



PROJECT MUSE®

Poetics in a Networked Digital Milieu

Michael Nardone

College Literature, Volume 47, Number 1, Winter 2020, pp. 248-258 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/746212>

POETICS IN A NETWORKED DIGITAL MILIEU

MICHAEL NARDONE

In the study of what writing is, has been, and might be, the figure of the archive and the discourse of poetics fuse together. Not confined to a singular narrative or trajectory, but a vast territory or “complex volume” of articulations in which “heterogeneous regions are differentiated or deployed in accordance with specific rules and practices that cannot be superposed” (Foucault 2002, 145), the figure of the archive and the discourse of poetics concern the assembling and organization of past compositions, the transmission of their inscriptions into the present, and the viable futures those traces make legible. If, as Kate Eichhorn argues, “to write in a digital age is to write *in* the archive” (2008, 1), what can the composition of archives—their materials, contexts of production, protocols, and interfaces—teach us about poetics today?

In my contribution to this critical forum, I focus on a specific archival genre, the digital repository, which, with the rapid expansion of digital networks since the mid-1990s, has served as a primary means for extending the purview and program of poetics as a contemporary institutional formation. I detail, briefly, the development of three significant examples of poetry- and poetics-related digital repositories—the University at Buffalo’s Electronic Poetry Center, Kenneth Goldsmith’s UbuWeb, and the University of Pennsylvania’s PennSound—so as to describe their impact on the publication,

dissemination, and storage of poetic works. By creating access to collections of out-of-print and difficult-to-acquire compositions, as well as to new writing and its related media, these three repositories have profoundly reconfigured the space and time of literary production. By generating new circulatory regimes for literary works composed in an array of formats—including text, sound, and (moving) image—they have exhibited the fundamental intermediality of poetic practice like no prior platform for publication. To this extent, they exemplify how the digital repository has incorporated characteristics of other vital means for the dissemination of works in literary and artistic communities—for example, the little magazine and small press edition, the anthology, the reading series, and the creative writing program—bringing together aspects of each in a single, unique media infrastructure. For these reasons, they serve as ideal objects for charting out the relation of digital networks to poetry and poetics in the early information age.¹

Each repository is, as I outline it, an argument for a specific poetics. Their entwined histories and cultural-technical infrastructures articulate numerous affinities; each is distinct for the way it casts a new light on certain critical terms for literary studies. Here, I approach the three digital repositories by means of their emphasis on, respectively, *access*, *circulation*, and *format*. Each aspect applies to all three digital repositories, yet, by focusing on one theme for each example, that repository's particular communication bias becomes clear (see Innis 1999). Such an engagement, then, opens on to a more general consideration of language and writing in contemporary networked digital milieus and underscores the particular affordances that make the digital repository a ubiquitous yet underacknowledged archival genre.

The Electronic Poetry Center (EPC) is one of the earliest digital repositories focused on poetry and poetics in the English language. In 1995, Loss Pequeño Glazier—in dialogue with Kenneth Sherwood and with the support of Charles Bernstein—initiated the EPC as a pre-Web Internet site using TelNet and Gopher protocols, designing it to function as a hub that could support a virtual ecosystem for poetry and poets. Founded footsteps away from the University at Buffalo's Poetry Collection and within the context of the university's Poetics Program, Glazier's central aim for the project was to create “a site for access, collection and dissemination of poetry and related material” in cyberspace (2002, 3). The EPC's emphasis on works of the radical modernist traditions of

twentieth-century North American poetry and its related information stemmed from Glazier's interest in those traditions' formats for publishing (for example, the small press publication from hand press to mimeo, Xerox to offset), their modes of conviviality (such as conferences, readings, and talks), and the multimodality of their poetic practices (in that the poets often materialized their works, in addition to being texts, as performances, installations, image- or sound-based works). Glazier thus sought to crystallize these poetic traditions' sets of social practices and relations and relay them into the early days of the World Wide Web.

