue, is to establish a relationship to the “scholarly” that is neither appropriative nor oppositional: “To be a critical academic in the university is to be against the university, and to be against the university is always to recognize it and be recognized by it, and to institute the negligence of that internal outside, that unassimilated underground, a negligence of it that is [ . . . ] the basis of the professions” (2013, 31). Blackness, poorness, exploitation, the diminishing of human connection and creative modes of life, all of these are neglected constitutionally in the implicit contract between academics and their institution, a neglect enacted vividly in the functional performativity of critique. The university is a manifestation of governance, and “governance is the extension of whiteness on a global scale” (MOTEN and HARNEY 2013, 56). For Sharpe, the school is the slave ship (2016, 21). The institution cannot love you, Tressie McMillan Cottom advises; it cannot love, but it can make you a “critic” and only it can make you “scholarly”.<sup>20</sup> So how are those who are passionate about philology, about texts, and about editing to re-join, be subsumed within, propagate “the outcast mass intellectuality of the undercommons” (MOTEN and HARNEY 2013, 33)? Moten and Harney say it is an act of love, of planning something together; an act of flight, a break, an act of stealing from the stealer (shifting the bones of the act of preservation), or what Cristina Rivera Garza would call impropriety.

## Disappropriative Editing

Rivera Garza’s book *The Restless Dead: Necrowriting and Disappropriation* is designed to inspire creative writers, to focalize a practice she senses is already underway but not yet widely valued. To annotate her summary a

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20. See, among other Cottom tweets employing her phrase, “I don’t know who needs to hear this but it is a really good time to remember that the institution cannot love you”, @tressiemcphd Twitter feed, @<https://twitter.com/tressiemcphd/status/1267559834297212928>; see also JAFFE 2021.

little, with our topic in mind: “What does it mean to write [or edit] today, in such a context? What are the challenges for writing [or editing], when professional precariousness and gruesome deaths are the stuff of everyday life? Which aesthetic and ethical dialogues does the act of writing [or editing] hurl us into when we are quite literally surrounded by corpses?” (GARZA 2020, 2, parenthetical additions are mine). Rivera Garza reminds us that as electronic access moves into new territories, the digital’s newest audiences are often those most subjected to violence: “blood and screens, conflated” (2020, 2). Another emendation: “If writing [or editing] is supposed to critique the status quo, then how is it possible [. . .] to dissociate the grammar of predatory power from aggravated neoliberalism and its deadly war machines?”<sup>21</sup>

Necroediting as a concept would bring together both Rivera Garza’s urgent questions and Sharpe’s focus on the colonial, anti-Black, premature-death-driven architecture of US law and custom. “What does it look like, entail, and mean”, Sharpe asks, “to attend to, care for, comfort, and defend, those already dead, those dying, and those living lives consigned to the possibility of always-imminent death?” (2016, 38). Laura Harjo, in developing a Mvskoke Creek set of cultural preservation and resilience strategies in her book *Spiral to the Stars*, offers a resonant prioritization. “The focus on futurity in this work”, she writes, “holds promise for recuperating the unactivated possibilities of our ancestors whose lives and imagined worlds have been cut short by the accumulation of violences, large, small, and micro-, produced by the ongoing structures of settler colonialism” (2019, 11).<sup>22</sup> All of scholarly editorial work, on whatever material, proceeds under those structures, that accumulation, and their death-dealing mode, a

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21. GARZA 2020, 2, parenthetical additions are mine. Now, perhaps you’re an editor or textual scholar who loves neoliberalism and its war machines. I argue that you are still in trouble, and not just because neoliberalism will betray everyone who insists on facts, cruxes, and research. To survive, professionally and bodily, will require thinking beyond past models of philology — the seas and storms come for all of us.

