

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Documentary Editing: Journal of the Association
for Documentary Editing (1979-2011)

Documentary Editing, Association for


2011

Presidential Address--New Editorial Futures for the Past

Kenneth M. Price

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, kprice2@unl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/docedit>

 Part of the [Digital Humanities Commons](#), [Other Arts and Humanities Commons](#), [Reading and Language Commons](#), and the [Technical and Professional Writing Commons](#)

Price, Kenneth M., "Presidential Address--New Editorial Futures for the Past" (2011). *Documentary Editing: Journal of the Association for Documentary Editing (1979-2011)*. Paper 14.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/docedit/14>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Documentary Editing, Association for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Documentary Editing: Journal of the Association for Documentary Editing (1979-2011)* by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

New Editorial Futures for the Past

Kenneth M. Price

Last year in her presidential address, Cathy Hajo, issued a challenge to us as members of ADE. After considering the rapidly changing nature of information, she concluded by remarking: “We publish only a tiny part of the knowledge and expertise that we gather in our work and it is time to take some chances, to try new things, and to risk some investment of time, against the chance that we can make a connection with the biggest audience that any of us will address.”¹ She had in mind most importantly that vast world of potential readers available to us through open access publication. She noted that if we do not engage with the new possibilities for scholarly communication we run the risk of becoming obsolete. The clear message of her talk was that ADE—comprised of leaders guiding the best practices and standards for scholarly editing—must engage with the changes in publishing and access that are reshaping human society in our time.



Photo by Ray Smock

For both better and worse, in the early twenty-first century we *are* faced with transformations in editing. On days when it seems for the worse, it is tempting to think the actor Paul Newman was talking about editing when he said, “It’s always darkest before it turns absolutely pitch black.” Most of the time, though, I am pleased about the new directions in editing, and I am certainly optimistic about the prospects for ADE. It can be difficult to embrace change, and this organization has responded with creative adjustments to our fluid, altering circumstances, making some key decisions that should help us sustain and build on our past achievements as we move into an increasingly digital future. Two of those decisions are significant enough to deserve comment tonight: plans to renovate our journal and our pending education grant proposal to the

¹ Cathy Hajo, “Scholarly Editing in a Web 2.0 World,” *Documentary Editing*, 31 (2010): 103.

National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) to assume responsibility for running the Institute for the Editing of Historical Documents, familiarly known as Camp Edit.² Both of these changes engage our association with what has been called the digital turn in the humanities, and in the final portion of these remarks I will consider what digital editing may do *to* and *for* our own individual projects in the future, how it will shape the way we organize knowledge, and how it could potentially alter for the better our professional standing.

In considering the Editing Institute, I am reminded of advice I received from my graduate school mentor: never accept a job before it's offered. The same of course can be said about grant funding. We all want to keep in mind that our education initiative is a *pending* proposal, and it is good not to build up too many expectations (much less bills!) based on grant money that has not been awarded. That said, we would be remiss as an organization if we did not think about the future possibilities opened up by the thoughtful proposal developed last spring by an ad-hoc committee. As you know, John Kaminski, Rich Leffler, and Michael Stevens, most notably, and many others as well, contributed to a successful editing institute held at Wisconsin since 1978. The aim of our proposal is to extend the outreach of this program and ADE generally to new constituencies and to develop specialized workshops for more experienced editors. A major goal of adjustments to the Editing Institute is to increase our membership. This point is key because the demographics of our organization are not favorable. With numerous retirements approaching, we will need to revitalize—and perhaps to some degree reorient—the organization in order for it to thrive in the future. The grant proposal would fund a part-time education director who will be charged with devising an institute and an annual workshop beneficial to both new and seasoned editors. Conversations with Kathleen Williams and others at the NHPRC have helped us consider new strategies to increase the impact of our Editing Institute and reap benefits for our members. An intriguing possibility emerged through our discussions: to run the Institute so that it is contiguous with the annual meeting. We realized that there would be some advantages in linking the Institute and the conference. Travel could be combined for both instructors and students producing a significant cost savings. In addition, attendance at the national meeting could be built into the funding and expectations for the

² Some weeks after the delivery of this presidential address, the National Historical Publications and Records Commission awarded the ADE \$250,000 over three years to enable the organization to run the summer editing institute along with advanced workshops.

Institute. Doing so would allow nearly two dozen new editors to get to know our organization and—well, frankly, we hope they fall in love! Seriously, we hope that hearing good papers and interacting with junior and senior people who share their intellectual interests will encourage them to remain members of ADE well into the future. It is important that we think in creative ways about educating new and established members about how to succeed in a rapidly changing editing and publishing landscape. The grant proposal includes a continuing education dimension (with topics varying year to year treating a range of matters such as metadata and text encoding, project management, and grant writing).

