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Editing Non-Canonical Texts: Issues and Opportunities

Kenneth M. Price
University of Nebraska-Lincoln, kprice2@unl.edu

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The three articles that follow—by Elizabeth Lorang, Amanda Gailey, and Wesley Raabe—highlight challenges and opportunities faced by editors who address non-canonical texts.[1] These essays, while commenting on individual projects, also help narrow the gap separating the disciplines of literary studies and documentary editing. That is, in the past few decades in literary studies, a great deal of attention has been directed toward previously neglected writers. This work—and the debates it has engendered—is contributing to a more complex and multi-faceted sense of our cultural history. Remarkably, full-scale editorial work has barely addressed our altered intellectual landscape.[2] Most work by editors has focused on editions of larger-than-life historical and literary figures. The collected edition of a major writer or historical figure has been central to—at times it can almost seem the defining undertaking of—documentary editing. Yet if we value a rich and wide-ranging understanding of our cultural past, we need to look beyond the most famous writers and historical figures.

In fact, if we have a sense of shifting tastes over time, we see that the American literary canon has been remarkably changeable. The acknowledged greats of nineteenth-century American literature at one time included Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, John Greenleaf Whittier, and James Russell Lowell. In the pantheon they have been replaced by Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Herman Melville, Frederick Douglass, and others. The uncertainty of the process of canonization makes us wonder which currently neglected writers may hold a much more prominent position in the future's view of our past. Dickinson, Melville, Kate Chopin, Zora Neale Hurston—at certain times all of these writers were hardly on the literary map. Various kinds of critical and editorial work have brought each to prominence.

In their examination of once-canonical, newly canonical, and non-

[1] These three essays originally highlighted a panel at the ADE meeting in Springfield, Illinois, in 2009.

[2] Some recovery work has, of course, centered on making available inexpensive reprints of long-neglected work. Typically, this work has not involved collation of various versions of a text or detailed accounts of the genesis of a text.

canonical texts, and of the editorial methods for treating them, the following essays advance thinking about both the literary record and documentary editing. Harriet Beecher Stowe, the subject of Wesley Raabe's essay, might at first glance seem to be the writer who least belongs in a group of essays treating non-canonical material. These days a person might reasonably ask: how could Stowe be regarded as anything but canonical? She is widely taught and written about, and numerous new editions and reprintings of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* have appeared in recent years. Yet Stowe's resurrection is a recent phenomenon (which helps explain why there is no edition of her letters available). When I was an undergraduate in the early 1970s, she was still widely dismissed for manipulative plots and emotional excess: Stowe was a prime example of a writer who could be—and was—maligned as unduly "sentimental." This was of course before an array of critics including Jane Tompkins drew attention to the gender politics inhering in our evaluative norms and rethought sentimentalism, seeing in it subversive power and an effective political and spiritual mode. Had Stowe been treated as a canonical writer before recent decades, a more developed scholarly apparatus would have been built around her writings, and the crucial, authorially sanctioned variants concerning race that Raabe has uncovered would have been studied intensively.

Occasionally, an essay reminds us of just how selective our view of the past is, how highly filtered it is when it reaches us, and how little of the past we really know. Elizabeth Lorang, in "From the Canonical to the Non-Canonical: Editing, the *Walt Whitman Archive*, and Nineteenth-Century Newspaper Poetry," asks disarmingly simple questions: how should we edit nineteenth-century newspaper poetry? What is the proper relationship between the poetic content and the overall newspaper context? Given the enormous number of poems written, how does a scholar usefully select poems to treat, and then, given the magnitude of material to consider, how much context can or should be presented? As Lorang notes, she necessarily has a "bifurcated" object of study—both the poem and the newspaper—because neither can be fully understood without the other. Does newspaper poetry continue to function as newspaper poetry if shorn of its context? Moreover, most editorial models are centered on "authorship," yet authorship is a meaningless category when it cannot be established for as much as two-thirds of the corpus. She also wisely notes that nineteenth-century readers accepted anonymity as a regular part of literary culture, thereby again suggesting how our current editorial norms are at odds with the most pervasive means of distributing and experiencing poetry at that time. Her digital project on newspaper poetry, if fully realized, would enable us to trace the course of reprintings and the life of a poem through its circulating history. At the moment, we can offer no good answer to Lorang's fundamental question about how

best to edit newspaper poetry, though she goes a long way in this essay toward documenting how dauntingly complex any adequate answer will have to be. Her essay demonstrates just how limited has been the purview of most scholars when generalizing about nineteenth-century American poetry.

Amanda Gailey's "Rethinking Digital Editing Practices to Better Address Noncanonical Texts" also notes the inadequacy of usual approaches to editing for the material she is treating here, Joel Chandler Harris and the Uncle Remus industry, material that is both under-studied and undeniably important for its role in the teaching of race to children. Gailey demonstrates through the example of Harris that textual remakings can sometimes be more culturally significant than the original work (for example, Disney's recreation of Uncle Remus as opposed to Harris's original character). We may question the literary merit of Harris' creation, but its cultural significance is undeniable. It is the reception of Harris's works, how they were appropriated, pirated, and disseminated into American racial consciousness that is of interest in our time, and studying these matters is not in the least enabled by an author-centered edition.

As indicated, editorial work has concentrated on prominent literary and historical figures, with good reason. These are major aspects of the cultural heritage we want to see live in the future. Yet we are in an age when what we want to remember and foster is heavily contested. These three essays remind us that practices established for presidential papers or for canonical writers are not necessarily ones that are useful for less well known writers or for material in forms other than manuscripts and books. A challenge for the future is to help bring into being tools and approaches that allow editing—increasingly digital in form—to fulfill its promise of enhancing understanding of long-revered and newly valued objects of study.