22. Harjo’s final chapter is literally a tool: a set of questions and exercises designed to “provide a platform for producing local knowledge, sorting through and reflecting on individual and collective wants, desires, and issues, moving information through the community, and devising concrete actions” (221). The exercises are geared toward Indigenous community building, but in many ways they can aid the kinds of work any collective might undertake, by foregrounding questions about group members’ values, backgrounds, and commitments, about how to circulate information within and outside the group, and about shared

continuation of slavery and removal, their latest version, instance, edition, witness. Necroediting would “both bear witness to and resist the violence and death resulting from the neoliberal state that has embraced maximum profit as a guiding principle” (GARZA 2020, 5). To resist that principle calls for the poetic act Rivera Garza calls “disappropriation”, or “constantly challenging the concept and practice of property (and propriety)” (2020, 5).

Rivera Garza’s emphasis on “community-based writing practices” is harmonious in some ways with key planks in the McKenzian textual scholarship world. Today editors and textual historians routinely “emphasize the material conditions of production that allow writing to exist (or not to exist) in the first place” and study “the roles of both authors and readers, and their communities, in the production and sharing of writing materials” (GARZA 2020, 4). But to turn these priorities back on ourselves as editors, disappropriation would entail more, would mean questioning “the legitimacy or political usefulness of a notion” of the editor “without community connections” (GARZA 2020, 4). It would center the multiplicity of agency involved in the creation of original works and in the editorial process alike. “Misappropriating concepts and vocabulary” from a wide range of fields, David Greetham reminds us, “textual scholarship is a fragmented pastiche [ . . . ] without a central governing figure or even a defined body of knowledge” (2010, 57). It is, however, a community of practice and custom, of shared predilections and conversations.

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commitments to land and place. These questions, taken from Harjo’s chapter, could be generative to ask within any editorial enterprise:

What are land-based activities that you do? (239)

What are the most important lessons you have learned in your life? (227)

What are the most important moments in the history of the community? (228)

What does the future of the community hold? (227)

What letter would you write to your future relatives living 150 years from now? (230)

The Society for Textual Scholarship has begun asking itself some of these questions, in the context of a 2021–2022 ad hoc committee’s work to consider the organization’s sustainability. The responses to these questions are not ancillary to the work an editorial collective does — they shape it in the most profound ways. To arrive at honest answers to these queries in the context of textual scholarly activity may not be as easy as at first it might seem. They’re part of a decolonial enterprise, and as such, must be responded to without deference to colonial structures: the academy, granting agencies, governments, library hierarchies, and the like. As rejuvenating exercises, the probing these questions make possible ranges deep within the mind and soul and well beyond the history planned for us by institutions.

Since human communality is the goal of Rivera Garza's reorientation, disappropriative editorial work would mean participating in "the construction of communal/popular horizons that secure the collective re-appropriation of the material wealth available" in the short run, and the displacement of property altogether in the long term (GARZA 2020, 5). Editorial work tends to proceed without reference to the question of property, or to contain that question within the historical framework of the subject under investigation. But to orient such work to "survival strategies based on mutual care and the protection of the common good" would be doing more than giving voice to the voiceless of the past — it would be distributing emotional and material resources among the many-voiced of the present, an offering to the real urgency of the current situation, being an occasion for, in Rivera Garza's words, "the experience of mutual belonging, in language and in collective work with others" (2020, 5).

The potential entailments of this refocalization, this different stance toward editing, are startling. To disrupt the property matrix that surrounds scholarly editorial and textual analytical practice, to modify it into "communication that makes a community" by sharing and allowing for the interruptions of interlocutors, is to risk — indeed to embrace — potential "inoperativeness" (GARZA 2020, 49). Open access is not enough. You can't have production deadlines. You can't have quantitative output targets, milestones, benchmarks, or "code sprints", and you probably should not use the word "teams" to describe your employees. Two entire sections of most grant applications are redacted by this stance: the "Plan of Work" and the "Goals and Deliverables" (see Fig. 5, below). The use of standards is suspect.