Trained as a computer scientist, an information systems technician, and a bibliographer, Glazier's skillset allowed him to confront the challenging task of collecting and organizing such pluriform works in the then-emergent space of the Internet. Approaching poetry, in Bernstein's words, "as a culture that can be documented" (Nardone 2018, 401),² Glazier assembled in one place individual poems, entire books, poets' biographical and bibliographical information, series of journals and magazines, reviews, critical essays, statements of poetics, talks, correspondences, newsletters, mailing lists, and, later, live exchanges, image-based works, and sound recordings. Catalyzed by Glazier's view that digital networks could be a liberatory space for poetry, the EPC is, in its creator's eyes, a utopian project with the purpose of creating unbridled access to rare poetry and poetics resources for all to read and learn. Crucial to Glazier's sense of the project was that it be a meeting place free from commercial interests. "I saw it almost as a space center," Glazier admits in conversation, "like a mothership that people could come to and dock, connect, and then float off" (330).

In establishing a new general form for the publication, organization, and dissemination of poetry and poetics-related materials, the EPC redefined what *accessibility* means in the greater literary landscape. In the decades prior to the EPC's creation, the accessibility of a poetic text primarily referred to a work's specific internal stylistic, often premised upon notions of "direct speech" and "self-expression" that a supposed "general reader" would comprehend rather immediately upon the encounter of reading.³ With the EPC, "accessible" becomes a term to describe materials (ones often out of general circulation and difficult to track down) made locatable and available to readers via the digital repository. In making available key documents of radical modernist poetic traditions—ones often difficult to track down, yet also often deemed *inaccessible* in the prior

sense of the term—the EPC underscored the obtainability of the text over its supposed semantic intelligibility. This transformation is an important paradigm shift for poetics in a networked digital milieu, one that materializes Friedrich Kittler’s statement “Nur was schaltbar ist, ist überhaupt” [*Only that which is networkable exists at all*] (Kittler 1993, 182; trans. Peters 2015, 26–27)—an aphorism Kenneth Goldsmith (2007) would later appropriate with regard to UbuWeb: “If it doesn’t exist on the internet, it doesn’t exist.”

UbuWeb, founded in 1996 by Goldsmith, is a Web-based repository of text, sound, image, and video works related to historical and contemporary avant-garde aesthetic movements. Initially focused on materials emerging out of the internationalist movement of visual and concrete poetry from the mid-twentieth century onward, UbuWeb grew to feature media related to the various disciplines of literature, dance, video art, music, sound art, performance, and outsider art. Importantly, UbuWeb situates avant-garde poetry and poetics in a space that fosters those traditions’ intermedial affinities. Like the EPC, UbuWeb concerns itself with creating access to “hard-to-find, out-of-print and obscure materials, transferred digitally to the Web” (UbuWeb FAQ). Referring to the repository as a “distribution center” (UbuWeb FAQ), Goldsmith highlights the importance of establishing access through the creation of new circulatory regimes for media. To this extent, Goldsmith has privileged the *circulatory* component of UbuWeb above other considerations—for example, above quality (of a work’s reproduction compared to its original) and permission (from the work’s creator in order to host and circulate it). Such archival practices have been, at times, controversial. Yet it is due to these practices that UbuWeb has been and continues to be a critical precedent for the development of media commons that collect and disseminate cultural and educational resources on the Internet.

UbuWeb, states Goldsmith, is “as much about the legal and social ramifications of its self-created distribution and archiving system as it is about the content that is hosted on the site” (2014, 251). In functioning as “an experiment in radical distribution” for avant-garde media, the digital repository has itself existed as a media object in constant circulation and transfiguration” (Goldsmith 2005). Due to Goldsmith’s discretion to circulate that which is difficult to access as opposed to that which is in the public domain, the digital repository has had a tenuous relationship with cultural and educational institutions, even as it has relied on their support for its bandwidth and

servers since its creation. UbuWeb's legal issues and numerous shut-downs have meant the site's core technological infrastructure has had to shift several times—from Buffalo to New Jersey to Toronto to Mexico City to, at the time of this writing, Iceland. In order to adapt to this regularly shifting infrastructure, Goldsmith has had to constantly change UbuWeb's collection itself, pulling and adding media, and reformatting its files so they continue to circulate in the face of the digital repository's uncertain ongoing existence.

At the level of its contents, UbuWeb makes an argument for engaging poetry and poetics in an expanded discursive terrain where they meet and enter into dialogue with other artistic practices. Here, we see the digital repository as an ideal means to publish, aggregate, and circulate works that explore the intermedial boundaries of poetic practice and test the limits of literary genre. Formally, the mobile and mutable example of UbuWeb, its texts and composite form, emphasizes how the circulatory matrixes of poetic works (in all their various inscriptions and iterations) extends far beyond the context of the repository to shed light on the materially embedded character of cultural expression (see Gaonkar and Povinelli 2003; Straw 2010). This is to say, more generally, that the study of texts circulating in digital networks points to a need for analysis that accounts for the sites where and techniques by which texts are reshaped, reformatted, and integrated into different contexts and conditions of consumption.