We faced an immediate practical problem with this plan. Linking the conference and the Institute, even if we compressed the Institute schedule slightly, meant an extended commitment for attendees of both events. Given that many people we would like to attend or to serve as instructors at the Institute are tied to the academic calendar, we concluded that taking a week off from other responsibilities in the fall, the traditional time of the ADE conference, might not please our colleagues at our home institutions. The ad-hoc committee was not certain how the membership would feel about moving the conference to the summer, when the Institute has been held. And of course none of our planning would make any sense if we moved the annual meeting time to the summer only to discover that the general membership wanted no part of such a plan, under any circumstance. So we took the question to the members, asking whether moving the conference would be worthwhile, if in doing so we could gain the advantages of cost savings, a likely increase in membership, and opportunities for continuing education. Remarkably, 96% of the membership voted in favor of moving the conference time if the grant application proves to be successful. Now we need to hope that the proposal is approved and that the consequences we anticipate come to pass.

Documentary Editing / Scholarly Editing

Just as interesting—and promising, in my view—is what is happening with the association's journal. *Documentary Editing* has served the association well since 1979 as a print journal, but it has run into the familiar problems of a print journal with a limited circulation and ever-increasing costs for paper, printing, and mailing. There have also been problems in having a lack of continuity in the position of editor. The association owes many thanks to the publications committee, and in particular to Ron Bosco and Rich Leffler for their recent work as co-editors. Bosco and Leffler agreed to serve for two years, and with time slipping away we needed new leadership. Luckily Amanda Gailey and Andrew Jewell stepped forward with a plan to succeed them in editing the journal. Essentially, they proposed an open access online journal that could reach a much

larger audience. Gailey and Jewell plan to continue with all of the content that people are accustomed to in our journal, but they also will add a new feature by making available space for small-scale peer-reviewed digital editions. This development holds promise of promoting both editing and the accompanying analysis of the text. As we know, peer review is not as well established for digital publication as it is for print, and by providing a venue for peer reviewed digital editing the ADE is taking not a responsive but a proactive role in helping to advance editing in a medium with an extraordinary power to enrich the work we do. It is precisely because some of the problems associated with digital scholarship have yet to be resolved that our organization should be working in this area. One of the key intellectual tasks of our generation, it seems to me, is to harness the power of the electronic medium.

The Publications Committee and the Council of ADE accepted this proposal to begin with the 2012 issue. Jewell and Gailey, editors respectively of the *Willa Cather Archive* and *Children of the Sun: Race and the Making of American Childhood*, have a deep commitment to this undertaking, and they have gained institutional support from the Center for Digital Research in the Humanities at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, which will help with such matters as design, long-term sustainability of the documents, and search functionality.

Early reactions to this initiative have been encouraging. Frances Whistler, writing last year as Assistant Director of the Editorial Institute at Boston University, sent an unsolicited letter saying how valuable having this outlet would be for her students and for the editing community generally. She noted how she often becomes aware “of excellent student work for which there is not necessarily a prospect of book publication. Sometimes this is directly the result of the relatively small scale of the work. . . . I shall look forward eagerly to learning more about this valuable development.”³

Other signs have been promising as well. The initial call for papers and editions yielded numerous strong proposals, and, significantly, most were from scholars not previously associated with ADE. People want the opportunities our new publication will offer, and they see the value of our organization. The new thrust of the journal may open our organization to a new group of potential members—digital humanists interested in editing. The fact that our new editors are both literary scholars may help us attract more members from that side of our organization (increasing the number of literary editors has seemed possible for years, though such growth has been slow in coming). The new editorial team is thus well positioned to cultivate new audiences while continuing to serve

³ Email message from Frances Whistler to Jennifer Stertzer, April 14, 2010, quoted with permission.

familiar ones as well. Incidentally, the journal will also undergo a name change from *Documentary Editing* to *Scholarly Editing: The Annual of the Association for Documentary Editing*. The editors hope that the new name will signal an openness to a variety of editorial approaches, even as it cues some readers that this journal is not the place to look for an essay on Ken Burns and filmmaking.

I hope that I have shown how ADE has begun to meet the challenges Cathy Hajo posed to us last year. I would like to conclude by issuing a challenge of my own, less to the organization per se, and more to how we conceive of our own research. Much could be said, but in the interest of brevity let me confine myself to a single thread, one that is consistent with points made in Ann Gordon's illuminating article in *Documentary Editing*, "Experiencing Women's History as a Documentary Editor." She points out that "Historical editions that we recognize as women's history take the form, primarily, of the papers of individual women."⁴ Of course there was nothing inevitable about that. When the NHPRC decided to include women's history in its publications program, one of the early examples of a completed edition was not of a solitary figure but instead of the *Papers of the Women's Trade Union League*. "The Trade Union League, based in New York City and Chicago in the early twentieth century, built alliances between working-class, often immigrant, women in factory jobs and upper-class progressive women for the purposes of resisting exploitation, organizing unions, and fighting for safety in the workplace."⁵ Few people followed the pattern set by the editors of the League's papers. Rather, the monumental scholarly edition, centered on a single great figure dominates our work. Much of my own work fits this pattern, too, since I have spent the last fifteen years as co-editor of the *Walt Whitman Archive* editing the writings of a single figure.