But as I suggested earlier, transformative experiments are underway in many of these domains of textwork. "Maybe it isn't outrageous to start imagining books solely or mostly made of acknowledgments pages", Rivera Garza writes; "sheer recognition, which means sheer critical questioning, of the dynamic and pluralistic relationship that enables their existence in the first place" (2020, 54).<sup>23</sup> As Greetham might put it, we can run toward contamination in every aspect of our practice, not just our conception of the text.

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23. Daniel Heath Justice's term for this kind of approach is "citational relations" (2018, 241). These practices have been a focus of much public commentary in recent years among feminist and BIPOC scholars, but have a long history; see for example, AHMED 2013; SMITH, WILLIAMS, WADUD, PIRTLE, and THE CITE BLACK WOMEN COLLECTIVE 2021; and MAYALI 1991.

**Work Plan**

We estimate that editing all of Chesnutt's correspondence will require [REDACTED] years to complete. The restrictions caused by the Covid-19 outbreak have limited our access to collections during the drafting of this proposal. However, we are optimistic that travel will resume by the time of the project start date, July 1, 2021. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] The work for the [REDACTED] present grant [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED].

June [REDACTED]–December [REDACTED]

- Convene a meeting [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]
- Continue to compile catalog [REDACTED]
- Contact repositories [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]
- Convene meeting [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

January [REDACTED]–June [REDACTED]

- Continue to compile catalog [REDACTED]
- Continue to request [REDACTED] [REDACTED]
- Continue to transcribe, encode, and proof [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]
- [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] solicit feedback [REDACTED]

Figure 5. A plan of work redacted for a necroediting approach. Courtesy of *The Charles W. Chesnutt Archive*, eds. Stephanie P. Browner, Matt Cohen, and Kenneth M. Price, @chesnuttarchive.org.

## The Destituent Stance

Equally potentially disruptive, or inspirational, for textual scholarship is what I call the destituent stance. Giorgio Agamben developed the philosophical notion of what he termed “destituent potential”. My take on it, though, comes largely from its mediation by the leftist intellectual and

activist collective known as The Invisible Committee.<sup>24</sup> Their rendition of the concept is practical, and while rooted in an internationalist perspective on oppositional movements today, it resonates with the insights of Moten and Harney, Sharpe, and Rivera Garza. Destituent praxis is a form of action-taking that attempts to do an end-run on constituent models of power such as representative democracy. The history of revolutions, party-power transfers, and constitutional reforms tends always to witness the reinstatement of hierarchies of capital, class, and race. If the goal of political transformation is to embody the will of the people, to put “the right folks” in charge, or to create a new representative system, that transformation’s fate is to fall back into the same exploitative trough, to be co-opted in the name of the people by a constituted power that feels comfortable ignoring our everyday lives, aspirations, and needs.<sup>25</sup>

So, theorists and practitioners of destituent praxis propose, what if one were to perform actions or inactions — destructive, constructive, obstructive, lazy, and so on — that are outside the norm, without “political” objective, disorienting in not being oriented toward a new constitution, law, or theory of society or politics? Take down part of the infrastructure of power (including material infrastructure) with the limited goal of making life better for your community and of connecting with other people or communities, rather than taking over, transforming, or even gaining concessions. This would not be a structural resistance, but inoperativity, distraction, confusion, redirection, inappropriateness, disappropriation, noise — an advertisement of ungovernability.

African Americans were necessarily early theorists and practitioners of a destituent power, of a mode of living beyond constitutionality, beyond the “people” of “we the people”. And Indigenous modes of sovereignty never

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24. See also NEWMAN 2017; MURPHY 2020; and TARÌ 2021.