Founded by Charles Bernstein and Al Filreis at the University of Pennsylvania in 2003, PennSound is an online repository of MP3 and MP4 audio recordings dedicated to poetry and poetics. PennSound has significantly altered the status of sound as “a material and materializing dimension of poetry” (Bernstein 1998, 4) by collecting, organizing, disseminating, and making available thousands of poetry-related recordings, and by anchoring the repository to an array of interfaces on- and offline that allow users to explore the phonotextual elements of poetic practice.⁴ Assembled from numerous personal and institutional collections of poetry audio recordings—ones that were, generally, not publicly accessible prior to PennSound—the repository has established a new set of standards for archiving, accessing, and critically engaging with literary audio recordings. Like the EPC and UbuWeb, PennSound emphasizes the importance of accessibility and distribution in its design. One of the site's core credos is “Make it free,” adapting Ezra Pound's modernist dictum to “Make it new” so as to apply to poetics in an era of digital

networks. “It must be free and downloadable,” states the first item in the “PennSound Manifesto.” The manifesto’s remaining points further define what making it “free” means exactly in that they stress the use of non-proprietary formats, the highest of quality of sound available as indexed to the relative ease of circulating files, and the incorporation of relevant bibliographic information in the file itself to optimize cataloguing and searchability.

PennSound’s commitment to access and distribution is one reason for the repository’s impact; its attention to *format* is another. Bernstein (1992, 134) describes format as a “middle term” between medium and genre. Jonathan Sterne states that format “denotes a whole range of decisions that affect the look, feel, experience, and working of a medium. It also names the set of rules according to which a technology can operate” (2012, 1–2). Whereas Bernstein’s description is helpful for approaching the individual files collected in the repository, Sterne’s sense of the term is useful for considering the repository itself and its context. With regard to individual files, the decision to use the MP3 as the primary format for PennSound contradicts what is generally viewed as best practices for archiving digital sound files. One of the main components of the MP3 format is its use of lossy compression, an encoding method that reduces file size through inexact approximations of and discarding redundant elements of a file’s data.⁵ This compression is the reason why the MP3 became “a triumph of distribution” (Sterne 2012, 1). Yet the augmentation of the original recording’s data makes the MP3, typically, a lesser quality recording and therefore a poor format choice for archival purposes. Archivists working with digital audio have set a clear precedent for preferring WAV files, which do not compress or discard data in the sound file.⁶ In utilizing the MP3 as the primary format for PennSound, the repository’s creators prioritized access to the recordings and their continued distribution over a higher fidelity and more data-rich acoustic experience. Such a decision underscores the uniqueness of the digital repository as an archival genre, in that it incorporates the collection-organizational model of archives while making available and circulating contents to general publics in a way more akin to publications.

More to this point, the format of PennSound as a digital repository—in Sterne’s sense of the term, referring to its protocols and operation—cannot be separated from its many spaces of production and use that inform the site’s interface. Here, interface stands as a technical object and shared boundary between electronic media and

human users (see Kirschenbaum 2002), as well as a zone of activity, of processes that transform the material states of media (see Galloway 2012). Assessing the relation between these two components of PennSound's interface—as a technical object and its effects—is important for understanding how the repository's texts and contexts mutually inform one another in the overall assemblage of the site. As a technical object, PennSound's interface derives from a series of models and versions developed in order to organize phonotextual materials: it articulates together a number of far-flung personal and institutional collections of recordings, reformatting their dispersed metadata (from reel-to-reel boxes, LP sleeves, cassette deck slips, and other accompanying reference notes) at one accessible site. It thus maps out and draws into relation an entire field of production that has been a prominent aspect of poetic practice, one that, prior to such an infrastructure, had remained in the margins of literary scholarship. Importantly, too, PennSound's protocols for distribution assure that its materials can be further incorporated into other online contexts such as syllabi, course materials, and other digital publications and collections.