Still, like Ann Gordon, I see great possibilities in the future in what are now less common approaches to editing. Our focus on canonical writers and major political leaders runs counter to an ongoing revisionist trend in American literary study and history: as we know, in literary studies the standing of the "author" has been questioned, cultural studies has flourished, and the canon has dramatically expanded, while in history a bottom-up view of change and significance has led in recent decades to an emphasis on social history (and of course a de-emphasis on "great men"). In these circumstances, much of the editing we do can appear to outsiders as stodgy. Further complicating matters, as editors we can feel torn by the differing priorities of two groups from whom

⁴ Ann D. Gordon, "Experiencing Women's History as a Documentary Editor," *Documentary Editing*, 31 (2010), 1.

⁵ Gordon, 1.

we often seek support: our colleagues in the disciplines of literary and historical study who tend to support experimentation in methodology (except when it comes to technology) and funding agencies who tend to support mainstream topics the “significance” of which goes without saying (even as they endorse the use of new technologies in editorial work).

Electronic editing would, in fact, be more congruent with recent developments in the humanities disciplines generally if it were to evolve away from solely writer-based approaches to accommodate topic-based approaches that employ a tightly integrated combination of collecting, editing, interpreting, and tool building. We might even end up producing scholarship that could restore the standing of editing in English and History departments, whose faculty, paradoxically, often use and admire scholarly editions even while they are unwilling to hire, tenure, or promote a scholar who produces that work. The type of enhanced editing I am imagining could help realize a potentiality in scope and expressiveness now available to editors and result in work so useful and enlightening that they could once again thrive in academic departments where they must explain themselves, vie for internal funding, seek promotions, and otherwise survive.

My thinking on a set of interrelated issues—what is it we should be editing? how should we go about it? how should we fund it? how should we position it within the disciplines?—is shaped by involvement in both the *Walt Whitman Archive* and a second digital project, titled *Civil War Washington*. The two projects differ in many ways. The *Walt Whitman Archive* is far along in its development, generously funded, and has a clear plan of development. *Civil War Washington*, in contrast, is just getting started, has had to struggle for funding, and has a less obvious trajectory. Of the two, the *Whitman Archive*, begun in 1995, more closely resembles a traditional print edition at least partly because of the time at which it came into being. *Civil War Washington*, begun in 2006, is less like a print edition for the same reason. Both projects take part in a broader movement in our time that strives to stretch, remake, and revitalize what editing can mean, and they also illustrate some of the challenges editors will need to address in the coming decades.

Many of you heard papers about one aspect of the work of the *Whitman Archive* yesterday—our work on the correspondence. The correspondence is added to our other work treating Whitman’s published poetry, prose, reviews of his writing, translations, bibliography, teaching materials and so forth. In addition to further broadening the range of materials we edit, we have been devoting more thought recently to the ways that we can enhance intellectual access to Whitman, his writings, and the world he moved in. We are assessing what new types of contextualization might mean for the infrastructure, usability, function, and the look and feel of the *Archive*, as well as for the distinctions

between text, context, and commentary. One of the questions we have asked is: What would be the effects of prioritizing geography in the organization and analysis of his works? We would like to study and present Whitman as a city poet. He once said that *Leaves of Grass* “arose out of his life in Brooklyn and New York from 1838 to 1853, absorbing a million people, for fifteen years with an intimacy, an eagerness, an abandon, probably never equaled.”⁶ A lifelong city-dweller, his work also emerged out of New Orleans, Washington, D.C., and Philadelphia/Camden. To consider such questions is to reexamine our scholarly methodology and perhaps the definition of an edition. In short, what happens—what is obscured and what is clarified—when tracing a writer’s movements through time and space is afforded as much attention as tracing the textual variants in his or her texts? These questions are not the kind traditionally addressed by printed scholarly editions, but that may be because the print apparatus could not accommodate them.⁷

If ADE members undertake to address such questions, we will be challenged to build strong connections between the texts we care about and other bodies of knowledge. And if we make those connections well enough, we can also strengthen our connections to our non-editing colleagues in the academy as well as in the larger world beyond the academy. In doing so, the stock of editors can only rise.

Because of work conducted since the 1950s we have become comfortable in knowing what an edition should look like and how it should function. The first digital editing projects have not reconsidered the edition as dramatically as they might have, in part because simply moving materials online, publishing more materials, and making them searchable were tremendous advances on their own. Now we can see that there is so much more we can do, but it is going to take some experimentation and a willingness to rethink how we define editing and the edition. What we end up making may sometimes look foreign and may even go by names other than edition—archive, thematic research collection, database are terms that all come to mind. But if we can build these new intellectual constructs with the care, rigor, and good judgment in selection that characterizes the best editing, we will create scholarly contributions that carry their own justification. ADE and the field of editing are positioned to help usher in the changing scholarly forms of the future.

⁶ Quoted in David S. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman’s America: A Cultural Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1995), p. 83.

⁷ Some of the ideas in this paragraph and the preceding one first appeared in “Civil War Washington, the *Walt Whitman Archive*, and Some Present Editorial Challenges and Future Possibilities,” in *Online Humanities Scholarship: The Shape of Things to Come*, ed. Jerome McGann (Houston: Rice University Press, 2010), pp. 287–309. This essay is also freely available online at www.whitmanarchive.org/about/articles/P5/anc.00550.html#rn7