25. “A power that has only been knocked down with a constituent violence”, Agamben writes, “will resurge in another form, in the unceasing, unwinnable, desolate dialectic between constituent power and constituted power, between the violence that puts the juridical in place and violence that preserves it” (2016, 266). Agamben’s obsession with dialecticalism is a serious shortcoming, but the directions this theory has been taken by Moten and Harney and by The Invisible Committee suggest the generative potential of regarding Agamben’s theory itself with a destituent stance. Critics have noted, as Murphy summarizes, that “the lack of detail leaves the concept plagued with uncertainty, including [. . .] the potential limitation of this project of the coming politics to acting on existing entities — once these have been rendered inoperative, what happens next?” (2020, 374).

ceased: since in the Native North American case ontology is in most cases telluric, literally land-being, the power play of the constitutional dialectic never began with Native people. Indigenous modes of resistance might look destituent from a Western representative democracy matrix — and Indigenous autonomy movements in the Americas are examples often cited by the proponents of destituent potential — but they never derived from an originary negative differentiation. In thinking about the possibility of a destituent philology, of the potential relations but also conflicts between, say, Moten and Harney’s fugitivity and Black study and the destituent method, it’s important to keep in mind the scales and contexts within which that method might take its place.

Here are some thoughts about what destituent philology might add (beyond Wikileaks) to the envisioning of new modes of textual scholarship I’ve already described. One might imagine editions whose presumption is that *homo sapiens* is done for; editions whose emphasis is on producing better relations between, in Sylvia Wynter’s words, “Man and its Human Others” (2003, 330); an edition that is literally *for the birds* — in which birds (or any other-than-human entity) are the *only target audience*; an editorial platform whose goal is to reduce the environmental impact of *any* edition to a minimum; editions (extending Jonathan Basile’s editorial principles in his digital version of Jorge Luis Borges’s “The Library of Babel”) based on science- and speculative-fiction paradigms;<sup>26</sup> editions designed to destroy themselves (many commentators on and practitioners of digital editing today aim at sustainability and technological stability for editions going forward, but under the destituent stance, neither of these would be necessary, even if in some cases they would be desirable); digital editions that are *only* legible through accessibility affordances;<sup>27</sup> editions whose approaches and revenue are directed entirely to the land back movement (open access might not be the best path here); undertaking a canonical critical edition and then doing so tectonically slowly, never planning to finish it (the New Variorum Shakespeare editions are a bit like this, but not intentionally — “this art does not so easily get anything done”, says Nietzsche of philology [1997, 5]); or more overtly criminal editions.

Back to Tamara Lanier: is to remove or return objects from special collections and archives an act that destitutes power? Jarrett Martin Drake writes that archives as things stand “are concurrently fundamental yet

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26. BASILE 2015; see also BASILE 2019.

27. See, relatedly, ALTSCHULER and WEIMER 2020 and MULLANEY 2019. For a provocation that at times tilts delightfully into destituent, see ORLEY 2022.

futile for liberation” (2021, 17), and perhaps the same might be said of the critical scholarly edition. The destituent stance is necessarily attuned to the circumstances of enactment; it would call for situational editing rather than activist editing, and for highly contingent formulations of editorial theory, or *the refusal to produce theory altogether*. “The situation”, writes The Invisible Committee, “is what determines the meaning of the act, not the intention of its authors” (2015, 145). Sounds familiar to any textual scholar: but imagine a kind of crack editorial team, whose goal was to join every insurrection possible — to help out in whatever ways philology and a knowledge of publishing systems and textual preservation could. If to destitute power is “to take away its legitimacy, compel it to recognize its arbitrariness, reveal its contingent dimension”, then what kinds of textual scholarship and edition making might, taking the university as their inhospitable domain, help effect the destitution of its authority (INVISIBLE COMMITTEE 2015, 75)?

This would be textual scholarship without the textual condition, just with textual situations: situations not derived from or within the field, nor reinforcing it, but still, showing the insurrectionary dimensions of the attentiveness and precision of our odd orientation, our queer habit of looking — at a thumbprint on an edition of Voltaire, a crimp mark on the edges of an instance of Dante, the tail of an illuminated Q, an inverted letter s on a galley proof, the pricks and rules, the folding and stitching that make some Verse breathe, make it alive. “To destitute”, writes The Invisible Committee, “is not primarily to attack the institution, but to attack the need we have of it”, and “to rescue from the institution the passionate knowledges that survive there out of view” (2017, 80, 81). What people, with what modes of life and interests, might edition-making connect, offer radical hospitality to, abandon its own legitimacy and authority to?