As a zone of activity, PennSound's interface emerges out of Bernstein and Filreis's common pedagogical engagement with and commitment to the modes of collective production developed within small press literary communities. Whereas the EPC and UbuWeb operate primarily (or nearly completely) in the virtual space of the Web, a critical element of PennSound is its creation of both offline and online spaces for social interaction that are tied to the ongoing production of the repository and its materials. Centered at the Kelly Writers House, “a superwired 1851 Tudor-style cottage on the campus of the University of Pennsylvania” (Filreis 2006, 125), PennSound operates as part of a network that includes the Center for Programs in Contemporary Writing (CPCW) and much of its programming, as well as a number of digital publishing projects such as PoemTalk, MediaLinks, and *Jacket2* magazine. The physical space of the Writers House encompasses a set of classrooms, a recording studio, a space to hold readings and talks, a publications room, a reception parlor and gallery—all of which contribute to making it function as a semi-autonomous space within the context of the university, one dedicated to a collective production of media and events focused on poetry and poetics. More recently, PennSound has served as a foundational component of Filreis's massive

open online course, or MOOC, on modernist poetry. Through the articulation of these various sites, collections, activities, publications, and pedagogical spaces, PennSound has developed a unique mode of exchange for poetry that Filreis describes as “our format” (Nardone 2018, 422).

In closing, to return to the questions that frame this issue on networks, I want to draw attention to two facets of the digital repository that deserve further consideration beyond this forum. First, critically approaching individual works contained within and transmitted through a digital repository calls for a renewed mode of analysis that accounts for the material apparatus, technological infrastructures, and social relations that produce the literary artifact (see Eagleton 1978) in addition to the chains of linguistic significations or codes that produce that work’s contents (see Macherey 1978). These two elements of literary production are inseparable from one another—a text’s linguistic meaning is always produced with and by means of the articulation of its specific medial form; their intertwining create the condition of possibility for any particular work, which bears the traces of its inscription, circulation, and relation to other documents and media within an array of historical, cultural, and philological contexts on and off of the Web. Second, any extended analysis of such literary production should lead to one of power, of the digital repository as a crucial contemporary infrastructure for establishing new poetic canons. Speculating in 2006 on the possible impacts that digital repositories might have on literary cultures, Marjorie Perloff asked: “How will the dissemination of such rich and varied materials affect the poetry-reading public?” (2006, 145). Over a decade later, we have some clear answers. In creating a valuable space for engaging intermedial works, in collecting and circulating historical materials that intermix with newly produced ones, and in facilitating the integration of those materials into syllabi, publications, and collections, the digital repository has traveled from the fringe nodes of poetics discourse as an extracurricular activity adjacent to scholarly settings and now functions as a hub of activity, development, and resources at the core of elite academic and cultural institutions. What this means in terms of the impact on the “protocols for reading” (Morris 2006, 13) in an expanded terrain of intermedial works and in terms of which aesthetic genealogies are represented or absent in such infrastructures becomes the next set of questions to study.

NOTES

- ¹ Alexander Galloway periodizes the information age as “not simply that moment when computers come to dominate, but . . . instead that moment when matter itself is understood in terms of information or code.” He continues: “The transformation of matter into code is not only a passage from the qualitative to the quantitative, *but also a passage from the non-aesthetic to the aesthetic—the passage from non-media to media*. [. . .] This historical moment—when life is defined no longer as essence, but as code—is the moment when life *becomes a medium*” (2004, 111).
- ² Quotations from Bernstein, Glazier, and Filreis cited “Nardone 2018” are sourced from a series of in-person dialogues I conducted with the three individuals in 2015 while a PennSound Visiting Fellow at the University of Pennsylvania. I have transcribed and edited these discussions, and published them within the appendixes of my doctoral dissertation, cited below.
- ³ For example, take Dana Gioia’s “Can Poetry Matter” (1991), which praises and seeks to continue the tradition of “past” poets and critics who “addressed a wide community of educated readers,” reporting their reactions with “scrupulous honesty even when their opinions might lose them literary allies,” and who without “talking down to their audience” cultivated “a public idiom,” and who prized “clarity and accessibility” over “specialist jargon and pedantic displays of scholarship.”
- ⁴ Steven Evans (2012) defines the phonotext as a “threefold braid of timbre, text, and technology.”
- ⁵ Jonathan Sterne describes this process more precisely: “To make an MP3, a program called an encoder takes a .wav file (or some other audio format) and compares it to a mathematical model of the gaps in human hearing. Based on a number of factors—some chosen by the user, some set in the code—it discards the parts of the audio signal that are unlikely to be audible. It then reorganizes repetitive and redundant data in the recording, and produces a much smaller file—often as small as 12 percent of the original size file” (2012, 1–2).
- ⁶ See, for example, the US Library of Congress’s “Recommended Format Statement” (<http://www.loc.gov/preservation/resources/rfs/audio.html#independent>) or the International Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives’s “Key Digital Principles” regarding file formats (<http://www.iasa-web.org/tco4/key-digital-principles>).