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These provocations share many emphases and features, but like guests to a gathering, they aren’t entirely compatible. Rivera Garza’s and Moten and Harney’s emphasis on the elimination of property stands in tension with the practice of postcustodial work, in some cases. And though the theorists of The Invisible Committee share that long-term objective, they pursue it by different means. It’s not clear that either the elimination of property or the destituent stance would harmonize with Sharpe’s notions of Black redaction and annotation, or with Caswell’s liberatory imperative for

postcustodial archives.<sup>28</sup> The emphasis on critique in Rivera Garza and Sharpe would be something Moten and Harney and the Invisible Committee would want to discuss. And the theorists of destituent potential don't have much to say about how, practically speaking, introverts (there are a few among us) would fit into their vision of communal action-taking. But working in dialogue with these ideas, editors and textual scholars could offer or enact insights, interventions, reconfigurations, or rearticulations of the practical cruxes such stances occasion.

Other challenges loom. Blockchain seems to offer a dreamy power to record provenance, work outside the nation form, organize beyond state control — but only under certain accessibility circumstances, at an enormous environmental cost, and shoulder to shoulder with one's nemeses. NFTs are not going to save us. The problem is even bigger I think than Matthew Kirschenbaum projects in his book *Bitstreams*: the energy required to archive everything is, of course, greater than the everything itself. Lots of copies keeps the oceans rising. What if every archives and every edition came with a continually updated carbon footprint count? Sustainability's challenge might be redefined not as "how can we do this with the least impact?" but rather "should we do this at all?" One path forward would be to approach textual scholarship's audience less as readers or as users and more as co-writers. Co-writers not in the sense of outsourcing editorial labor to enthusiastic transcribers outside the academy, but of starting with folks' enthusiasms or passionate knowledges in the activity of selecting, generating, and transforming projects. The last half century of textual scholarship saw plenty of work revealing the plurality involved in literary creation and distribution and unveiling racism, classism, sexism, xenophobia, and homophobia as shaping factors in the literary marketplace,

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28. In Caswell's words, "community-based memory workers must go beyond the recuperation of minoritized histories, however important, to catalyze those histories for liberation" (2021, 7). Editorial work is surely a kind of memory work. And I'd say liberation is a good thing, though how to define it is notoriously tricky, as the populist conception of the term "freedom" in the U.S. today makes amply clear. We can be free without being equal; and equal without being free. As the Invisible Committee puts it, what we experience in today's West is "a form of power that is realized *through* the freedom of individuals", not against it (2015, 126). Caswell draws on Chandre Gould and Verne Harris's definition of "liberatory" in a 2014 report to the Nelson Mandela Foundation about memory work, in which liberatory efforts are neither salvific nor aimed at individuals, but rather focused on stopping cycles of violence, prejudice, and injustice (GOULD and HARRIS 2014, 5).

in publishers' and writers' practice, and in libraries and bookselling. But where this work starts and stops tends to orient it more toward a critical community than a general one — a creative one whose agency (and imagination of agency) and communality might be brought into a mutually transformative relationship with that of the textual historian.

Reflecting on her career, Laura Harjo notes that “My mode of inquiry continues to evolve, because I find it unconscionable for academia not to accommodate or understand the value of my grandfather’s pawn shop medicine song” (2019, 23). My sense is that for many textual scholars, this spiraling from a particular text to a mode of inquiry to institutional appreciation is a passionate motivating core. The question remains how to evolve our modes of inquiry in ways that can route that passion outside or against colonial and white supremacist patterns toward mutually supportive, equitable, peaceful collective activity. All around us are inspirations and pathways. I’ll close with the words of Alexis Pauline Gumbs, from her book *M Archive: After the End of the World*, which reminds its readers that Black people — among other people — have already lived through apocalypses: “Consider this text an experiment”, she writes, “an index, an oracle, an archive. Let this text be as alive as you are alive. Might be enough” (GUMBS 2018, xii).

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