WORKS CITED

- Bernstein, Charles. 1992. *A Poetics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- . 1998. “Introduction.” In *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word*, 3–26. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Eagleton, Terry. 1978. *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory*. New York: Verso.
- Eichhorn, Kate. 2008. "Archival Genres: Gathering Texts and Reading Spaces." *Invisible Culture* 12: 1-10.
- Evans, Steve. 2012. "The Phonotextual Braid." *Jacket2*, March 25, 2012. <https://jacket2.org/commentary/phonotextual-braid>.
- Filreis, Alan. 2006. "Kinetic Is as Kinetic Does: On the Institutionalization of Digital Poetry." In *New Media Poetics: Contexts, Technotexts and Theories*, edited by Adelaide Morris and Thomas Swiss. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Foucault, Michel. 2002. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Translated by A. M. Sheridan Smith. New York: Routledge Classics.
- Galloway, Alexander. 2004. *Protocol: How Control Exists after Decentralization*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- . 2012. *The Interface Effect*. London: Polity.
- Gaonkar, Dilip Parameshwar, and Elizabeth A. Povinelli. 2003. "Technologies of Public Forms: Circulation, Transfiguration, Recognition." *Public Culture* 15 (3): 385-397.
- Gioia, Dana. 1991. "Can Poetry Matter," *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1991/05/can-poetry-matter/305062/>.
- Glazier, Loss. 2002. *Digital Poetics: Hypertext, Visual-Kinetic Text and Writing in Programmable Media*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press.
- Goldsmith, Kenneth. 2005. "The End of UbuWeb." Letter posted to the UB Poetics discussion group, June 1, 2005. <https://listserv.buffalo.edu/cgi-bin/wa?A1=ind0506&L=POETICS#319>.
- . 2007. "If It Doesn't Exist on the Internet, It Doesn't Exist." *Harriet*, March 16, 2007. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2007/03/if-it-doesnt-exist-on-the-internet-it-doesnt-exist>.
- . 2014. "Robin Hood of the Avant-Garde." In *Dynamic Fair Dealing: Creating Canadian Culture Online*, edited by Rosemary J. Coombe, et al. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. 251-260.
- Innis, Harold. 1999. *The Bias of Communication*. 2nd edition. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Kirschenbaum, Matthew G. 2002. "Editing the Interface: Textual Studies and First Generation Electronic Objects." *Text*, no. 14, 15-51.
- Kittler, Friedrich. 1993. *Draculas Vermächtnis. Technische Schriften*. Leipzig: Reclam.
- Macherey, Pierre. 1978. *A Theory of Literary Production*. Translated by Geoffrey Wall. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Morris, Adelaide. 2006. "New Media Poetics: As We May Think/How to Write." In *New Media Poetics: Contexts, Technotexts, and Theories*, edited by Adelaide Morris and Thomas Swiss, 1-46. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

- Nardone, Michael. 2018. *Of the Repository: Poetics in a Networked Digital Milieu*. Concordia University, PhD dissertation.
- Perloff, Marjorie. 2006. "Screening the Page/Paging the Screen: Digital Poetics and the Differential Text." In *New Media Poetics: Contexts, Technologies, and Theories*, edited by Adelaide Morris and Thomas Swiss, 145–162. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Peters, John Durham. 2015. *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Sterne, Jonathan. 2012. *MP3: The Meaning of a Format*. Durham NC: Duke University Press.
- Straw, Will. 2010. "The Circulatory Turn." In *Wireless Spectrum: The Politics, Practices, and Poetics of Mobile Media*, edited by Barbara Crow, Michael Longford, and Kim Sawchuck, 17–28. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- "UbuWeb FAQ." <http://www.ubu.com/resources/faq.html>.

MICHAEL NARDONE is a postdoctoral fellow in the department of French Literature at the University of Montreal, and an affiliated faculty member of the Centre for Expanded Poetics, Concordia University. He is the author of two books of poetry: *The Ritualites* (2018) and *Transaction Record* (2014).